your name

Early in my teaching career I managed to inadvertently get most of the students in my microeconomics class mad at me, and for once, it had nothing to do with anything I said in class. The problem was caused by a midterm exam.

I had composed an exam that was designed to distinguish among three broad groups of students: the stars who really mastered the material, the middle group who grasped the basic concepts, and the bottom group who just didn't get it. To successfully accomplish this task, the exam had to have some questions that only the top students would get right, which meant that the exam was hard. The exam succeeded in my goal—there was a wide dispersion of scores—but when the students got their results they were in an uproar. Their principal complaint was that the average score was only 72 points out of a possible 100.

What was odd about this reaction was that the average numerical score on the exam had absolutely no effect on the distribution of grades. The norm at the school was to use a grading curve in which the average grade was a B or B+, and only a tiny number of students received grades below a C. I had anticipated the possibility that a low average numerical score might cause some confusion on this front, so I had reported how the numerical scores would be translated into actual grades in the class. Anything over 80 would get an A or A–, scores above 65 would get some kind of B, and only scores below 50 were in danger of getting a grade below C. The resulting distribution of grades was not different from normal, but this announcement had no apparent effect on the students' mood. They still hated my exam, and they were none too happy with me either. As a young professor worried about keeping my job, I was determined to do something about this, but I did not want to make my exams any easier. What to do?

After reading this, it is easy to see that students only care about _____ and less about _____.

why? Discuss.

Finally, an idea occurred to me. On the next exam, I made the total number of points available 137 instead of 100. This exam turned out to be slightly harder than the first, with students getting only 70% of the answers right, but the average numerical score was a cheery 96 points. The students were delighted! No one's actual grade was affected by this change, but everyone was happy. From that point on, whenever I was teaching this course, I always gave exams a point total of 137, a number I chose for two reasons. First, it produced an average score well into the 90s, with some students even getting scores above 100, generating a reaction approaching ecstasy. Second, because dividing one's score by 137 was not easy to do in one's head, most students did not seem to bother to convert their scores into percentages. Lest you think I was somehow deceiving the students, in subsequent years I included this statement, printed in bold type, in my course syllabus: "Exams will have a total of 137 points rather than the usual 100. This scoring system has no effect on the grade you get in the course, but it seems to make you happier." And indeed, after I made that change, I never got a complaint that my exams were too hard.

In the eyes of an economist, my students were "misbehaving." By that I mean that their behavior was inconsistent with the idealized model of behavior that is at the heart of what we call economic theory. To an economist, no one should be happier about a score of 96 out of 137 (70%) than 72 out of 100, but my students were. And by realizing this, I was able to set the kind of exam I wanted but still keep the students from grumbling.