

Marks Motivate Students:

The Case for Retention of Grades

by Charles Crawford

The traditional grading system is under attack in universities and colleges all over North America. The validity of grades is being questioned because the average of assigned grades has been rising steadily for the past several years. In the United States the most frequent explanations for this trend include: better schooled students, poorer schooled students, liberalized curricula, uncertainty among instructors about the objectivity and validity of grading practices, an anti-authoritarianism which leads some instructors to match the "gentleman's" C of earlier decades with the anti-gentleman's B plus, a skillful use by students of pass/fail courses in order to avoid low grades.

Furthermore, the current recession in the market for university graduates has produced extreme competition among students for grades, particularly among those wishing to enter professions such as law and medicine, and there is considerable evidence that this competition has led to an increase in student cheating and sabotage of other students' work. If bright but dishonest students have an advantage in getting into professional schools what will the next generation of doctors, lawyers and teachers be like?

A major consequence of the criticisms of the traditional grading system has been the generation of uncertainty and confusion not only about the purpose and value of the grading system, but also about the purpose and value of higher education. Most of the suggestions for ameliorating the problems supposedly caused by the grading system involve major changes in the system. Many universities and colleges have adopted pass/fail system or some combination of the pass/fail and traditional systems.

The purpose of this article is to argue that these changes will not only not ameliorate the situation, but are based on a misconception of both the nature and purpose of both higher education and the grading system.

Educational Assumptions Underlying Proposed Changes

I believe that the following assumptions about the nature and purpose of education are at the basis of most of the recommendations for changes in the grading system:

1. Personal and social development of students is the primary function of a university education.
2. Grades interfere with the operation of the educational process.
3. Extensive changes in the grading system can be made without lowering the academic standards of the University.

Canadian universities have traditionally been concerned with the search for truth, the cognitive development of students, providing training for students wishing to master a particular discipline, and the transmission of world and western culture. Certainly personal development is a primary aim of universities, but the aspect of personal development that the university must be concerned with is development within the context of these functions of the university. There are many aspects of student's personal and social development, such as those associated with personal life and extracurricular activities, which are not only a major concern of the university, but should the university make them its concern, it would not possess the resources to adequately deal with them.

Individuals who promote the personal development view of education see the university as a kind of educational supermarket and the student as a sort of customer who can pick and choose what he wishes and ignore what he wishes. He should, therefore, not be punished by receiving a low grade if he decides not to do an assignment, to do it poorly, or to do something else instead, since he is to be rewarded in terms of personal and social development rather than in terms of the traditional values of the university.

The belief that the university should "develop the whole person" is based on a rather simplistic notion of human nature. Human organisms are sufficiently complex that no single institution, be it the school, the church or the family, has the resources to develop the whole person, or even contribute to the development of all parts of the whole person. Furthermore, in a democratic society, we may not wish to give primary responsibility for personal development to a single institution.

Students should have as much latitude in their choice of programs and courses as possible. They must have the right to choose their major, a majority of the courses within their major as well as the courses outside their major. Students, however, do not have the right to choose what they will learn within a specific course.

A course is the unit for development of cognitive skills and transmission of knowledge. And as such, the material in it is not there because of the personal whim of the instructor, but because he, as a scholar or scientist, as a specialist in his areas of competence, and as a representative of the academic community believes that it is necessary for the intellectual development of students. If, however, students have the right to choose what they will learn within a specific course, then the assignment of fine grades becomes very difficult and the adoption of some type of pass/fail grading system may be advisable.

If grades are one of the factors determining academic standards then what effect will a major change in the grading system such as the adoption of a pass/fail system have on standards? Since many instructors and students unfortunately perceive examinations and essays as mechanisms for assessing grades rather than as didactic devices to be used in conjunction with lectures and seminars for the development of cognitive skills, a major change in the grading system may have a serious effect on teaching practices and academic standards unless it is accompanied by a greater understanding of the nature of higher education by both faculty and students.

Individuals who accept the personal and social

development view of higher education often argue that grading interferes with the educational process since it discourages students taking courses in new areas of interest. For this reason, the proponents of this view, argue grading should be either eliminated or some type of pass/fail system should be introduced.

There may well be some students who are timid or insecure and who do not venture into new areas because of the fear of low grades. Granted that such students exist, two questions remain. First, how much would they benefit from a change in grading practices, and second, what would be the implications for higher education of eliminating grades or introducing some type of pass/fail course?

Although there are many reasons why a student might fear getting a low grade in a course in a new area, the most likely is that from past experience he has information which leads him to believe that he may not have high ability in that area. He may be acting wisely if he avoids the area. One of the fundamental assumptions underlying the personal and social development view of higher education is that there is at least one thing in which everyone can excel and hence that educational institutions must be structured so that he can discover "his thing."

Some people excel in mathematics, others excel in cooking. There are many people, however, who do not have the ability to excel in anything, and it is anti-human and repressive to convince them that they should continue to search until they find the one thing that they can excel in. The fact that an individual cannot excel in anything does not mean that he cannot be happy, that he cannot be a valued member of society, or that he can be treated unjustly or disrespectfully by his fellows.

The notion that the grading system should be overhauled in order to encourage students to explore new areas is based on the mistaken assumption that one can obtain a good understanding of a new area by sampling its content. Although different academic disciplines may deal with different content, what differentiates them is primarily their styles of reasoning and their basic operating assumptions.

Both the novelist and the psychologist study human behavior, their approaches differ greatly. It is difficult to learn the fundamentals of an academic discipline through a superficial sampling of its content. A student may pass first year calculus with a D or C by memorizing a few formulas and how to apply them, but has he really learned any mathematics? Changing the grading system in order to encourage students to explore new areas may interfere with the educational process since it is based on the assumption that creativity and cognitive development can be achieved through a superficial exploration of the content of many disciplines.

Grades have been given for many years in many universities and therefore they probably serve some important functions which should be examined before any changes in the present system are made. Grades perform some of the following functions:

1. They provide information to the student on how well he is succeeding within the system.
2. They provide external institutions with relatively objective and standardized measures of performance.
3. They provide a source of motivation for some students.
4. They provide information to the faculty on the quality of teaching.

All institutions and communities have certain goals and values. It is these goals and values that distinguish institutions and communities from aggregations of individuals. As an institution and a community, the university has not only the right, but the duty, to provide information to its members, the faculty and students, on how well its objectives are being achieved. Grades are one of the best mechanisms for providing such information.

For students, grades are primarily measures of how well they are functioning in terms of the goals and values of the university. They also provide a measure of how well an individual may function in some external institution, such as the civil service, or industry, to the extent that the external institution

Evaluation

All students in Arts and Science courses should be in class April 2 to 6. The Student's Council will be distributing a course evaluation form, through which students can express their views on course content, professors, facilities and other items, including the present grading system.

This material will form the basis for a counter-calendar to be sent to new and returning students in the fall. The calendar will provide inside information on courses and enable students to choose those most in line with their interests and goals.

Those dates are April 2 to 6. The council has invested \$3,400 in the project; with student support, the benefits can be enormous.