

16. CHEATED

MY SECOND SEMESTER AT MICHIGAN WAS MUCH LIKE THE FIRST—I survived but didn’t distinguish myself. My courses didn’t interest me much and didn’t seem all that relevant. I was still learning the ropes, and felt as if I hadn’t made the transition to full-fledged Michigan Man. At the end of the first year at Michigan, my junior year, I had a solid B average. Trouble was I never saw myself as a B student. I resolved to do better in my senior year, come hell or high water.

The summer after junior year, I stayed in Ann Arbor and got a job at a place called Environmental Research Institute of Michigan—ERIM. The name suggested an outfit that was devising ways to counter air and water pollution, but in fact most of ERIM’s work dealt with remote sensing and surveillance, and was financed by the U.S. Department of Defense. My job at ERIM was to write computer programs to simulate the operation of airborne radar systems, specifically Synthetic Aperture Radar. The work was interesting, and it allowed me to hone my math and computer skills. Summer went by quickly, and I was ready to attack my senior year courses.

I signed up for some interesting, tough courses in the first semester. One was Electrical Biophysics, ECE 471. It combined engineering, biology, physics, and math to describe the human nervous system as an electrical communication network. A two-professor team taught it: one was my Bioelectrical Sciences Lab mentor and employer, Dr. William J. Williams; the other was Dr. Spencer Bement.

Williams and Bement were an odd team. Whereas Professor Williams was Kennedy-esque, cerebral, and original, Professor Bement impressed me as stern, uptight, and dull. In 1970s pop-psychology terms, I regarded him as “parental”—definitely not an “I’m Okay, You’re Okay” type of guy. During the first few class sessions, I noted a distinct difference in the way the two professors acted toward me. Professor Williams was friendly and familiar. Though he was my employer at the G. G. Brown Lab, our classroom relationship was strictly professor/student. I didn’t expect special treatment, and Professor Williams didn’t signal that he was willing to provide any. Professor Bement was another story. His behavior made me feel that he resented my very presence in the classroom. While he sometimes spoke informally with other students, he was strictly formal with me. His answers to the questions I posed struck me as terse and condescending.

I considered Professor Bement’s contributions to the course minimal. He seemed to leave the more esoteric aspects of the material to Dr. Williams, who seemed to be the intellectual driver of the course. For me, Bement was little more than a source of bad vibes.

Despite my apprehension about Professor Bement, I was bubbling with excitement about ECE 471. The course dealt with fascinating topics such as detection of taste and smell and light, and transmission of sensations from nerve endings to the brain. The course included laboratory exercises such as measuring the speed of nerve impulses and analyzing electrocardiogram (EKG) signals. This was exactly the kind of interesting, stimulating work I had hoped to find at Michigan.

I worked hard in ECE 471, and had an A going into the final exam. I thought if I could just ace the final I would be well on my way to establishing myself as a top student in the College of Engineering.

Final exams were the week before Christmas, and by then I was mentally exhausted, on the verge of crazy. I wasn’t walking around campus muttering to myself like some other burnt-out students, but I was close. In spite of my precarious mental state, I was prepared for finals and confident I would get an A in ECE 471.

On the day of the final, I drove down to Central Campus and had a nice breakfast at the Brown Jug restaurant. Then I made my way to the exam room in East Engineering. I was early. I was prepared, re-

laxed, and ready. I didn't want charity, and I didn't want luck—I just wanted an A. I *expected* an A.

Professor Bement passed out the exam. I thought it odd that he was administering it, because that role was typically delegated to a teaching assistant. When the exam came to me, I opened my blue book, picked up a fresh #2 pencil, and started to have at it. The questions on the exam were the tough, open-ended type I'd come to expect at Michigan. When I finished, I was confident I had done well, but I wasn't sure. The exam was complex, and would be graded "on a curve," which meant my grade would depend on how the other students did.

Toward the end of finals week, a huge snowstorm hit Ann Arbor. By December 23, most students had left town for the Christmas break, but I stayed around to confirm my grades. This was my make-or-break semester, and I was determined to see it through to the bitter end. Professors Williams and Bement had said they would leave our graded exam booklets in the East Engineering study room, a tight little space where students crammed between classes. The professors had indicated that they would place each student's overall numeric score and course grade on his exam booklet.

That snowy morning, I cautiously made my way to the study room and immediately found the exam booklets stacked on a chair. I glanced at the cover of the blue book on top of the stack. It wasn't mine, but sure enough, there was a number and a grade on the cover. The number was 212, and the grade was A+. I surmised that the owner of that blue book had achieved a total numeric score of 212, and that score qualified him for an A+ grade. Lucky bastard! Alone in the deserted study room, I proceeded to thumb through the stack to find mine. I was nervous and excited as I examined the booklets, one by one. I certainly can't remember everyone's exact grade, but the following approximates what I discovered:

212 ... A+ ... not me
201 ... A ... not me
195 ... A... not me
190 ... A ... not me
185 ... A- ... not me
176 ... B+ ... me!

I was dejected. After all my hard work in ECE 471, I barely missed getting an A. In fact, it looked as if my grade was the highest B. I slipped my blue book out of the stack and turned to leave the room, but something made me stop. I went back to examine the other booklets. I found the place where I had removed my book from the stack and continued to examine the remaining ones.

174 ... A-

171 ... A-

165 ... B+

160 ... B

What? Oh shit! Apparently, two people with a lower overall score than mine received an A- as their final grade. I couldn't believe it. I went through the entire pile again from top to bottom. There was no mistaking it—my score was higher than two others that qualified for A's.

Shaking with anger, I ran to the Electrical Engineering office and asked the secretary if I could use the phone. I reached Professor Williams at his G. G. Brown office. I told him there seemed to be a mistake with my course grade, and Dr. Williams agreed to see me.

I ran outside and jumped into my Camaro. The snow was really coming down, and the streets were completely covered. I sped out to North Campus, skidding through snowdrifts at every turn. My heart was racing. There had to be some mistake. This wasn't fair. I was in no mood to be toyed with. I was half-crazed from the long semester and the seemingly endless hours of studying.

I arrived at G.G. Brown and bolted into Professor Williams' office. He wore a bemused look as he sat behind his desk and listened to my story. He must have noted my desperation, because my voice quivered with each word. He asked to take a look at my blue book. He looked at the cover and started flipping through the pages, then consulted a journal that contained a record of the course grades. After what seemed like an eternity, he spoke.

"Well, David, it looks like you might have an issue here. Professor Bement handled the grading of the exams and the assignment of the final grades, so I'll have to speak to him about this. I'll get back to you."

I knew it! I had gotten bad vibes from Professor Bement the moment I set foot in his classroom. I was sure Bement was trying to screw me, but why? Was he a racist? His body language, the way he treated me in class, and this apparent manipulation of my grade all said yes. Whatever his motivation, I was not going to let the injustice stand. I had worked too hard to let Bement spoil my achievement. I was determined to get my rightful grade no matter what.

I went home for Christmas seething with anger. All I could think about was getting my grade changed, and doubt about the outcome spoiled the holidays. The day after Christmas I was on the phone to Dr. Williams. Sure enough, he had followed up on my grade.

“Well, David,” he said, “I spoke with Professor Bement. He tells me he based a portion of each student’s grade on his own subjective criteria. That’s why you had a higher numeric score than a couple of other students but got a lower overall grade.”

“But that’s not fair!” I blurted into the phone. I was hot and could feel myself trembling, and my voice was somewhere between shouting and crying. “I got a higher score than those other students, so I shouldn’t get a lower grade than they did!”

Professor Williams said, “We’ve decided to change your grade. You’ll be getting an A-minus in the course.”

It took a moment for what he said to register. I said, “Thank you, Professor Williams.” I was mentally and emotionally exhausted.

“You’re welcome, David. I guess we won’t be leaving the blue books in the study room anymore.”

I found Professor Williams’ last comment odd. It seemed to imply that Professor Bement’s mistake wasn’t denying me my rightful grade—it was allowing me to find out about it.

Professor Williams changed my grade to A–, which was an A in the official record. I had foiled what I regarded as Professor Bement’s attempt to cheat me. Though his bias seemed blatant, I still didn’t want to believe it. Prior to that episode, most people in positions of authority seemed supportive of, or at least indifferent to, my aspirations. The experience with Professor Bement was a real eye-opener.

That semester, I made the dean’s list in the College of Engineering for the first time. I proved to myself and my professors that I

could excel, and I believed that my success would be limited only by my desire.

I was proud of my academic achievement. I was even prouder that I stood up and didn't allow myself to be cheated.