

Part II: Testing and Grading – abridged and edited

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Grading

Faculty standards for A-grade performance define the meaning of excellence within the colleges. We must guard the criteria of achievement, since everyone pays the price of academic inflation when these standards are lowered. Students work hard for grades because "making the grade" is personally rewarding and is an important basis for special awards, admission to advanced training, and employment prospects.

Grading a stack of exams and papers is a time consuming and pressured task because, throughout, the matter of fair play is squarely on the back of the reader. By way of evaluation, the teacher should indicate in some detail the rationale for assigning the gross grade, making specific reference to identified parts of the exam or paper. The instructional value of essay exams and term papers is practically wiped out if the student receives nothing back other than the grade.

A steady and unwavering evaluative state of mind is difficult to sustain when reading page after page through a set of exams. Three procedural controls help to reduce the evaluating drift: (1) turn under the front (name) page to forestall confounding effects from those students we particularly like or dislike; (2) read one question at a time through the entire set of exam booklets; (3) shuffle the order of the booklets periodically to balance the inevitable effects of reader fatigue or an emerging tilt toward one pattern of answers.

There are two basic options available to instructors for grading student achievement:

1. *Norm-referenced grading*, more commonly referred to as grading-on-the-curve, sets the scale of achievement by the average level of class performance. Students basically compete against one another in this approach.
2. *Criterion-referenced grading* has the teacher measuring the students against some absolute standard with respect to what they are expected to learn. The competition here is between the student and mastery of a finite body of knowledge.

In practice, these two approaches overlap and merge since a teacher's judgment about levels of achievement is influenced by the levels of student performance with which one is accustomed at a given school.

The danger in grading-on-the-curve is its diminishment of the teacher's responsibility for evaluating the students' level of understanding against his or her preset criteria of subject-matter achievement. The

final examination, for example, is a revealing statement sampling the information and skills the teacher believes should be carried from the course.

Grades serve the academic purpose of showing intellectual achievement in a limited domain defined by books, teachers, laboratories, and the like. They are not designed to predict success in the off-campus setting where special weight may be given to information, aptitudes, and personal characteristics extending beyond the boundaries of teachers and their courses. Only indirectly or on occasion, do grades reflect a student's tolerance for stress, independent decision-making, congeniality in human relations, ability to cope with unexpected problems, and the like. Teachers can best sustain the credibility of the grading system by making their assessments reflect as fairly as possible how well each student has achieved the stated objectives of the course.

Material on this topic and others can be found in the CTL library in the Mason Room at the Smith House.