

shares the values of the university. As such, grades are a valuable source of information that students can use in making decisions about their future.

Grades are a relatively objective reflection of the evaluation process which occurs in all societies. Can individuals living in a complex society such as ours afford to forego the information provided by grades? Furthermore, grades are one of the few formal evaluations that an individual receives in his entire life that is available to him, which he knows the basis of, and which he has the right to challenge. One never sees his credit rating, letters of reference are confidential, decisions on jobs and promotions are made behind closed doors, even spouses are not always candid.

Some individuals dislike the use of grades for selection and certification by external institutions such as government, industry and the professions. If this attitude is based on evidence that grades are poor predictors of success in these institutions then it is a legitimate attitude. If, however, it is based on a dislike of these institutions, as the willingness of many of these individuals to use grades for graduate school selection and the certification of physicians suggests, then it may not be quite so legitimate, and may in fact violate the academic freedom of the students wishing to enter these institutions.

Conceptualizing the grading system as a mechanism for providing information on how well the student is functioning in terms of the values and goals of the university provides perspective for understanding the use of grades. If another institution shares the values of the university then grades may be useful in predicting the performance of an individual in that institution. Many government, industrial and professional organizations, however, do not share all the values of the university and therefore grades may be a poor predictor of success in these organizations. There is, in fact, considerable evidence that grades are not good predictors of success in many organizations.

Some faculty and students decry the fact that grades help motivate some students; apparently on the grounds that a deep intrinsic interest in the material to be learned is the only legitimate source of motivating learning. Cannot grades be a legitimate source of motivation? Is it wrong for a student to work for a high grade because he believes that high grades are an indication that he has successfully mastered difficult material or developed intellectual skills?

Is it wrong for him to work for high achievement merely because he likes the letter A? Suppose four students all receive A's in a particular course. The first student was motivated by his intrinsic interest in the course. The second student was not very interested in the course, but worked hard to get an A because he believed it would help him advance to the presidency of the CPR. The third student disliked the course, but mastered the material because he believed it would help him smash the capitalistic system. The fourth student did not like the course either, but was motivated to get a high mark because his mother liked him to get A's. Does the university have the right to question the motivations of students for wanting high grades? There are probably as many reasons for students coming to university as there are students. I find the continual questioning of why students wish to get good grades and the accusation that they are desired for some kind of non-academic reason rather repressive and an unwarranted invasion of the student's privacy and his academic freedom.

What is the significance of grades for faculty members? They provide information to faculty members on how well they are helping the university attain its objectives. If a faculty member gives many F's and D's then he knows that he must improve his teaching or the university must improve its student selection procedures. Accurate assignment of grades requires considerable student faculty interaction. Removing the pressure for student faculty contact that is now provided by the requirement that the faculty assign accurate grades may result in more teaching by teaching assistants and more time for faculty research unless that pressure is replaced by a philosophy of education that demands student-faculty interaction.

## The Arguments Against Grades

There are, however, a number of arguments against the use of grades.

Some of the more important ones are:

1. Grades produce anxiety
2. Grades are impersonal
3. There is a great deal of gamesmanship involved in grades
4. Grading produces a power relationship between students and faculty
5. Grades inhibit creativity
6. The grading system is a parody of our economic system.



The self-appointed guardians of academic standards are seeking to preserve a mythical status quo.

Grades do produce anxiety. However, anxiety in and of itself is not necessarily bad. There is considerable psychological evidence that individuals perform best under moderate anxiety. Quality of performance usually falls when anxiety is either very high or very low. There are, therefore, very few students who suffer greatly because of the anxiety produced by grades. Furthermore, it is possible that one of the functions of a university education is to teach students to function under anxiety. Such an ability is valuable to the scholar and physician as well as to the politician and revolutionary.

It is sometimes argued that there is a considerable amount of gamesmanship involved in getting grades. Personally, I doubt that gamesmanship affects grades very much. There is a myth among students which some faculty have also accepted that students who pay a lot of attention to the instructor get higher grades. I doubt it.

Most instructors do their best to give grades on the basis of the ideas and work of students. Students who have few ideas, who do little work and who also spend a lot of time talking to professors rarely get high grades. The gamesmanship argument is currently one of the most important justifications for changing the present system. If considerable gamesmanship is involved in the determination of grades then the problem is with the faculty and not with the grading system.

Another argument against grades is that they are impersonal and therefore somehow do not reflect the true state of ability and knowledge of the student. Although grades may be impersonal, the process for assigning them need not be impersonal and may be an evaluation of an intense intellectual relationship between two people. Eliminating impersonal grades will not make the university more humane unless the faculty and students develop an appropriate philosophy of education. Individuals who object to the impersonality of grades usually argue that written summaries of a student's performance and letters of reference are better measures of a student's true ability. However, if we were concerned about the gamesmanship involved in getting the relatively objective letter grades, should we not also be concerned about the gamesmanship that will undoubtedly become involved in getting the relatively subjective written reports and letters of reference.

Grades are relatively objective summaries of performance and are not meant to say all there is to say about a student. For many purposes they must be supplemented with other information such as that provided in letters of reference. But since they are relatively objective they are much easier for a student to challenge than are written summaries and letters of reference.

One of the most popular, current arguments against grading is that they produce a power relationship between faculty and students which prevents the development of authentic relationships between faculty and students and hence interferes with the learning process. It is true that there is a kind of power relationship between faculty and students. However, this relationship is caused primarily by the fact that information and ability are sources of power rather than that grades are a source of power.

Eliminating grades will not change the power relationship between the faculty and students so long as learning is based on a two-way transmission

of information and faculty have more information and ability than students.

Another argument against grades is that they stifle creativity. It does not follow, however, that removing grades will suddenly make many students creative who are not now creative. Although much is known about developing convergent thinking, little is known about developing divergent thinking. Unfortunately, even less is known about developing the productive combination of both types of thinking that provide the basis for much creativity. It is also possible that some of the individuals who argue that grading inhibits creativity are confusing idiosyncrasy with creativity. In any case, the argument should be directed against the basis of grades and not against grades themselves.

The last argument about grades that is discussed here is that the grading system is a kind of parody of our economic system. There are three areas of student activity, academic, personal and organizational, among which the student must divide his time and effort. It can be argued that grades provide a kind of currency, not unlike money, which determines how much time and effort a student can invest in each of these areas or in particular aspects of each area.

One of the arguments against such a system can be paraphrased as follows: Many people in our society are unhappy. We live in a capitalist, competitive society therefore capitalism and competition must make people unhappy. Anything at the basis of this society such as money, economic man and the grading system must be bad and if possible should be eliminated. Another argument which has a better logical basis is that grades are the currency of the university and tend to dominate all aspects of student life and thereby make the university unnecessarily repressive. If such a state of affairs actually exists then the university should decide if it can be ameliorated without destroying the values of the university.

Accepting a "currency" view of grades does not necessarily imply, however, that the grading system should be drastically overhauled. Grades can be conceptualized as valuable information that students can use in making many kinds of decisions.

Changing the grading system will not solve many of the current problems in higher education. It will, however, allow pseudo-liberal administrators and teachers to convince themselves that they have not only solved some major problems but have liberalized education as well. The result should be at least another decade of complacency.

## Some Suggestions

Many of the evils attributed to the grading system would disappear if the purpose and function of the grading system were fully understood. There are steps that universities and colleges could take that would not only increase student, faculty and community understanding of grades, but would alleviate some of their more negative effects without lowering academic standards. For example, the university might:

1. Use the traditional grading system, but allow students the option of having a pass/fail transcript sent to external, non-educational, institutions.
2. Provide a pass/fail option for students who have completed two years with a B average.
3. Allow students to take their first two years on a pass/fail system, give them a diploma in arts or science at the end of two years, but require them to write a comprehensive examination to be admitted to the last two years of the degree program.

Since grades are merely measures of how well a student has adjusted to the values and goals of the university they should not be routinely provided to non-educational organizations. Furthermore, a student has the right to determine what information is sent to non-educational institutions. Once a student has shown that he can function adequately in terms of the values of the university there is little need for him to receive final grades and he should be given the option of taking his last two years on a pass/fail system. The third suggestion makes a pass/fail option available to students in their first two years while providing a mechanism for protecting academic standards.

The diploma in arts or science that is given at the end of two years should not be considered as the "booby prize" for those who cannot go on for the degree, but as recognition that a university student acquires many valuable attitudes and skill through participation in extracurricular activities and student life. Many of these attitudes and skills may be as valuable for the aspiring executive or journalist as A's in accounting and English literature. The implementation of these three suggestions should alleviate most of the problems caused by the misuse of the grading system as well as fostering a better understanding of higher education and the grading system by faculty, students and the community.

—reprinted from *The Peak*