

Grades are Degrading: The Case for Abolition

excerpted from *A Plan for College* by David Bakan.

There are two reasons generally offered to legitimate the use of grades in a college program. The first is that the grading serves to enhance the quality of the educational experience. The second is that grades are essential advisory pieces of information in connection with future educational and vocational decisions. I will deal with these in turn.

If grades are to be considered to be of value in enhancing the quality of education, then the examinations on which they are characteristically based should appropriately measure what they presume to measure. There are numerous criticisms which may be cited to show that such grades based on conventional examinations are actually very poor indices of the relevant traits in the students.

The work in the field of psychometrics in psychology over the last few decades has revealed quite unambiguously that the task of measuring any psychological function is fraught with difficulties. Unless a test is carefully designed and repeatedly tested itself on different groups, re-designed on the basis of such experience with the test, often many times, it is very likely to be both unreliable and invalid. Reliability of a test is reflected in consistency in score by different graders and by administration to the student, say, in different versions, and getting consistent scores. Validity of a test is the degree to which it measures the traits it is presumed to measure, instead of reflecting fortuitous characteristics.

The Reliability of Testing

The making of a good test of any trait thus requires the repeated administration of the test to different groups. But this can only be done properly if the security of the test is guaranteed; if, to put it bluntly, the students have not seen the test questions beforehand. But in the case of an examination for a conventional course in a college, the test must be made afresh for the occasion, and thus necessarily must be of dubious reliability and validity. Professors who use the same test items over and over again, whereby the cumulative experience might make for greater reliability and validity in a certain "theoretical" sense, open themselves to having their test finding honoured places in well-kept files in fraternity houses or the quarters of enterprising black-marketeers in old tests.

The awareness of the possibility of grades on examinations being contaminated by the relationship between the professor and the student is well known; and indeed, in some places, there is the custom of making the identity of the student secret from the grader. How effective this latter strategy may be is an open question, but the prevalence of the strategy indicates the suspicion in which professors hold their grading practices.

To the best of my knowledge there exists no explicit and generally acceptable guide lines for the assignment of grades. The "curve" was developed some years ago by the psychologist Max Meyer as a way of making grades "objective." The "curve" provides for the assignment of grades in terms of relative performance of students, with a designated percentage getting A, another designated percentage getting B, etc. This atrocity, in minimal fairness, requires that there be a relatively large group of students all subjected to the same educational experiences and provided with the same educational opportunities. It systematically ignores variation from group to group. It assumes that the average of any one large group is identical to the average of any other large group. It assumes that the amount of variation among students in any large group is identical to the amount of variation among students in any other large group. It is systematically blind to the fact that the quality of instruction varies. Indeed, one of the major defects of virtually every grading system is the attribution of variation in quality of performance to the student only, ignoring other factors which may be associated with the performance.

The trend towards the increased use of "objective" examinations of the multiple-choice and true

false type has not abated. It has been the growing accompaniment of the use of large classes. Such examinations require an inordinately high degree of skill in their construction, for even moderately appropriate evaluation of students; and such skill is rare among college professors. The value of such tests as an educational experience is very doubtful; and they generate a vision of the use of knowledge which is quite inconsistent with many of the values that a liberal education should represent.

Grading and Cynicism

What effect does grading have on the very quality of the educational enterprise? Were a grading system reasonably reliable and valid it could give the student what psychologists have come to call "knowledge of results," information concerning learning efforts as a basis for improving them. The multiple choice examination can hardly do this. Grades on essay examinations, with their intrinsic unreliability, can hardly do this. If the professor were only the teacher and perhaps even a friendly critic, but not the judge, an examination of any kind might be the occasion for dialogue between them, and thus for the furtherance of the educational enterprise. But, when the professor is equally the judge, placing a grade on a permanent record, such dialogue between the student and the professor is cheapened and the advantage lost by the sensed possibility that they are merely haggling and bickering for ends quite outside the educational enterprise itself.

A grading system that is less than completely sound, which unfortunately is what they mostly are, tends to produce cynicism. Students are often brought to the cynical position of choosing "easy" courses; or they study what they "think will be on the exam." The students' awareness of the large part that chance plays makes him cynical of low grades and high ones as well. The cynicism is fed by the sense that the student has that the grade is assigned independent of the quality of the instruction. For every student is at least dimly aware of the possibility that he could have learned better with better instruction. Ideally, grades which compare one student with another might be meaningful if each student were to receive optimal instruction, which is rarely the case.

Examinations and grades have been defended as motivational devices, to motivate the student into greater effort and application, and hence higher levels of achievement. There is little question but that sometimes the pressure created by an anticipated examination has a positive effect in this manner. However, there is also good reason to believe that sometimes the effect of this pressure is in the opposite direction. As Cronbach has put it in his discussion of the possible negative effects of low grades in education, "The least painful way out of many difficulties is to stop trying." (Lee Cronbach, *Educational Psychology*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1954, p. 528.) Grades, instead of producing positive motivation, may create instead hopelessness, apathy, and cynicism. The world is filled with people who carry permanent and unnecessary psychological scars from their youthful experiences with grades and whose effectiveness as adults was made less rather than more. Whether, in balance, the effect of grade pressure is to increase the level of achievement rather than decrease it is quite open to question.

The Prof As Judge

Conventional grading systems work against true cooperation among students in the educational enterprise. When a student is given a grade in comparison with his fellow students, each student who might be superior to him is his "enemy." The professor who is burdened with the task of giving each of his students a separate grade is loathe to make assignments which involve genuine teamwork. In view of the fact that so much of the work of the modern world cannot be done without teamwork, the state of mind created by the grading system may handicap a student from performing effectively in later years.

Grades play a role, I believe, in the great contemporary crisis that exists between students and professors. Grades have come to play an extremely

important role in the last few decades in connection with admission to schools and admission to various career lines. With this growth of the significance of grades with respect to admission to educational opportunities, career, and even life or death in some cases as where grades were used for draft deferment, that which has played only a small role has taken on very great importance in the total educational enterprise.

If one agrees to this it is reasonable to drop the whole grading enterprise. Grading has outgrown its usefulness for its major function, which was to serve the education of the student. With this new power, exercised by the professor in his giving of grades, the professor is made less of the professional rendering educational services to the students and more the instrument of other agencies. Gradually and even insidiously the professor has been changed from serving students into a kind of personnel officer for other agencies. Frequently, grades are given not only in terms of the actual learning and performance of the student academically, but is influenced by the professor's judgement of the "suitability" of the person, for, say, a particular profession, sometimes based on ignoble motives that he or a professional group may have. Awareness of the way in which the increased judicial function, in this sense, of the college professor has come to interfere with his educational function has led, in some instances, to an effort towards the severe separation of the judicial function from the educational function as at the University of Chicago some years ago, in which a separate testing office was established. However, the experience of the last few years indicates rather strongly that the only way in which the educational function may be cleared of the corruption resulting from the exaggerated judicial functions is for the college to drop its judicial function in connection with the education of students.

The Abuse of Power

The modern student is often quite confused. He has come to regard his own freedom as an inalienable right. He has come, perhaps in his idealism, to expect the university to be both an agent and a locus for the fullest exercise of freedom. Yet he often finds himself bound by meaningless and mindlessly assigned educational chores which he is told he must fulfill. And much too often, instead of finding professors who allow themselves the freedom of thought that their position especially allows them, finds instead men bound by nameless insecurities and intimidations which are both self-created and mutually supported.

The clear awareness that the professor is no longer the student's "friend" anymore, that the professor is working as the agent of other interests than that of the student, combined with the increased necessity of winning the professor's good will in order to make career progress is, in my opinion, one of the major reasons for the rising bitterness of students the world over. When one person has such great power over another, the latter must have some recourse against incompetence and irresponsibility in the former's exercise of that power. If there is no such recourse available then at the very least the latter needs some assurance that the former is morally meticulous in his exercise of power. Recent events in the history of the world have too many times raised the question of such moral meticulousness, on the part of professors and administrators. Some of the latter have frankly admitted their lack of moral meticulousness on the grounds that they are "facing reality"; and that students would be well advised to warn about the nature of that "reality." The students have seen the abuse of power by their professors in the upgrading of students who accept the professor's ideologies and opinions, or those who flatter the professor, and the down-grading of the inquiring student for his "insolence." In a world in which grades were less consequential, such abuses of the power associated with the giving of grades were not important enough to be much of an issue. However, today, the only way in which this wedge which has been driven between professors and students, which has grown so large, can be removed, is by the professors completely abrogating the judicial function.

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