

Essays on Teaching Excellence

Toward the Best in the Academy

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The Meaning of College Grades

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Paul Dressel (1983) has defined a grade as "an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material (p. 12)." In all-too-many instances, experienced instructors have heard anecdotal evidence from honest and forthright students that support the accuracy of Dressel's statement. Is his observation equally true for all course grades? While I think not, I would suggest that a course grade should be viewed as "the alphabetic or numeric symbol representing the end product of an evaluation process used in a specific course, taught by a particular individual, during a specified semester." Though institutional grading systems typically dictate the particular symbols used (e.g., letter grades, letter grades with pluses and minuses, numbers), individual faculty are responsible for creating the evaluation process used in the courses they teach. Thus, grade definitions are only as informative and precise as the evaluation process allows. Further, in most instances, course grades are unidimensional symbols into which multidimensional judgments made by a faculty member have been cast (Milton, Pollio, and Eison, 1986). Daily attendance, active class participation, the timely submission of assignments, completion of extra credit activities, as well as scores on quizzes, tests, papers, and projects are often used by faculty in rational yet idiosyncratic manners; definitional clarity of grade meanings, for students and other audiences, will be enhanced by complete written disclosure of the learning activities and outcomes used in the computation of course grades.

Problems with Grades as Communication Devices

Jedrey (1982) has claimed, "Grading is an important means of communication with our students... The grade conveys a relatively unambiguous message about a student's progress, in a universally understood system of academic notation (p. 104)." While few would argue with the thought expressed in Jedrey's first sentence, objections to Jedrey's second thought should know no bounds. Communication about the specific meaning of a course grade occurs between faculty and students most often in the privacy of the classroom, but seldom, if ever, is this information communicated to others (e.g., parents, business recruiters, graduate school admission committees). For example, the official 1988-1990 Bulletin of my campus states, "Grades are assigned as follows: A excellent; B = superior; C = average; D = inferior; F = failure (p. 33);" in the absence of additional information provided by the instructor, interpretation of these symbols by a transcript reader is as much a "projection" of the reader's personal views and experiences as is the "projective" interpretation of the meaning and significance of an inkblot made by a psychiatric patient.

To improve the communication value of grades, faculty must improve the frequency and quality (e.g., depth, breadth, specificity) of feedback provided to students. It has been my experience that most faculty members describe the assignments and other important expectations used to compute course grades; in fewer instances, however, are students provided with illustrative examples of classroom tests or samples of previously graded written work that illustrate qualitative differences in students' writing. In short, what qualities or characteristics differentiate superior student work from work of average or inferior quality? This information can, and should, be provided to students. It is in this area that individual faculty members can make the most significant improvements and reforms-in the words of K. Patricia Cross (1989), "one class at a time."

Grades as Motivators

Over 5,000 students enrolled at one large research university, four regional state universities, one liberal arts college and two community colleges completed a self-report inventory designed to assess students' orientations towards learning and towards grades (Eison and Pollio, 1989). This questionnaire contains the statement,

"I think grades provide me a good goal to work toward;" between 73% and 90% of the students in each sample agreed or agreed strongly with this belief!

To enhance the motivational impact of course grades, faculty should recognize differences in student orientations towards learning and towards grades and design instructional and evaluative activities that are responsive to these differences.

For instance, approximately one out of every two students surveyed agreed with the statement, "I think that without regularly scheduled exams I would not learn and remember very much;" almost as many students reported that they "get annoyed when lectures or class presentations are only rehashes of easy reading assignments;" and over 85% of the students on each campus reported that they "appreciate the instructor who provides honest and detailed evaluation of my work though such evaluation is sometimes unpleasant." Though student feedback such as this often surprises faculty, its instructional implications are clear. For example, periodic examinations are needed to motivate some but not all, students to study; the vast majority of students, however, desire honest and detailed feedback from instructors. Benjamin DeMott (1988) has asked, "Is not knowing who you're talking to as bad as not knowing what you're talking about?" Faculty members will benefit from efforts to empirically explore the motivational impact grades have upon their students.

Problems with Grades as Predictors of Adult Achievement

Because undergraduate grades often influence post-baccalaureate educational and professional opportunities, one must ask, "To what degree do college grades predict adult achievement?" The best available answer to this question of grade validity is found in the results of a recent meta-analysis (Cohen, 1984) of 108 studies correlating college GPA to various criteria of adult achievement (e.g., ratings of job performance, income, promotions, attainment of a graduate degree). The mean correlation for the 108 studies reported was $r .18$. While statistically significant, an effect of this magnitude is considered "small." Along similar lines, Samson and colleagues (1984) performed a meta-analysis on 35 studies reporting on the relationship between GPA and occupational performance (e.g., income, job satisfaction, effectiveness ratings) in various fields (e.g.,

teachers, engineers, business, nursing, medicine, military and civil service) .and concluded that "the overall variance accounted for makes grades or test scores nearly useless in predicting occupational effectiveness and satisfaction." Given the consistent and convincing nature of these findings, perhaps faculty members should collectively urge registrars to insert a note of interpretive caution prominently on each students' official transcript for external audiences and should demand that institutions place less reliance on the GPA as the primary measure of student achievement for internal decision making such as the awarding of honors.

Concluding Thoughts

Though grades are an issue that won't go away, the life-force of higher education is good clear thinking followed by good clear decisions (Milton, Pollio and Eison, 1986). Dispelling common myths and misunderstandings about grades, and thinking critically about how to best use grades to promote learning are significant challenges that faculty must face; examination of the works cited below can help guide one's deliberations.

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