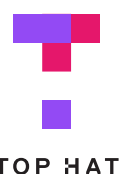




Grading: Frustrations and Ideas

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How to make assessments more secure in a bring-your-own-device environment

Faced with unrelenting pressure to achieve high grades and increased competition for jobs and graduate school slots, students are resorting to risky measures to attain academic success.

In a survey of over 70,000 undergraduate students conducted by the International Center for Academic Integrity, 68 percent of respondents admitted to cheating on a test or written assignment.

A 2014 survey of 41 Canadian universities showed more than 7,000 students had been disciplined for academic misconduct in the 2011–2012 academic year. In the U.K., the number of university students using smartphones and other devices specifically to cheat has increased 42 percent since 2012. And in the U.S., even top universities are struggling with cheating scandals that threaten to tarnish their reputations.

Top Hat Test is helping to stem the tide by allowing professors to securely administer tests and quizzes in a bring-your-own-device (BYOD) environment, using Top Hat's proprietary lock-out capabilities. Students already have their digital devices in the classroom, so why not harness them to improve the assessment experience?

Top Hat is a cloud-based, all-in-one teaching platform that works on students' devices. And with Top Hat Test professors can create a secure exam experience that ensures the academic integrity of assessments.

Here's how it works: When a test or exam begins in Top Hat, students will be prompted to enter the unlock code supplied by the instructor. If at any point during the test a student leaves tophat.com (for example, if they open another browser on their laptop or device), they will be warned that they can't return to the test. If they proceed, Top Hat's proprietary algorithms will automatically lock them out of the test.

Instructors will be notified in real-time about any student lockouts and can then make the decision whether or not to allow the student back in. (Instructors also have the option to manually lock out a student if they see anyone exhibiting behavior that isn't automatically tracked in Top Hat.)

Based on the academic risks that students are willing to take to achieve a good grade, it's clear they're under a lot of pressure to succeed. And for professors, that makes assessment an increasingly complicated process. With Top Hat Test, we're committed to restoring security to the assessment process by giving instructors the opportunity to securely monitor students on their home turf—the digital devices that are part and parcel of the modern college classroom.

The Top Hat Team
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TOP HAT

Introduction

Grading is the subject of countless complaints by faculty members. They feel pressure to give higher grades than they believe have been earned. Rigorous grades earn the professors poor reviews. Standards don't exist. And on and on.

To be sure, one major issue with regard to grading is grade inflation. But there is much more being discussed: How can grading be made meaningful? What does real assessment look like (and it may have little to do with grading)? How do online and/or group work change grading? Can educators reform grading or should they just abandon it? How much do trends in high schools contribute to the environment in college?

The articles in this compilation explore these and other issues and trends related to grading. *Inside Higher Ed* will continue to track these topics. We welcome your reactions to these articles and your ideas for future coverage.

--The Editors
editor@insidehighered.com

News

A selection of articles by *Inside Higher Ed* reporters

Grade Inflation, Higher and Higher

BY SCOTT JASCHIK // MARCH 29, 2016

The most common grade is A -- at all kinds of colleges. But while grade point averages are increasing at four-year institutions, that's not the case at community colleges.

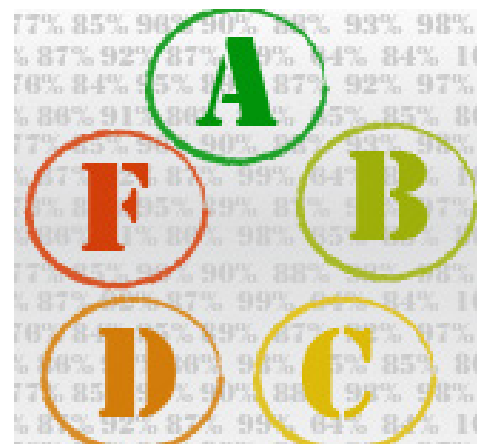
The first major update in seven years of a database on grade inflation has found that grades continue to rise and that A is the most common grade earned at all kinds of colleges.

Since the last significant release of the survey, faculty members at [Princeton University](#) and Wellesley College, among other institutions, have [debated ways to limit grade inflation](#), despite criticism from some students who welcome the high averages. But the new study says these efforts have not been typical. The new data, by Stuart Rojstaczer, a former [Duke University](#) professor, and Christopher Healy, a [Furman University](#) professor, will appear today on the website [GradeInflation.com](#), which will also have data for some of the individual colleges par-

ticipating in the study.

The findings are based on an analysis of colleges that collectively enroll about one million students, with a wide range of competitiveness in admissions represented among the institutions. Key findings:

- Grade point averages at four-year colleges are rising at the rate of 0.1 points per decade and have been doing so for 30 years.
- A is by far the most common grade on both four-year and two-year college campuses (more than 42 percent of grades). At four-year schools, awarding of A's has been going up five to six percentage points per decade and A's are now three times more common than they were in 1960.



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- In recent years, the percentage of D and F grades at four-year colleges has been stable, and the increase in the percentage of A grades is associated with fewer B and C grades.
- Community college grades ap-

Grading: Frustrations and Ideas

pear to have peaked.

■ At community colleges, recent years have seen slight increases in the percentages of D and F grades awarded. While A is still the top grade (more than 36 percent), its share has gone down slightly in recent years.

Here are some of the graphics being released today, appearing here via permission of GradeInflation.com, which show the various trends for grade point averages at four-year colleges and universities, grade distribution at four-year colleges and universities, and grade distributions at community colleges:

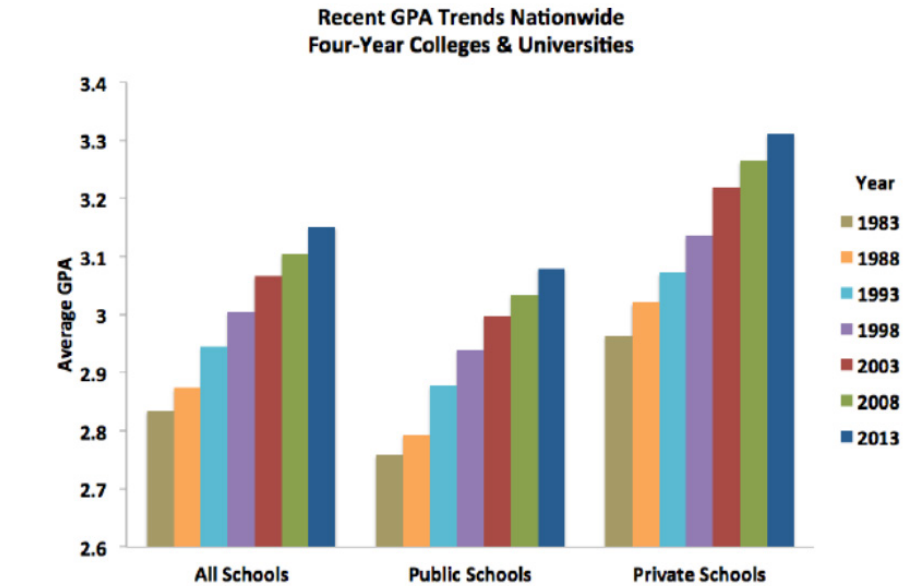
The trends highlighted in the new study do not represent dramatic shifts but are a continuation of trends that Rojstaczer and many others bemoan.

He believes the idea of “student as consumer” has encouraged colleges to accept high grades and to effectively encourage faculty members to award high grades.

“University leadership nationwide promoted the student-as-consumer idea,” he said. “It’s been a disastrous change. We need leaders who have a backbone and put education first.”

Rojstaczer said he thinks the only real solution is for a public federal database to release information -- for all colleges -- similar to what he has been doing with a representative sample, but still a minority of all colleges. “Right now most universities and colleges are hiding their grades. They’re too embarrassed to show them,” he said. “As they say, sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

Not all scholars of grading and

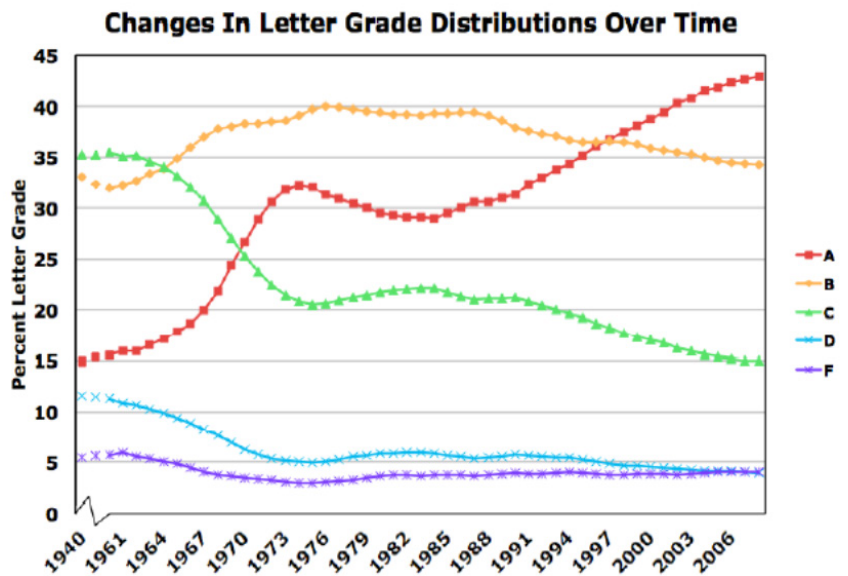


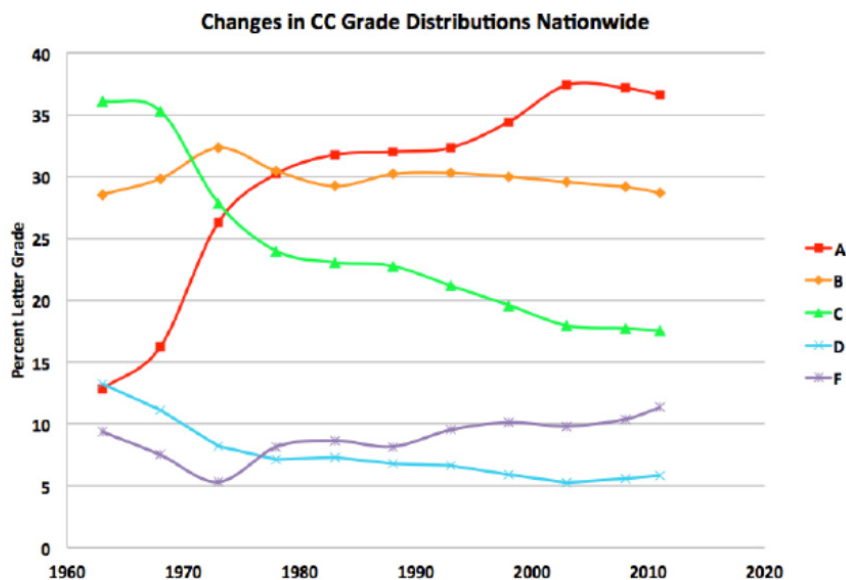
higher education share Rojstaczer's views, although most agree that grade inflation is real.

A 2013 study published in *Educational Researcher*, “Is the Sky Falling? Grade Inflation and the Signaling Power of Grades” ([abstract available here](#)), argued that a better way to measure grade inflation is to look at the “signaling” power of grades for employment (landing prestigious jobs and higher

salaries). To the extent the relationship between earning high grades and doing better after college is unchanged -- and that's what the study found -- the “value” of grades can be presumed to have held its ground, not eroded.

Debra Humphreys, senior vice president for academic planning and public engagement at the Association of American Colleges and Universities, said she looks at lots





of data to suggest “an underperformance problem,” which raises the question of why grades continue to go up. AAC&U is one of the leaders of the VALUE Project, which aims to have faculty members compare standards for various programs with the goal of common, faculty-driven expectations about learning outcomes. Humphreys said agreement on learning outcomes and assessment is important because so much of what goes on in grading is “so individual.”

“It remains largely a solo act, with no shared program standards for what counts as excellent, good, average or inadequate work,” she said. “So faculty have no firm foundation to stand on when they go against the trend and assign lower grades.”

Community College Students and Faculty Members

In his analysis, Rojstaczer notes that community colleges have some characteristics that might make them as prone to grade inflation as are four-year institutions (and he considers community college grades high, too, even if they aren't still rising). For example, he notes that many community college leaders embrace the student-as-consumer idea just as do four-year college presidents. And community colleges rely on adjunct instructors, many of whom lack the job security to be confident in being a tough grader, since students tend to favor easier graders in reviews.

Rojstaczer thinks that, to understand grade inflation, one needs to look at the student body at two-year colleges, which he characterizes as less spoiled than those at four-year institutions. “One factor may be that tuition is low at these schools, so students don't feel quite so entitled,” he writes. “Another factor may be that community college students come, on average, from less wealthy homes, so students don't feel quite so entitled.”

Thomas Bailey, George and Abby O'Neill Professor of Economics and Education and director of the Community College Research Center at Teachers College, Columbia University, agreed via email that he also thinks tuition and student expectations may play a role.

“I would imagine that four-year colleges are more likely to compete on the basis of grades than community colleges,” he said. “Most community college students go to the closest college, so they don't shop around as much, so there would be less chance that they would benefit from a reputation of high grades. In terms of the notion of entitlement, it might be that students who pay more would feel more willing to demand some sort of accommodation. I believe that among four-year colleges, grade inflation is higher for privates, who charge more, than it is for publics.” ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/03/29/survey-finds-grade-inflation-continues-rise-four-year-colleges-not-community-college>

SOURCES [1] Christopher Kondo, Department of Marketing, California State University Fullerton [2] Results of the 2016 University Information Technology Services report on Top Hat usage at Indiana University [3] Christopher Kondo, Department of Marketing, California State University Fullerton [4] Results of the 2016 University Information Technology Services report on Top Hat usage at Indiana University

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of students
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textbook market"**

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TOP HAT

Lenient Grades, Unreliable Grades

BY COLLEEN FLAHERTY // JANUARY 24, 2017

Study finds variation in the way students are evaluated -- and tougher grades appear to be closer to what they should be. But not necessary due to grade inflation alone.

Professors love to hate grade inflation, saying course marks aren't as meaningful as they used to be. A new paper makes the case that easy grading is actually a symptom of poor assessment practices rather than a cause and that, either way, reducing leniency in grading may lead to more accurate assessment.

"The strong association between grading leniency and reduced grading reliability ... calls for interpretations that go beyond the effect of restricting grades to fewer categories," reads the paper, now [available online](#) in *Studies in Higher Education*. "One possible explanation is that grading leniency is the result, rather than the cause, of low grading reliability. Consider faculty members who suspect that their assessment methods are unreliable. This could occur in course subjects in which assessment of student performance requires subjective and complex judgment."

Less "flattering reasons" for low grading reliability include "badly designed or poorly executed as-

sessments," the study continues. "Increasing grading leniency as a compensating mechanism for low grading reliability can be rationalized as an ethical behavior because it avoids assigning bad grades to good students. It is also a prudent strategy because, though students may accept high and unreliable grades, they might begrudge low and unreliable ones."

"The Relationship Between Grading Leniency and Grading Reliability" is based on a data set pertaining to 53,460 courses taught at one unnamed North American university over several years. All sections included 15 or more students with passing grades, and failing grades were tossed out of the analysis to avoid any biasing effect on average grades. The primary focus was whether grades were reliable measures and whether they were lenient. Results suggest they're often neither, though there was plenty of consistent grading.

A leniency score was computed for each section as the "grade lift

metric," or the difference between the average grade a class earned and the average grade point average of the class's students at the end of the semester. So if a course section's average grade was B, but the students' average GPA was 3.5, then the "lift" score was -0.5, indicating tough grading. A positive score indicated lenient grading.

"The core idea is that high grading reliability within a department should result in course grades that correlate highly with each student's GPA," reads the study, written by Ido Millet, a professor of business at Pennsylvania State University at Erie.

Course section grading reliability scores were computed based on the same logic. So, in an extreme example, a section in which high-GPA students received low grades and low-GPA students received high grades earned a low reliability score.

Grading reliability averaged 0.62, meaning that in most cases better students received better grades.

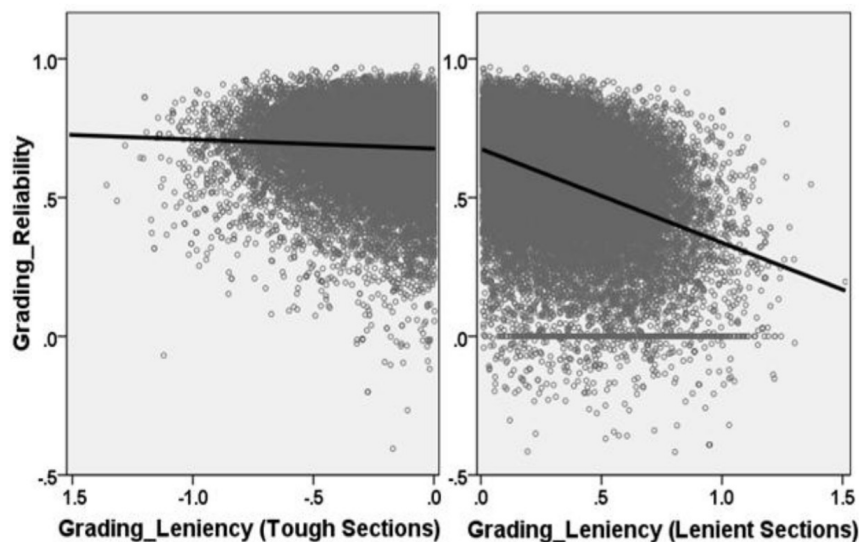


Figure 3: Steeper decline in grading reliability for lenient sections.

Grading leniency, meanwhile, ranged between a minimum of -1.36 and a maximum of 1.51. “These are extreme values, considering that a grade lift of -1.36 is equivalent to a class of straight-A (4.0 GPA) students receiving average grades slightly below a B-minus (2.67),” the study says. “Similarly, a grade lift of 1.36 is equivalent to a class of C-plus (2.33 GPA) students receiving average grades above an A-minus (3.67).”

Millet also compared grading reliability in sections with lenient grading (positive grade lift) with sections with tough grading (negative or no grade lift). Data indicated that reliability for tough graders was higher.

Over all, “grading leniency is associated with reduced grading reliability ($p < 0.001$),” he wrote. “This association strengthens as grading moves from tough to lenient. The standardized slope coefficient changes from -0.04 to -0.42, indicating that the decline in grading reliability associated with a one-unit increase in grading leniency is ap-

proximately 10 times larger among lenient-grading sections.”

To isolate the effect of factors other than leniency on grading reliability, Millet included several independent variables in the analysis: standard deviation of GPA within each course section, class size, instructor experience, course level and number of credits. Reliability positively correlated with the standard deviation of GPA within each course section, and with and course credits -- probably because a four-credit course provides more

opportunities for student-professor interaction. There was a low and negative correlation between instructor experience and grading reliability, and classes with more students had higher reliability. There was lower reliability in upper-level courses, probably because of the relative homogeneity of students.

But even after accounting for the effects of other variables, grading leniency still had a significant negative association with grading reliability, according to the study.

Similar to results for individual course sections, the decline in grading reliability was more pronounced among departments with lenient grading (departments were anonymized in the study).

Another noteworthy finding is that variance in students' GPA is “a strong contributor to grading reliability in lenient- as well as tough-grading course sections,” Millet says. This may also explain the “weak results” past studies have found about the relationship between grade inflation and grading reliability, Millet says, since the effect of increasing grading leniency over several decades “may have been moderated by a concurrent increase in variability of

Table 3: Correlation table for dependent and independent variables.

	Grading reliability	Grading leniency	GPA SD	Instructor experience	Class size	Course level	Course credits
Grading reliability		-.41**	.31**	-.01*	.07**	-.05**	.15**
Grading leniency	-.41**		.05**	-.03**	-.08**	.02**	-.32**
GPA SD	.31**	.05**		.01*	-.02**	-.37**	.02**
Instructor experience	-.01*	-.03**	.01*		.01**	.04**	-.05**
Class size	.07**	-.08**	-.02**	.01**		-.03**	-.12**
Course level	-.05**	.02**	-.37**	.04**	-.03**		-.16**
Course credits	.15**	-.32**	.02**	-.05**	-.11**	-.16**	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

students' abilities."

The study notes several limitations, including that GPA is only a "proxy" for expected performance and that replications using data from other institutions are needed. Yet Millet argues it has several important implications for higher education, such as that future studies of grading reliability should incorporate measurements of variability in students' abilities, and that grading reliability should be incorporated as an independent variable when higher grades lead to higher scores on student evaluations of teaching.

That's because "students may accept high and unreliable grades, but they might resent low and unreliable ones," the study says. "This may help resolve the leniency versus validity debate. If the correlation between grading leniency and [evaluation] scores is particularly strong for lenient graders with low grading reliability, this would mean that the leniency hypothesis is correct. In such a case, rather than simply 'buying' student satisfaction, the effect of higher grades may be interpreted as avoiding student dissatisfaction when grading reliability is low."

Millet has [previously suggested](#) that giving instructors information about how lenient their grading is compared to their peers' can significantly reduce variability in grading leniency, and he says that future research may extend the same approach, to see whether this also leads to increased grading reliability.

"The rationale for this hypothesis is that, as institutional norms for grading leniency become visible,

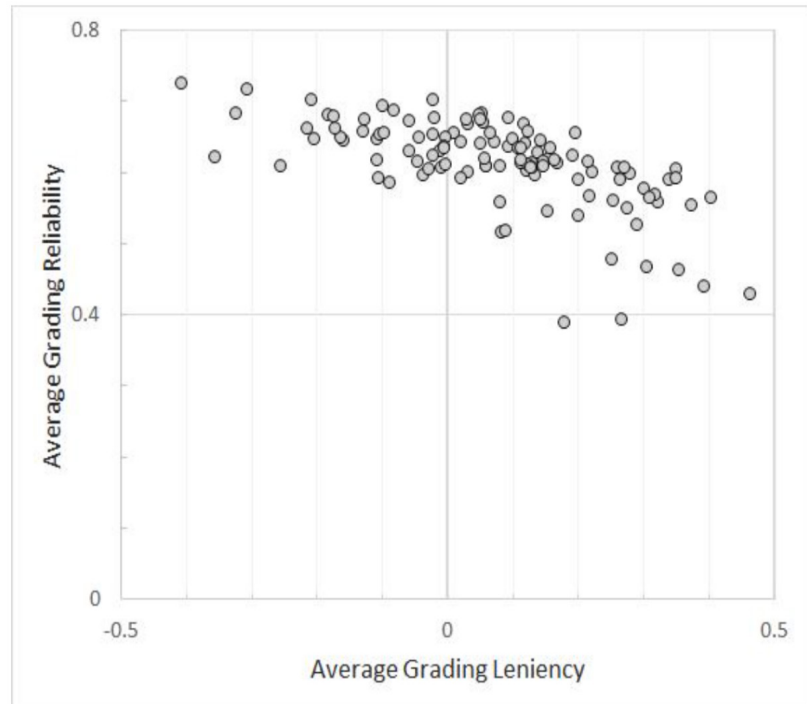


Figure 4: Grading leniency and reliability by academic department.

extremely lenient graders may become less lenient," the study says. "This may force such instructors to become more reliable in order to avoid student dissatisfaction."

At the same time, he says, administrators should "resist" the temptation to use the grading reliability metric to evaluate faculty members. Why? "Such heavy-handed use of this imperfect metric can lead to unintended consequences. For example, faculty members who are concerned about their grading reliability scores might resort to assigning good grades to students with high GPAs and low grades to students with low GPAs."

Millet also says it would have been useful to include in this study metrics related to the number and type of assessments employed by each course section. Such data can be useful for internal diagnostics. Typical learning management systems already collect limited data

about assessments, and by "adding a few more attributes to characterize each assessment, useful reports could be generated to establish and detect deviations from institutional norms."

He reiterated in an interview that "the main issue here is that grading leniency may be a symptom, rather than a cause, of low grading reliability." It's possible that when professors "suspect they have low reliability in the way they grade, they compensate with grading leniency."

While grade inflation typically gets a lot of attention, Millet said, "what we need to address, and set up some reporting system for, is grading reliability. One of the ways of doing that is to collect data on grading leniency, assessment types and assessment scope for individual course sections. And collecting data about assessments can be facilitated by learning management systems." ■

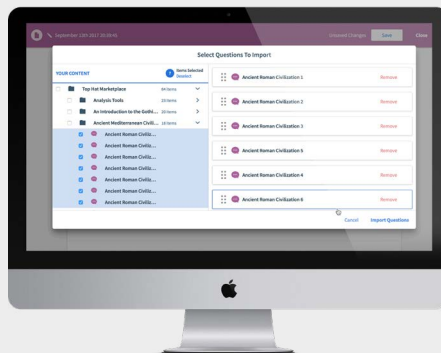
<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/24/study-suggests-grading-leniency-result-rather-cause-low-grading-reliability>



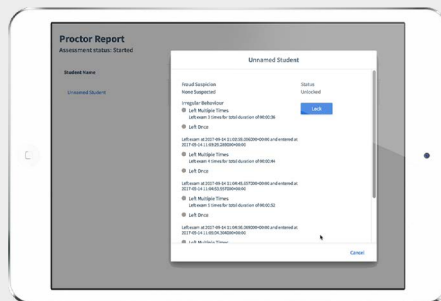
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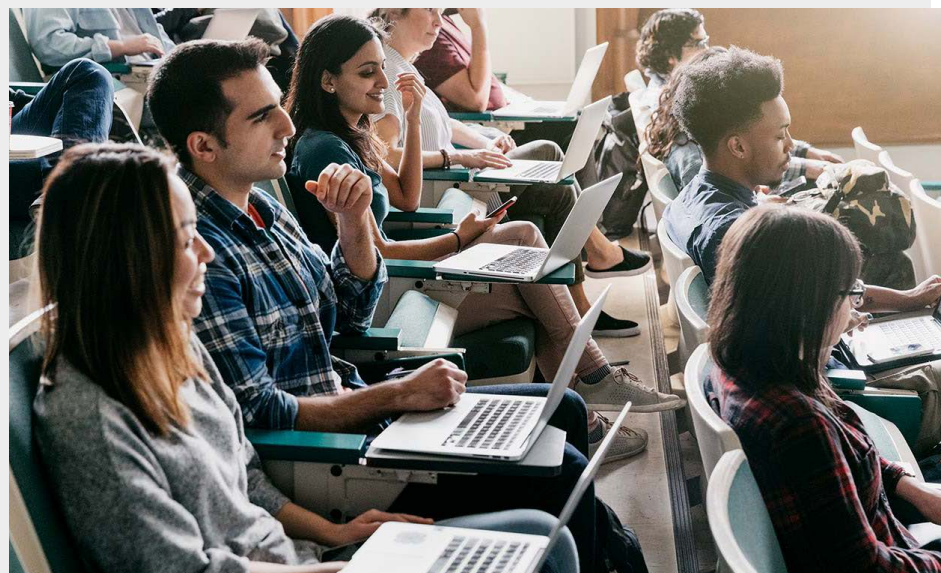


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High School Grades: Higher and Higher

BY SCOTT JASCHIK // JULY 17, 2017

Where is grade inflation the highest? At schools where students are more likely than elsewhere to be wealthier and white. Does this create more inequity and uncertainty in admissions?

[Numerous studies](#) have documented grade inflation in colleges. A study being released today shows that grades are going up in high schools -- in ways that may raise issues for college admissions systems that rely on high school grade point averages. The study also shows that many schools -- especially those educating wealthier students -- are no longer calculating or releasing class ranks, potentially making it more difficult to compare students in an era of grade inflation.

The study finds that the gains in high school GPA raise questions about the ability of colleges to rely on the statistics in college admissions. Further, the study finds that grade inflation in high schools has been most pronounced at high schools with students who are wealthier than average -- and where most students are white.

The study, released today, will be a chapter in *Measuring Success: Testing, Grades and the Future of*

College Admissions, to be published next year by Johns Hopkins University Press. The two authors of the study are Michael Hurwitz, senior director at the College Board, and Jason Lee, a doctoral student at the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia.

The involvement of the College Board in the research may lead some to assume that the study ends up endorsing the use of standardized tests as one way to deal with grade inflation -- and the authors of the study do in fact make that argument. At the same time, they say that the numbers speak for themselves and show grade inflation in high schools to be real. (A prominent critic of standardized testing contests the analysis -- more on that below.)

The research is on students who take the SAT, and the study argues that these are representative of high school students who enroll in four-



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year colleges. The data come both from the Education Department and from surveys the College Board conducts of students who take the SAT.

A key finding is that, looking at cohorts of high school graduates who finished from 1998 to 2016, the average high school GPA went up from 3.27 to 3.38.

Notably, the gains were unequal among high schools, and the differences appear to favor students from wealthier (and whiter) high schools than average.

Grading: Frustrations and Ideas

The study groups high schools by the magnitude of grade inflation. In the top decile of growth in average GPAs, black and Latino students made up only 22 percent of students on average, and only 32 percent of students were eligible for free lunch. But in the bottom decile of GPA growth, black and Latino enrollments were an average of 61 percent, and more than half of students were eligible for free lunch. The study finds that the average GPA at the high schools with the most grade inflation (top decile) has hit 3.56, while the average at places that haven't seen much grade inflation (bottom decile, largely minority) is 3.14.

In some ways, this [mirrors findings about grade inflation in higher education](#), where a recent study found continued gains in

GPAs at four-year colleges, but not at community colleges, which serve many low-income and minority students.

These days, many high schools “weight” GPAs, giving extra points for honors or Advanced Placement courses, and the study finds similar grade inflation in the weighted and unweighted grades.

“High schools that liberally assign high grades may paradoxically disadvantage some students,” the study says. “Such grade inflation blurs the signal of high grades on

a transcript, meaning that the students whose performance truly justifies A grades are not easily discernible from students with more modest classroom performance.”

And these findings should alarm admissions officials, the study says. “If all transcripts are replete with A grades, without standardized tests, admissions staff would be tasked with the impossible -- using high school GPA to predict whether the student will thrive academically.”

The authors of the study also look at the data another way, to show that the gains in GPAs aren't from

brute. What if students are smarter or are being better educated, and so are earning their better grades? The authors reject these possibilities, and cite SAT scores to do so. If students were learning more, their SATs should be going up, or at the very least remaining stable. But during the period studied, SAT averages (math and verbal, 1,600-point scale) fell from 1,026 to 1,002.

In interviews, the authors of the study said that they didn't have an explanation for the grade inflation. Their focus, they said, was on the data, not the reasons why. They said

they hope people will do further research, talking to teachers and others, to look for explanations.

While the authors said they didn't think many educators would be surprised that grade inflation is

present in high schools, they said it was important to look at the variation among high schools, a circumstance that has received less attention.

High schools “most prone to grade inflation are the resourced schools,” Lee said, “the ones with the highest level of affluence.” For those at high schools without resources, generally with lower GPAs, grade inflation elsewhere “puts them at a disadvantage in the college admissions process.”

Hurwitz, asked about the College

“If all transcripts are replete with A grades, without standardized tests, admissions staff would be tasked with the impossible -- using high school GPA to predict whether the student will thrive academically.”

more B-minus averages becoming B-plus grades, but are due to more A grades.

Here, the authors find that the proportion of students with A averages (including A-minus and A-plus) increased from 38.9 percent of the graduating class of 1998 to 47 percent of the graduating class of 2016. Those gains came from the B and C ranges.

Of course, the authors acknowledge in their study, there could be a reason for the grade inflation that would make educators cele-

Board's inclination to favor standardized tests, said that it's true the organization runs the SAT. "We're not saying you should just ignore grades. But what we are saying is that it is important we have some sort of standardized measure like the SAT," he said. "Right now where we see high school grades is enormous variation among high schools and variation of grade inflation."

The Role of Class Rank

One way of dealing with grade inflation might be more reliance on class rank, especially if there are data on the averages of students at different ranks. "Class rank, based on high school GPA, adds important context to student grades," the study says. "Achieving a B average at a high school without grade infla-

tion might prove a more impressive feat than earning all A grades at a comparable high school with rampant grade inflation."

But using data from the National Student Clearinghouse and the Education Department, the study finds that a majority of those who attend the most competitive colleges come from high schools where class rank is "suppressed." In contrast, a solid majority of those at less selective colleges come from high schools still releasing class ranks. And the study notes a relationship between wealth and these trends, with many of those coming from high schools that don't release rank coming from private schools.

Bob Schaeffer, public education director of FairTest: National Center

for Fair and Open Testing, a long-time critic of the College Board, was not impressed by the study, which he said in an interview was an attempt by the College Board "to stave off the test-optional movement."

He said that the only part of the study he considered to be "a new wrinkle" was the information about grade inflation being most prevalent at high schools with wealthier, less diverse students than at other high schools. But he noted that many of the colleges that have dropped SAT or ACT requirements in recent years have found enrollments of minority and low-income students going up.

These colleges, he said, "know that no standardized exams are needed to make fair, accurate admissions decisions." ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2017/07/17/study-finds-notable-increase-grades-high-schools-nationally>



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Dropping the D

BY ASHLEY A. SMITH // FEBRUARY 9, 2018

Transfer rates at North Carolina's Stanly Community College increased after the college made the simple grading change of no longer awarding D's.

What's the point of a D grade?

Not much, according to one North Carolina community college.

In 2010, Stanly Community College faculty and advisers realized that the long-held tradition of educators using an A-through-F grading scale didn't help students who were on transfer pathways or who needed to complete sequential courses -- meaning courses that require prerequisites. That was due in part to the grade of D, because while students could pass a course with the grade, they weren't allowed to move on to the next course in a sequence or transfer to an institution that required a C or higher.

So the math and English departments at the college made a simple change: they stopped awarding D's.

"Most of us said a student is successful if he or she has 70 percent or better," said Heather Hill, vice president for academic affairs at Stanly. "We were saying 70 percent or better for student learning outcomes, but still allowing students to pass with a D."

In order to transfer courses to the state's universities, students needed to score a 70 percent or at least a C, but the college still allowed students to pass courses with a D. The problem even applied to students who didn't plan to transfer. If they took a prerequisite course, moving on to the next level required at least a C. Yet students could complete a prerequisite course with a D -- they just couldn't move on to the next level.

"We really noticed it was an issue when we had students that would get the D in their math class and they had a D on the transcript," said Brigitte Myers, the math department program head. "Later they would talk to us as an adviser and they're ready to transfer, but we're telling them to retake the class or they have to retake at the [university]. They didn't understand. 'Why can I graduate and it won't transfer?' students were asking, and the syllabus said they could get a D in the class and now we're saying it's not good enough."



So both departments set the standard that a score of 70 and higher, on a 100-point scale, or an A-minus through C, is considered passing. Anything lower than 70 points is failing.

The change had an impact on the college's transfer success rate, which the state's universities measure one year after students transfer from a community college. Stanly stopped awarding D's collegewide in 2012. For transfer students who had attended Stanly after the change, the college's transfer success rate increased by 15 percent.

Hill said the college, which enrolls about 3,500 students, can't definitively say that eliminating D's

led to the improvement in Stanly's transfer success rate, which prior to the change was about 75 percent, but administration and faculty feel strongly that it had an impact.

"By eliminating the D's we showed them if they set the bar high for themselves, they can achieve that," Myers said. "In order to be successful even at the four-year university and to be competitive, they've got to make those A's, B's and C's. It's not prestigious to graduate with a four-year degree and straight D's."

Because math and English are the two gateway courses where the issue would arise, and also courses that nearly every student at the college must take, it was faculty members within those departments who pushed for eliminating the grades. Gradually the movement spread across the college to include all general education and university transfer courses.

The only area where the grade change didn't apply was allied health, Hill said, which already has an established grading scale that stipulates that anything below 80 points is considered failing.

"I don't feel like having a D shows that you know the majority of course material when a C is considered to be average enough that you should

be able to be successful," Myers said. "That first year, I had students ask about it, but I tried to stress the first day of class the grading scale and I made sure I constantly reminded them all semester they need a 70 to pass and less than 70 is failing. But usually, if the student is concerned about their grade, they will rise to meet the bar wherever you set that bar."

Myers said she had at most two students who questioned eliminating the D grade, but it's become the standard during the past few years.

"Many people think I'm mean if they have a 69.3 or 68.5, but that's an F," she said. "That's what it is. They can take quizzes and rework homework until they get 100. There are so many opportunities for them to go in and get those several points. If you can't support that effort, you don't deserve it."

Myers said it's no different from a student who is a few tenths of a point away from an A grade. If they want it, they'll earn those extra points, she said.

Hill said a relatively small number of students were affected. The college's records from 2010 and 2011 show that less than 10 percent of students earned D's.

"The only group that gave us

pause that I was worried about were financial aid students, because a D counted for satisfactory academic progress," Hill said. "But most of the students earning D's were having to repeat courses anyway."

Hill said it's just as much of a financial aid concern when a student receives an F and has to repeat.

In recent months, Stanly has been approached by a number of other colleges in and outside North Carolina about altering their grading scales.

"We had a great idea that we sort of sat on because it made so much sense that we didn't see it as innovative," Hill said. "We presented it in the fall and were surprised by the number of colleges who never thought of it. Since then, people from other states have been asking questions."

Evelyn Waiwaiole, the executive director of the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the [University of Texas at Austin](https://www.utexas.edu/), said that educators have been using the same grading system for so long that no one has questioned it.

"If it doesn't transfer, it doesn't count, so why would you do it," she said. "This reinforces that students want high expectations and will work to meet them." ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/02/09/north-carolina-community-colleges-elimination-ds-leads-transfer-success>

Punishing Women for Being Smart

BY SCOTT JASCHIK // MARCH 21, 2018

Employers favor new college graduates with moderate academic success but not high achievement, study finds. New male graduates' grades don't seem to have much impact.

Study hard, earn good grades and career success will follow.

Actually, a new study finds that this common advice given to college students isn't true.

The grades of new college graduates who are men don't appear to matter much in their job searches, according to a new study. And female graduates may be punished for high levels of academic achievement. The study comes at a time of growing evidence that female students are outperforming their male counterparts academically in college (after also having done so in high school).

The new research will appear in the April issue of *The American Sociological Review*.

Natasha Quadlin, author of the study and assistant professor of sociology at [Ohio State University](https://www.ohio-state.edu/), did an "audit study," submitting 2,106 applications for various jobs appropriate for new graduates. She varied the job applicants' grades, gender and undergraduate major. For men, grade point average didn't seem to matter. The key finding was that women applying for jobs



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benefited from moderate academic achievement but not high levels of achievement.

Of the applications she submitted from equally high-achieving male and female personas, men received calls for further discussion twice as often as did women with equal grades. In science and technology fields, the ratio favored men by three to one.

Quadlin said that the finding on STEM jobs was particularly of concern in light of the great efforts at many colleges and universities to recruit more women into studying the sciences.

In a related study also described in the article, Quadlin surveyed those who make hiring decisions on the qualities on which they focused with various applicants. She found that employers value competence and commitment in considering male applicants. But when evaluating female applicants, they focus on "perceived likeability." This finding, combined with stereotypes many men have about smart women, may explain the findings about high-achieving female graduates not receiving the same job market attention as those of moderate achievement. ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/03/21/study-finds-female-college-graduates-newly-job-market-are-punished-having-good>

Online Students Don't Have to Work Solo

BY MARK LIEBERMAN // APRIL 25, 2018

Group projects might seem more daunting in an online format, but instructors say they've found ways to foster collaboration and avoid logistical roadblocks.

Group work has long been a source of friction between students and instructors. At their worst, team projects force high-achieving students to compensate for those less willing to put in effort. At their best, they foster productive collaboration and idea sharing among future professionals.

Online courses add another layer of considerations for instructors. Students might be too far apart to meet in person, or too busy with other life commitments to schedule remote meetings. The impulse to lean on higher-achieving members of a group might be exacerbated by not having to face frustrated teammates in person.

"Group projects can be really great, and they can be a disaster," said Vickie Cook, executive director of the Center for Teaching, Learning & Service at the University of Illinois at Springfield. "The most important thing is that they have a purpose. They're very organized. Faculty and students have the same understanding of what the group project needs to accomplish and steps along the way to get there."



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Faced with these challenges, instructors have adapted old strategies and formulated new ones for group projects in online settings. Some instructors say implementing these strategies takes up more time than a comparable assignment in a face-to-face course; others aren't as convinced of the extra workload.

Instructors who assign group projects to online students see their efforts not as a burden, but as a tool to help students learn and form relationships

-- just as they might face-to-face.

Unique Challenges

Instructors say many of the fundamental characteristics of a successful group project online are consistent with what works face-to-face. There are some key differences, however.

At the Chicago School of Professional Psychology, instructors warn students about group projects at the beginning of the semester, rather than springing something unexpected on them.

"They're online students; they typically have a lot going on in their lives, they're full-time employees," said Alisha DeWalt, associate campus dean. "We want it to be an efficient project that's really driven to mastery of learning outcomes."

Online students in marketing communication management at Florida Gulf Coast University have to present case studies as groups in order to critically analyze the kinds of content they'll create in their careers. Ludmilla Wells, associate professor of marketing, has over the years worked hard to put constraints on sources she expects students to mine when preparing their projects.

Because online students have the entire internet at their fingertips whenever their mind is on the course, they're sometimes overwhelmed when searching for information. Wells provides students with "key points of entry" for information: magazines like *AdAge* and *Business Week*, aggregators like Smart Post and Media Brief. She also lays

MarCom 6336 Final Project Proposal

Each team has selected a brand-name consumer product, identified an issue/opportunity to address, and discussed a *first thought* as to what the team might develop for a MarComm proposal.

Basic Formatting:

- Running Head: Team# - Brand-Name Product – Date
- Margins: all pages 1" margins, do not justify paragraphs
- Font: Times Roman 11-point Font
- Lines Spacing: 1.5 lines, .5" paragraph indent, (no extra lines between paragraphs)
- Narrative: 12 min-15 max pages, number all pages
- References: minimum 25 sources
- Appendix: your choice, no limit

Document/Proposal Guideline

1. **Executive Summary** (One Page)
2. **The Company** (Half Page)
3. **The Brand-name Product** (Half Page)
4. **Competitive Communications Environment** (
 - About your brand and product
 - About your competitors)
5. **Problem or Opportunity Identification**
6. **Target Audience**
7. **MarComm Objective** (must be measurable in communications terms – *not sales*)
8. **Strategy(ies)** max two strategies
9. **Tactics** – must address at least FIVE from the list (in any order) as to how you are going to implement that tactic or why that tactic is not appropriate for your branded product.
 - ✓ Advertising (be specific)
 - ✓ Public Relations (be specific)
 - ✓ Social Media (be specific)
 - ✓ Customer Relationship Management (be specific)
 - ✓ Sales Promotion (no B2B) (be specific)
 - ✓ Media Relations (be specific)
 - ✓ Events (be specific)
 - ✓ Sponsorships (be specific)
 - ✓ Your Choice (be specific)
10. **Budget Narrative** (Half Page Max) Why are you allocating the \$100,000 for twelve months among your chosen tactics. (add spreadsheet to Appendix)

Ludmilla Wells' expectations for group projects

out specific expectations for the final product in writing.

"At the graduate level, nobody works alone," Wells said. "You're a representative of your department in the firm, you're an entrepreneur working for a chamber of commerce. You're still working as collective in one fashion or another. This gives them an opportunity to bring what they are very in-

terested in or they're very good at to the team."

In person, instructors can allow students to work on group projects during class time, which gives them a window into how the students are doing. No such opportunities are available in an online class, which means instructors have to build in opportunities to see projects at various stages of completion, said Cook, who helps online instructors (and face-to-face ones) at Springfield strategize group project assignments.

Establishing learning objectives early goes a long way toward mitigating students' frustrations with having to work in teams and concerns about col-

laborating with students they don't have access to in person, according to Cook.

"I don't think any of us like busywork. Students especially don't like group work because it's difficult to schedule or because one group member pulls more weight, one group member pulls less weight," Cook said. "Having that

clarity of purpose puts you on a single field."

Assigning Groups or Letting Them Form Organically

Forcing students to work together can introduce students to new perspectives and lead to healthy collaboration. It can also backfire if students don't get along or their work styles aren't compatible.

Online, that dynamic can be heightened because students are operating with only a limited understanding of their fellow students' personalities and behaviors.

In her marketing courses at Florida Gulf Coast, Wells splits the difference. She lets students choose their team members for the case study project but assigns groups for discussion threads that take place throughout the semester.

Students in her course likely already know each other a bit from previous courses in the M.B.A. program. They're also more likely to pick people with whom they share common interests or have compatible work schedules, Wells said.

That last point plays a major role in the success or failure of a group project in an online class. According to Cook, one professor at Springfield creates a communication plan with students -- posting everyone's detailed weekly schedules, swapping Skype IDs and cell phone numbers, establishing tasks for individual team members that will add up to a complete assignment.



Steve Greenlaw meets with his online student groups for progress reports.

On the other hand, dividing up the work too much can mean students aren't really working together as groups, according to Darin Kapanjie, academic director of the online M.B.A. program at Temple University. It's easy for him to trace a disjointed final product back to an approach that minimized group interaction, he said.

Assigning groups can be a fraught exercise, though -- made more difficult by not meeting students in person. Steve Greenlaw, a professor of economics at the University of Mary Washington, likes to avoid grouping freshmen together because he wants new students to benefit from the wisdom of their older peers.

At first he tried to create groups with a mix of older and younger students, but he discovered that older adults found the younger students' schedules and social media communication preferences untenable. Now he groups adults together, with the occasional exception.

"Sometimes when I have a group that is really struggling with the content or with getting in, I try to put an adult student who I know personally into that group to help stabilize things," Greenlaw said. "That works pretty well."

During group projects in his classes, Gregg Ramsay, professor of computer applications at Pace University, assigns one person in each group to serve as "project manager" -- a liaison between the group and the instructor, required to share twice per week an update on the group's progress.

Ramsay's students in groups are required to meet weekly on Blackboard Collaborate; if students miss the meeting, they can be "divorced" from the group and receive a failing grade for the project. Never in his 19 years of teaching online has this happened, Ramsay said. He believes online courses don't make group projects unfeasible -- quite the opposite.

"I've had a lot of success with them,"

Ramsay said more generally of group projects in online courses. "I've never had any significant issues, and over the years I've been able to design the projects where the students take responsibility for completing their part of the project."

Grading as a Whole or Individually

In key respects, instructors consider group projects in online courses no different from similar assignments in person.

Assigning a single grade to a group of students can mean rewarding underperforming students for letting their peers complete most of the work, or marking down students who tried their best for a project that didn't come together.

At the Chicago School, students do some of that work for the instructor, according to DeWalt. After finishing a project, students fill out a report on their own performance and that of their colleagues. Knowing they'll be evaluated this way keeps online students engaged when they might be

IDL Tip

Several instructors interviewed for this story said they urge students to complete their group project work on Google Docs. Not only can students easily collaborate simultaneously on writing and research, but professors can easily look at the revision history to get a sense of whether students participated in equal amounts.

tempted to drift.

At Springfield, most faculty members in online courses give individual participation grades and a final group grade. Greenlaw, on the other hand, prefers for students to be responsible for the entire final product. Particularly in an introductory course, he doesn't see the need to split hairs about how students acquired knowledge.

"Whether they figured it out on their

own or whether they were taught by someone else in the group fundamentally doesn't matter to me at this level," Greenlaw said.

Why Do It At All?

Cook believes faculty members do spend more time constructing and executing group assignments than they would for more straightforward individual assignments. But students learn valuable skills in communication and group dynamics that will serve them well beyond the course. Their field of choice will likely require group work -- and it's plausible that some of it might face logistical challenges like the ones presented in an online course.

Greenlaw thinks the workload is the same, and the workload is worthwhile for the same reason online as face-to-face.

"One of the things that I try to do is provide the same amount of interactivity in the teaching and learning online as I do face-to-face," Greenlaw said. "I think that's how learning happens best." ■

<https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/article/2018/04/25/group-projects-online-classes-create-connections-and-challenge>

Getting Out of Grading

BY SCOTT JASCHIK // AUGUST 3, 2009

Cathy Davidson, calling the current process “meaningless” and “superficial,” decides to turn evaluations over to her students.

Few parts of their jobs seem to annoy professors more than grading. The topic consumes gripe sessions, blog posts and creates plenty of professorial angst (not to mention student angst).

Cathy Davidson has decided that the best way to change grading is to take herself out of it. Davidson, a [Duke University](#) English professor, announced on her blog last week that she was going to give students the power to earn A's or some other grade based on a simple formula in which she wouldn't play much of a role.

“I loved returning to teaching last year after several years in administration ... except for the grading,” she [wrote on her blog](#). “I can't think of a more meaningless, superficial, cynical way to evaluate learning than by assigning a grade. It turns learning (which should be a deep pleasure, setting up for a lifetime of curiosity) into a crass competition: how do I snag the

highest grade for the least amount of work? how do I give the prof what she wants so I can get the A that I need for med school? That's the opposite of learning and curiosity, the opposite of everything I believe as a teacher, and is, quite frankly, a waste of my time and the students' time. There has to be a better way....”

Her approach? “So, this year, when I teach ‘This Is Your Brain on the Internet,’ I'm trying out a new point system. Do all the work, you get an A. Don't need an A? Don't have time to do all the work? No problem. You can aim for and earn a B. There will be a chart. You do the assignment satisfactorily, you get the points. Add up the points, there's your grade. Clearcut. No guesswork. No second-guessing ‘what the prof wants.’ No gaming the system. Clearcut. Student is responsible.”

That still leaves the question of determining whether students have



Cathy Davidson

done the work. Here again, Davidson plans to rely on students. “Since I already have structured my seminar (it worked brilliantly last year) so that two students lead us in every class, they can now also read all the class blogs (as they used to) and pass judgment on whether they are satisfactory. Thumbs up, thumbs down,” she writes.

“If not, any student who wishes can revise. If you revise, you get the cred-

it. End of story. Or, if you are too busy and want to skip it, no problem. It just means you'll have fewer ticks on the chart and will probably get the lower grade. No whining. It's clearcut and everyone knows the system from day one. (btw, every study of peer review among students shows that students perform at a higher level, and with more care, when they know they are being evaluated by their peers than when they know only the teacher and the TA will be grading)."

Several of those posting comments on Davidson's blog expressed support for her approach or outlined similar strategies they had tried or wanted to try.

One post, "Never underestimate grade orientation," noted a caution. "I can see this working with a small course. I tried something similar several years ago at Buffalo. My mistake was to make it a 'curved' class (though only a positive curve). Two 'gangs' (one a group of fraternity brothers, the other just people who met and formed up) reached an agreement that they would vote up each others' work no matter what, and non-members' work down, no matter what, in order to increase their own grade in the class favorably, and hurt others' grades. I wrote it up a little [here](#). When I intervened, I got complaints: I had set up the rules, several said, if I didn't like the outcome, how was it their fault."

Another posting describes a more successful attempt of a similar approach: "I've done something like this with my big undergrad class, 'Intersections: Race, Gender & Sexuality in US History,' for years now. They

do all the work, at a 'good faith' level of quality (earning a check from their TA), show up on time to all classes and participate in discussion sections -- they get an A. Grades scale down from there. The greatest thing about it is that many students without previous educational privilege *love* it and often do extremely well when not being judged in the usual way -- reading a book a week, writing response papers every week, and ultimately participating at grad student level. Entitled students who try to skate by on a good prose style do not like it at all."

In an e-mail interview, Davidson said her announcement represents more than her personal distaste for grading as we know it. Rather, her views relate to ideas she explores in her forthcoming book (from Viking Press next year), *The Rewired Brain: The Deep Structure of Thinking for the Information Age*.

"Many of us are frustrated with grading as presently, historically constructed and are finding a mismatch between the kinds of learning happening on the Internet (from a 5-year-old customizing her Pokemon onward) and the rigid forms of assessment that has become the hallmark of formal education, K-12 and beyond, in the late 20th and now the 21st century. In an era when customizing, process, collaboration, and learning from mistakes are hallmark, when we are all having to revise how we think about the human desire to work together towards a goal -- whether a Wikipedia entry or a Netflix software competition -- we are saddled with a Machine Age model of assessment which is as rig-

id, reductive, uncreative, and uncollaborative as we can imagine. We know from early childhood studies that if you tell an American toddler 'here comes the teacher,' he sits up straight, looks up, shuts up, and stops smiling. That is not the kind of teacher I want to be. But by the time young people enter college, they have cordoned off 'education' into 'grading.' "

Her approach to grading, Davidson said, "encourages students to rethink everything they've learned about grading within higher education and encourages them to think about how you evaluate quality and performance -- not for a grade but for the respect of one's peers and one's own self-respect. This is one of the important skills of the 21st century."

She stressed that she's not abandoning the role of grading, but having students take ownership of the task in a way that shows that "evaluation, in a serious way, is part of collaborative, interactive creativity. Right now, we have an educational system that encourages 'teaching to the test.' That's appalling as a learning philosophy and a total waste of precious learning time and opportunities in the digital age."

Whatever the results of her grading approach, Davidson is in a secure position -- as a highly regarded, tenured professor at a leading university -- to try something new. She acknowledged that there would be additional issues for a junior professor or non-tenure-track instructor taking this idea, but said that they shouldn't rule it out. And she noted problems with continuing with the status quo.

"One never knows what one can get

Grading: Frustrations and Ideas

away with pre-tenure and that is why I tell all of my students to make their department chairs partners in anything they do, from the most traditional to the most experimental -- and to keep a paper trail. That is, write to set up a meeting to explain one's pedagogical philosophy in a case like this, send it to your chair, ask to meet with the chair, discuss it, and then write a follow-up note thank-

“[W]hen we are all having to revise how we think about the human desire to work together towards a goal -- whether a Wikipedia entry or a Netflix software competition -- we are saddled with a Machine Age model of assessment.”

ing the chair for the meeting, recapping it, and giving her or him credit for any changes you've made in the syllabus (for example) and then send a copy of the revised syllabus. That is a helpful process for everyone involved

don't believe anything is risky if it is well thought out and well communicated. I happen to believe that just about everything is risky (including playing by the rules) without careful intention and careful communication.” ■

as well as a wonderful addition to one's tenure portfolio,” she said.

“Who wouldn't want a teacher who thinks seriously and deeply about what teaching means? I

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/08/03/grading>

Views

A selection of articles by *Inside Higher Ed* reporters

Do We Know What History Students Learn?

BY SAM WINEBURG, JOEL BREAKSTONE AND MARK SMITH // APRIL 3, 2018

It's not enough to say that they pick up critical thinking skills, write Sam Wineburg, Joel Breakstone and Mark Smith. It's time to offer evidence.

"What are you going to do with that -- teach?" Uttered with disdain, it's a question history majors have been asked many times. Clio's defenders have a response. [The head of the American Historical Association](#) says that the study of history creates critical thinkers who can "sift through substantial amounts of information, organize it, and make sense of it." [A university president](#) asserts that the liberal arts endow students with the "features of the enlightened citizen" who possesses "informed convictions ... and the capacity for courageous debate on the real issues." Historians pride themselves on the evidence for their claims.

So, what's the evidence?

Not much, actually. Historians ar-



"The First Thanksgiving" by Jean Leon Gerome Ferris

en't great at tracking what students learn. Sometimes they even [resent being asked](#). Recently, however, the winner of the Bancroft Prize, one of history's most distinguished awards, washed the profession's dirty laundry in public. The article's title: "Five Reasons History Profes-

sors Suck at Assessment."

Anne Hyde described what happened when accreditors asked her colleagues to document what students learned. They paid little heed to the requests -- that is, until Colorado College's history department flunked its review. Committed

Grading: Frustrations and Ideas

teachers all, her colleagues “had never conducted assessment in any conscious way beyond reporting departmental enrollment numbers and student grade point averages.”

Among many college history departments, this is routine. To address the issue of assessment, the American Historical Association in 2011 set out on a multiyear initiative to define what students should “be able to do at the end of the major.” Eight years, dozens of meetings and hundreds of disposable cups later, the Tuning Project produced a set of ambitious targets for student learning. But when it came to assessing these goals, they left a big question mark.

Which is one of the reasons why we were convinced of the need to create new assessments. With support from the Library of Congress, we came up with short tasks in which history students interpreted sources from the library’s collection and wrote a few sentences justifying their response. For example, one assessment, “[The First Thanksgiving](#),” presented students with a painting from the beginning of the 20th century and asked if the image of lace-aproned Pilgrim women serving turkey to bare-chested Indians would help historians reconstruct what may have transpired in 1621 at the supposed feast between the Wampanoag and English

settlers.

In the March issue of the *Journal of American History*, we describe what happened when we gave our assessments to students at two large state universities. On one campus, we quizzed mostly first-year students satisfying a distribution requirement. All but two of 57 ignored the 300-year time gap between the Thanksgiving painting and the event it depicts. Instead, they judged the painting on whether it matched their preconceptions, or simply took its contents at face value -- an answer we dubbed the “picture’s worth a thousand words” response.

We weren’t terribly surprised. When we tested high school students on these tasks, they struggled, too, and many of these college students were in high school only months earlier. But what would happen, we wondered, if we gave our tasks to college juniors and seniors, the majority of whom were history majors and all of whom had taken five or more history courses? Would seasoned college students breeze through tasks originally designed for high school?

What we found shocked us. Only two in 49 juniors and seniors explained why it might be a problem to use a 20th-century painting to understand an event from the 17th century. Another one of our assess-

ments presented students with excerpts from a soldier’s testimony before the 1902 Senate Committee investigating the war in the Philippines.

We asked how the source provided evidence that “many Americans objected to the war.” Rather than considering what might prompt a congressional hearing, students mostly focused on the document’s content at the expense of its context. Rare were responses -- only 7 percent -- that tied the testimony to the circumstances of its delivery. As one student explained, “If there hadn’t been such a huge opposition by Americans to this war, I don’t believe that the investigation would have occurred.”

We suffer no illusions that our short exercises exhaust the range of critical thinking in history. What they do is provide a check on stirring pronouncements about the promised benefits of historical study. In an age of declining enrollments in history classes, soaring college debt and increased questions about what’s actually learned in college, feel-good bromides about critical thinking and enlightened citizenship won’t cut it. Historians offer evidence when they make claims about the past. Why should it be different when they make claims about what’s learned in their classrooms? ■

Bio

Sam Wineburg is the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education and of history (by courtesy) at [Stanford University](#). Joel Breakstone is the executive director and Mark Smith is director of assessment at the Stanford History Education Group.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/04/03/historians-need-measure-what-their-students-learn-opinion>

Transformative Learning

BY REBECCA AND DANIEL HAGGERTY // DECEMBER 21, 2017

Such learning is not only possible but also measurable, write Rebecca and Daniel Haggerty, who describe an approach that other institutions might consider adopting.

Social justice is embedded in the mission of the University of Scranton, based on the principles of discernment first articulated by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th century. The university strives to help each student discover his or her values, beliefs and path in life, and that outreach includes students of all faith traditions, as well as those who identify as agnostic or atheistic.

We are always gratified to learn that our students are being deeply impacted by the learning experiences we offer them. But why are they so affected? Is the key the experience or the required reflection after the experience -- or a combination of the two? Can we measure this kind of education, and can such measurement be applicable to all types of institutions of higher education?

The answer to all of these questions is a resounding yes. We are studying outcomes of an honors course that includes a summer trip to Europe and a fall follow-up course.



Sanctuary of Ignatius of Loyola in Spain

We have found a way to assess the value of reflection and contemplation, and how this leads to a transformational learning experience -- particularly vis-à-vis the mission of our university. And we believe this kind of assessment is

transferable.

The basic question is whether educators and institutions are truly committed to undergraduate education designed to help students make positive contributions toward making the world a better place. If

the answer is yes, you do not have to be Jesuit or religious to tailor our formula to your institution's distinct mission and identity.

Our long-standing Special Jesuit Liberal Arts Honors Program recently began offering students a mission-driven trip to Spain and Italy that puts them up close and personal with the spiritual journey of St. Ignatius. And we have added a fall course that is academically rigorous and writing intensive but also highly reflective.

We created the course because we realized students wanted more. They kept coming to our offices to talk about the trip; they asked to discuss it over a meal. They wanted to think and talk more about how the trip related to what they were reading, movies they were seeing, how they shared the experience with their friends and families, how it deepened their understanding of the mission behind the education -- and how it helped them learn about themselves.

Thus, we began the process of assessing one of the university's signature honors programs not only from a hard-data standpoint -- collecting statistical information, such as grade point averages and classes taken -- but through the softer lens of personal reflection.

A survey of alumni of the honors program from every class since 1980 drew a 40 percent response.

“Is the key the experience or the required reflection after the experience -- or a combination of the two? Can we measure this kind of education, and can such measurement be applicable to all types of institutions of higher education?”

More than 90 percent of the respondents credited the program with honing their critical-thinking, writing and speaking skills.

The survey also told us that alumni believe the key to deeper learning is not only study but also reflection through personal writing and group conversations that lead to greater insight.

A Holistic View of Student Transformation

We recently presented our findings at a conference at Drexel University, and participants were eager to learn more about how they might use our methods to integrate their missions into student learning, and assess outcomes. Here is a brief summary of the process we followed.

Working with our Office of Educational Assessment, we identified our program as a high-impact practice, or HIP, meaning it is rigorous, helps students develop meaningful relationships and encourages them to engage with others of different backgrounds and beliefs. HIPs also provide rich feedback to students to develop important skills and provide for reflection.

We use direct measures such as exams, essays, papers, projects

and portfolios. In this course, we also assigned students to create a PowerPoint presentation on the trip's connection to our mission.

Students presented this in class and across the campus and even produced a documentary film.

The key was linking these direct measures with the goal of transformative learning, so we measured student understanding of our mission before and after the trip and course. We found that their understanding had been advanced, and that was exciting, since evidence of transformation typically is indirect.

We also did use indirect measures like student attitudes, perceptions, values and feelings, which also capture transformational outcomes. The documentary and PowerPoint presentations were both direct and indirect measures, since they included interviews with students who were expressing how their perspectives changed as a result of the experience.

In addition, we encouraged students to keep journals, so they could review the trip prior to class, which enriched class discussions. After class, they were encouraged to record new insights.

One student wrote that he finally grasped what social justice was, and he was moved to discern an appropriate personal response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Another

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wrote that her understanding and appreciation of the Jesuit mission in education started with the trip and came together in the companion course, and that the university's mission had become her personal mission in life.

We also interviewed each student to help them process and express what they had experienced. In all, we gathered what we believe was a holistic view of not only student learning and achievement but, moreover, of student transformation, as well.

We are conducting comparative analysis, too, through pre- and

posttrip surveys, and we've found that students in the first survey were tentative about sharing Jesuit values, while the posttrip surveys show that students have come to embrace those values personally.

We have also found that the trip and course have influenced faculty members, too. In one instance, English literature, philosophy and theology professors linked courses in their disciplines to show students how the subject matter in each could be bridged with common themes.

An academic course that is also transformative might make some

educators and institutions uneasy about considering adopting our approach. Some might think that transformation only belongs in institutions with religious identities or military academies.

We beg to differ. Transformation is a natural expression of an institution's commitment to its mission and identity.

Secular institutions are committed to values like civic engagement, leadership in a global context or a diverse and inclusive culture of learning, innovation and discovery. Why not infuse that commitment into undergraduate learning? ■

Bio

Rebecca Haggerty is assistant dean of assessments and programs in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Scranton, and Daniel Haggerty is professor of philosophy and director of the Special Liberal Arts Honors Program.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2017/12/21/college-measures-how-much-course-has-transformed-its-students-opinion>

Ungrading

BY SUSAN D. BLUM // NOVEMBER 14, 2017

Formal education has led to a lack of learning in a number of ways, argues Susan D. Blum, and the one change that can make a big difference is getting rid of grades.

For the last decade and a half, I've engaged in anthropological research on higher education, identifying several challenges and mismatches between what we know about learning "in real life" and learning in college. In my most recent book, ["I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College](#), I identified a number of ways that formal education has led to a lack of learning. Colleges promote credentials, obedience and the sorting of haves and have-nots, but not necessarily learning.

People kept asking me what I would do to improve things. And I said that if I could make one change, I would [get rid of grades](#).

I'd been making some efforts in that direction, but still I fretted over how to make my pedagogy align with my theoretical understanding of how people learn. "Fretted" may be too light a term; I wondered if I could actually keep teaching if I didn't believe in the enterprise.

Last summer, as I prepared my classes, deeply immersed in the think-

ing that had led to the book, I decided I would go all the way and get rid of grades. Or at least, get rid of them as much as I could -- all the way to the end of the semester.

I had read many accounts of individual [faculty](#) members and whole [colleges](#) that were grade-free, but in mid-August, I discovered Starr Sackstein's book [Hacking Assessment: 10 Ways to Go Gradeless in a Traditional Grades School](#), which gave me some cover in case students or administrators challenged this.

My reasons for wanting to get rid of grades were numerous: I felt as if students are fixated on grades above all else. Most faculty conversations with students include some discussions of grades: *What do you want? What do I have to do to get an A? How can I improve my grade? What are the criteria for grades?* And the professor takes on the role of a judge.

It felt like there was no space for adventure, zest, risk -- or even for genuine learning. Everything focused on pleasing the professor.



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And in my research on learning and education, I had learned a lot about grades, such as:

- Grading requires uniformity. It assumes uniform input, uniform process and uniform output. I stopped believing that was a useful way to approach student learning. Students don't start out the same. They don't have the same life experiences -- or even academic experiences -- during our semester together. They don't go to the same places afterward. They have different goals.
- Grades don't provide adequate information. If the purpose of grades is to convey a student's accomplish

ment, adequacy, excellence, compliance, effort and/or gain in learning, then they fail. Is a student who enters already knowing a lot and continues to demonstrate knowledge at a high level, but then misses an assignment because of a roommate's attempted suicide and ends up with a B-plus, the same as someone who begins knowing nothing, works really hard, follows all the rules, does quite well and ends up with a B-plus? What information is conveyed? What about someone who loves biology and excels in those classes, but who loathes history, bombs in history classes and ends up with a 3.0 GPA? Compared to someone who muddles through every class and a similar GPA, yet with no passion, excellence or highs or lows? What do we learn from the GPA? What does a course grade mean?

■ Grades don't truly motivate students. [Experts](#) distinguish different types of motivation: 1) intrinsic, or doing things for their own sake and 2) extrinsic, or doing things for external benefits not inherently part of the activities themselves. I would also add fear and avoidance as big motivators, or doing something to avoid negative consequences.

Grades are the quintessential form of extrinsic motivation: they reward for accomplishment. But they are also threats: if you don't comply in every way, no matter how you feel about anything, you will be dethroned. Yet the fact is, most people are motivated by interest or need, not by arbitrary mandates.

Extrinsic motivation leads to the minimax principle. If the only thing you care about is something beyond the activity itself -- an extrinsic reward such as the grade -- it is sensible to do as little as possible to procure the highest possible reward (grade), which [Arie Kruglanski, Chana Stein and Aviah Riter](#) dubbed in 1977 the "minimax strategy" in instrumental behavior. Cheating, shortcuts, cramming ... all those make sense if the only goal is points or winning.

Students [treat college as a game](#). Games are fun, but if the goal is amassing points and winning at any price, then game is the wrong model for college -- at least if learning, not just winning, is the goal. Of course, games can also be absorbing and done for their own sake -- playing *Words With Friends* or *Grand Theft Auto* -- so those types of games are fine. Maybe the problem is when it is seen only as a survival course.

Students see the rules as arbitrary and inconsistent. Different professors have different scoring -- participation, homework, teamwork or no teams, tests, showing your work, partial credit -- all of which appear to be [plucked out of thin air and make no sense](#), as I found in my research on plagiarism. Citation? Sharing? Page length? Number of quotes? Consult notes or closed book? Students just have to figure out in each case what the professor wants. It all seems arbitrary, and therefore [unconnected with anything meaningful or real](#).

Students are taught to focus on schooling rather than learn-

ing. Is the goal of school, including college, primarily [achievement, success, accomplishment](#)? Is the focus on learning the actual skills people will need or want outside college? Whoever asks them, "What are you learning?" instead of "How are you doing?" Or "[What'd you get?](#)"

In fact, people are consumed with curiosity and joy when they learn new things. Sometimes it's hard and sometimes it's needed (as for a workplace that changes), but [learning happens all around us all the time](#) -- TED talks, podcasts, Nova, adult ed, learning from WikiHow, lectures at libraries, church study groups, knitting circles, work challenges.

Grades encourage a fear of risk taking. Grades seem so consequential that students believe they can't take a chance on anything unproven. In most college classes, a mistake is punished by a lower grade, which is then averaged into the other grades, even if the student completely gets it forever after that initial try. Yet mistakes are information and contribute to learning. In tasks like riding a bicycle or submitting an article for publication, feedback about shortcomings is information. This helps with improving.

Solutions

I have tried to address these problems with solutions. Some of the tactics I have used in my own classes include the following:

■ **Decenter grading.** We don't talk about the point breakdown because I don't have one in my classes anymore. We talk about what the goals

are for everything we do: for reading, writing, discussion, research and projects.

■ **Emphasize the entire portfolio.** A semester is a nice, long, luxurious time for a lot of activities, reflection, conversation, writing and wondering. At the end, we can assess the entire experience, rather than students worrying about how an early misstep is going to mean lack of success.

■ **Have students develop an individual plan.** I developed this myself on the model of an individualized education program (usually used in special education). I have since discovered two similar models: [Universal Design for Learning](#) and [Individual Development Plan](#). The idea is to have students figure out how a class fits with their own lives, course of study and interests. Even if it is required, I want them to articulate some value for themselves. I try to meet with every student early in the semester and again midway through to talk about how prepared they are, what they are eager to learn or do, and what causes apprehension or even dread.

■ **Encourage self-evaluation.** If the genuine goal of college is to prepare students for life, then it's vital that they develop their own standards. So rather than ask students to submit work with the hope that I'll think it's excellent, I encourage them to develop honest standards and self-scrutiny. Every assignment is accompanied by students' written self-assessment of their work. What were they trying to get out of the assignment? What

did they learn? What was successful? What was less successful? Why? What might they do differently? What would they like help with? That should serve them better in life than hoping that mediocrity will be seen as fabulous. Sometimes things aren't perfect -- and that's OK. But it is useful for them to understand and even articulate the reasons. (*I didn't give myself enough time. I started too late. I didn't understand this. I couldn't really get into this subject.*) Throughout our lives beyond college, we won't excel at and plunge enthusiastically into every single thing we do all day.

■ **Conduct portfolio conferences.** I begin the semester with a discussion with each student about their own individual plan. I try to meet with everyone at the middle of the semester and the end of it in a portfolio conference. I give them a document to complete prior to our meeting and instruct them to look back through all their work. The goal is to show them their learning, by comparing their early and later understanding, and to help them feel pride at their body of work. It also forces them to review the material, which research shows fosters [retention](#). Students suggest their grade, which I can accept or not. No, not every student suggests an A.

Outcomes

I enjoyed my relationship with my students; I loved the atmosphere of the classroom; I believe that the encouragement of learning and even risk taking in the service of growth have been successful.

Students reflected that it allowed them to relax and focus on learning,

perhaps for the first time. One student wrote in a reflection on one of my classes that used ungrading, "I honestly enjoyed writing for me, instead of necessarily for a professor or an outside source. I felt I had more freedom to express what I wanted to say, and I feel like I wasn't focused too much on making claims that could get me points."

I am confident that at least some of the students were sincere in generating their own adventure in learning.

Comments to Skeptics

I know this seems idealistic and, for many classes and many professors, impossible. Here are my thoughts on that:

■ Going gradeless can be done in a class of any size and of any type, though students may find it alarming and unfamiliar. Some faculty use something called "contract grading," which still uses a traditional scale but puts some of the control in students' hands.

■ You can provide opportunities for students to [make choices](#), which allows them to find at least a tiny bit of intrinsic motivation even in the most conventional of courses.

■ Some assignments -- maybe small ones -- can still be risk-free and contribute to intrinsic motivation, by being utterly fascinating, completely useful or fun.

■ You can always offer low-stakes exercises that are perceived as enjoyable and not trivial, in any course. And even if your supervisors are skeptical, as long as the process serves the central goal of contributing to student learning, they shouldn't ob-

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ject.

Here is one piece of evidence from a student who really trusted the process and responded honestly to the question "What assignment(s) pushed you to learn the most?" "While it ended up

being one of my weaker pieces, I felt that my [project] was my most personally informative piece. I read so many different sources on the [topic] and really took a deep dive to explore the reasons why the [people do what]

they do."

Isn't that a beautiful, honest analysis of learning? I wanted students to believe that this education is for them, not for me.

I can never go back! ■

Bio

Susan D. Blum is a professor of anthropology at the University of Notre Dame. Among her publications are two books on higher education, [My Word! Plagiarism and College Culture](#) (Cornell, 2009) and ["I Love Learning; I Hate School": An Anthropology of College](#) (Cornell, 2016).

<https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/11/14/significant-learning-benefits-getting-rid-grades-essay>

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Inside Higher Ed
1150 Connecticut Avenue Northwest
Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036