

No grades

The Cranky Professor

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Why grades? Why not instead simply have students receive either Pass or Fail, with failure reserved for those who don't complete all course assignments? (Why even Fail? Why not just count students who don't complete course assignments as having withdrawn from the course?)

It's not uncommon for a professor to discover that a capable, hard-working student has dropped his course. And it's not uncommon for him to learn that she dropped it because she feared she would get a poor grade. "I liked what we were doing," the student will explain, "and I'm sure I would have learned a lot had I remained in the course. But I have to be realistic. I need to maintain a high GPA if I'm not to jeopardize my future. I just couldn't risk staying."

Grades put pressure on students, pressure to do well in their courses. That point might well be the start of a justification for assigning grades. And yet, this pressure can easily cause students to do poorly. Worse, it can cause them to seek to please the professor rather than to learn from her. One of the things a professor hates most is to have a student ask her how to get a better grade on the next assignment. Professors love students who want to learn from them; that's why it's so dispiriting to encounter a student concerned instead to develop a technique for getting a good grade. Such a student doesn't want to learn. Indeed, sadly, such a student might not understand that getting a good grade isn't at all the same as learning.

From the point of view of getting an education, it's certainly better to apply yourself to an unfamiliar and difficult problem than to stick with what you know and play it safe. By applying yourself to a new and difficult problem, though, you risk getting it wrong. And that might affect your grade in the course.

Assigning and earning grades, then, can and, at least sometimes, does get in the way of getting an education. It gets in the way of students challenging themselves and experimenting, and it gets in the way of their cultivating inner sources of motivation.

Now whatever justification grading policies might enjoy, that justification has to take seriously what we want higher education to do. We professors want to create and nurture young intellectuals, people able and willing to think hard, to think competently, and to think dispassionately about whatever topic comes their way. So, whatever justification a grading policy might have, that justification cannot refer to the needs or designs of prospective employers or professional schools. It's not for us as a university to function as a ranking agency for anyone who might be waiting for our graduates as

they pass out our doors. Or, rather, whether we are used as a ranking agency is, for us, a matter of indifference. We ought not tailor what we do to what employers or other institutions would like from us.

Whether Saint Mary's University should continue with its present grading policies, or abandon grades altogether, or allow professors to grade or not grade however they see fit, is, of course, ultimately to be determined by putting the case against grading alongside the case for grading, and then judging where the balance of benefits over burdens lies.

In this article I've gone a little ways in the direction of stating the case for no grading. And I've put a stricture on what may figure within the case for grading. So, then, what is the case for grading? And is it—and how is it—superior to the case against grading?