



Just what do your grades measure—and why?

By DOUG MUSTARD

What did the grading of your Christmas exams or essays tell you about yourself? Are you a Grade A egg? 2nd grade butter? Red or blue brand beef? Premium or regular gasoline?

What does university grading do? An obvious answer is that it sorts people into various levels. This grading can then be used to rank a group of people—useful, for example, when a number of people are applying for one vacancy, whether a scholar-

Background

Doug Mustard is a grad student in the department of education foundations. He taught for two years in the department of philosophy, and got two 9's in his half-year courses (so he tells us) which, of course, qualifies him to sound off on the subject of marking.

ship or a job. Some might say that grades measure a student's accomplishment. Let's see just what kind of accomplishment grades measure.

Why is grading or ranking people necessary? Cynics will point to particular instructors who, in order to satisfy some personal psychological hang-up, need to have the power over other people which grading gives them. Certainly we all suspect that some instructors delight in wielding this power over others. (Notice how they say 'I gave you a 7' rather than 'You earned a 7'.) For some it is the only way they can prevent knowledgeable students from successfully challenging their ideas and beliefs. (Do you dare tell any of your professors when they're talking nonsense?) The only way some instructors can maintain the image of their own superiority is to keep their class grades very low and, between pipe puffs, tell their colleagues how stupid students are. For others, only the power of grading which they have could induce anyone to pay any attention to them.

Is it too far-out to suggest that these sorts of hang-ups are the reason for continuing the grading system? Only a systematic survey could discover the extent to which instructors' personal psychological needs serve to perpetuate the grading system. But don't bother starting a list of instructors you would like to see investigated; I doubt that we'll ever see such a survey. Judging from the availability of information, the university disciplines do little research on the university itself.

Some might say that students need to have an authority-figure tell them how they measure up against other students, and that grading fulfills this need. Some insecure

students like grades for this reason, but the most common reason given by students for accepting the grading system is simply that the university requires them to get certain grades in order to get a degree. In the last analysis, students need grades only because someone else requires that they have them.

It would be theoretically possible for a university to grant degrees without having a grading system; one could get a degree merely after registering for four years. Why does that sound unrealistic? Because the university's need for the grading system, like the students' need, is based on someone else's requirements. Employers want the university to act as a people-grading station. A university grades people into two general classes, those with degrees and those without. Its transcripts also rank people with degrees into different levels according to the grades they received. Employers require transcripts and obviously find them useful. Let's look at the nature of grading to see what they find useful.

Grading is an activity in which a standard is set up, and a given object or performance is measured against that standard. Eggs, butter, and steel are things (other than students) which are graded. Certain standards are established, and if a piece of butter completely attains those standards, it is labelled '1st grade'. In the university situation, certain standards are set up by the instructor, and if a student completely attains those standards, that student is labelled '9'.

We all know that standards of different instructors vary. Even if instructors Furd and Farkle both use the same criterion for evaluating the student (say, the amount of original research) Furd may require more research for a mark of '9' than does Farkle. But instructors may also set up completely different criteria: Furd may judge students on the amount of original research; Farkle may instead look for new interpretations of existing data. If a combination of several criteria is used, instructors may differ on the relative weighting to be given to each factor.

Standards set up by instructors can differ in other ways. The instructor affects the standards to be met by determining the content of the course, and by deciding on what part of that content tests will be based. Some instructors use multiple choice exams which evaluate a student according to the standard of how well he recognizes statements of accepted dogma. Others use essays which can evaluate a student's originality, creativity, or ability to interpret facts. The type of test set up by the instructor both reflects and forms part of the standards which the student must work toward in order to receive good grades.

I'd like to see the results of a study showing the actual standards being used by instructors in the university. We all suspect that in some courses the standard by which one is graded is how well one agrees with the instructor. How widespread is the use of this standard? Grading has no necessary connection with learning things which are true, or with developing one's critical ability, or with any of the other avowed aims of universities. The only requirement for the activity of grading is that some standard or other be set up. That standard could be the height of the student, the regularity of attendance, the position of the exam paper after being thrown down a staircase, the degree of obsequious class participation, or the ability to recite accepted dogma. Any university which professes certain aims should discover what in actual fact are the standards being applied by those who are grading, and should demonstrate that the standards used are conducive to the avowed aims.

Students know that, in fact, instructors' standards vary widely. They recognize that it is as ridiculous to compare a grade in one course with a grade in another as it is to

by each instructor, and the transcript shows how well the student measured up to that standard, whatever it was. In the case of a person with a degree, the employer knows that some additional standards were set up by the university, and that the student also measured up to them, whatever they were.

From this information, the employer is able to infer three things about the student. He can tell how well the student discovered what were the standards set by the instructor and university (i.e., how well the student discovered what others wanted of him). He can tell how much the student desired to work toward those standards set by others. And he can tell how capable the student was of attaining those standards. A lack in any of these three areas will result in poor grades.

The phenomenon of those who are forced to withdraw because of bad grades is not necessarily explained by lack of ability or by emotional problems. In an increasing number of cases, the student simply decides that the standards set by the instructor to obtain marks are not worthwhile, and the student prefers to learn about the subject rather than to work toward the exams.

The third item is of use to the employer only if he knows the actual standards which were set, and only if those standards required skills relevant to the job for which he is interviewing the student-applicant. Egg-grading standards are uniform, and so we come to know by experience what kind of product is designated by 'Grade A egg.' Entrance exams set by professional societies (e.g. law) approach this level of uniform grading of product, but they are the only ones that do.

In any case, the first two items are invaluable. They tell the employer to what degree the future employee will be able to discern the standards and goals set by those in authority over him, and they indicate to what degree the employee is likely to accept and work toward those standards. This is the 'accomplishment' of a student which grades measure, and this is valuable information to an employer.

The grading system does have a function, and it performs this function admirably. The function of egg-grading is to designate a uniform product. The uniformity which student-grading measures is the extent to which the student-product has indicated its readiness to work toward standards and goals set by others. Student-grading is an effective method of assessing that quality of the student-product. Grading will be with us just as long as the university is controlled by those who want student-products which are ready and willing to work toward standards and goals set for them by others. The medium is the message.

Mark-it-yourself!

- (1) Choose five criteria (the more arbitrary the better).
- (2) Choose five weights (again, the more arbitrary the better).
- (3) Then read the first and last paragraph of this feature and grade accordingly. Be sure to use a red pen, and make any comments illegible.

criteria	wt.	mark
(1)
(2)
(3)
(4)
(5)
total	

compare 1st grade butter with 1st grade steel. Yet employers, scholarship officials and deans compare transcripts and grades. What are they comparing?

When an employer or scholarship official looks at transcript, he does not know what standards were employed by each instructor. It is like trying to compare grades on farmers' produce under a system whereby each farmer sets his own standards and grades his own farm products. But the employer knows that some standard was set