

## FERPA in the Classroom

Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) protects students' right to privacy in their education records. While FERPA has its complexities, here we will focus on areas where FERPA touches everyday faculty practice.

What's an education record? For faculty, here's a useful rule of thumb. If something contains a student's name plus an ID number or grade, it's an educational record and must be kept private. When we put a grade on a student's test or paper, we create an education record. When we use a roster with names and ID numbers, we are handling an education record. These records can be electronic or paper.

Here are a few good practices for keeping education records confidential:

- When returning graded work, hand assignments to each individual. Avoid emailing grades and instead refer students to the learning management system (Blackboard for most of us). If a student calls on the phone, ask a few questions to verify his or her identity before discussing grades.
- If using a sign-in sheet for attendance, be sure it includes just names—no ID numbers.
- Get a student's written authorization that references FERPA before writing a letter of recommendation with information about academic performance.
- If posting grades, devise a system that allows only the individual student to identify his or her grade; never include part of the Social Security number or post an alphabetical list.
- When disposing of graded tests and assignments, shred them.
- Be conscious of what appears on a computer screen or open grade book.

Parents who want to discuss their student's grade present a tricky issue. While university students have the right to keep their education records private from their parents, FERPA makes an exception for those who are dependents on parents' tax returns or have otherwise authorized the parent by written authorization. As faculty, we may not be able to determine if a specific conversation with parents would be legal, so it's a good idea to refer these requests to the Dean of Student Success or the academic dean of the area.

These resemble FERPA issues, but they aren't:

- Having students critique each other's work is a legal educational activity. Students don't give grades and they are not agents of the university, so no education record is created.
- Student work can be collected and analyzed as part of official program evaluations. FERPA specifically allows universities to conduct this kind of activity without asking students' permission.

### Want to read more about FERPA?

"FERPA: What Faculty and Staff Need to Know" [http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/ferpa\\_faculty.html](http://www.bc.edu/offices/stserv/ferpa_faculty.html)

### A teaching tip submitted by

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