How Grading Alternatives Measure Student Learning

- De-emphasizing letter grades

- Involving students in evaluating assessment

- Collaborative grading

- Other alternative-grading methods

- Concerns over equity issues

How much is a grade worth? As it did with many aspects of higher learning, the Covid-19 pandemic accelerated and ignited existing conversations about the utility (or lack thereof) of distilling student learning into a single percentage or letter grade. When it comes to determining the value of student work, a relatively recent term — "ungrading" — is changing the ways students learn, instructors teach, and how both document the process.

It's understandable to see the word "ungrading" and assume it means abolishing grades altogether. But that's a misconception, according to Robert Talbert, a mathematics professor at Grand Valley State University. "That final grade is determined in a different way than the traditional points-based approach, but students in the vast majority of ungraded courses still get an A, B, C, D, or F in the end," he wrote in a recent blog post.

THE CHRONICLE
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®

Drive greater impact for your learners and institution with Anthology

+ Provide your learners the exact tools they need to succeed

+ Improve outcomes with insightful and shareable results by simplifying, streamlining, and scaling assessment at all levels

+ Standardize data collection across platforms to get a holistic view of campus-wide progress toward goals

Together, we can ensure the best outcomes for your learners and the brightest future for your institution.

Explore our solutions for assessment management
anthology.com/understanding >

anthology
Advancing Knowledge ®

— the only holistic provider of EdTech solutions and services

To better understand developments and trends in alternative grading methods, this report explores the benefits and challenges of different approaches to conventional assessment.

De-emphasizing letter grades

While some institutions, like Hampshire College, in Amherst, Mass., and Evergreen State College, in Olympia, Wash., dispense with grades altogether, this is not the norm at most. But that doesn't mean de-emphasizing letter grades can't be incorporated at colleges that use traditional grading.

> ## "The important thing is not to center grading, but to center learning."

Quite often, it is. There's no single approach to ungrading, and it differs from other alternative grading methods, many of which precede it. But according to Talbert, what sets ungraded classes apart is that they don't focus on grades as a primary form of student feedback, but rather employ alternatives like student conferences, written descriptions, or criteria set in collaboration with students.

Susan D. Blum, an anthropology professor at the University of Notre Dame who has edited a book on going gradeless, gives her students letter grades, but she involves them in the process of determining their grades and assessing their own progress. "For me, the important thing is not to center grading, but to center learning," she says.

Involving students in evaluating assessment

Jesse Stommel, who uses the same grading alternative technique as Blum and teaches writing at the University of Denver, defines ungrading as "a systemic critique of grades." He says, "usually, that work is something I do together with students: getting students to think critically about what grades are."

This kind of conversation can unfold in any classroom, regardless of what approach to grading the instructor uses. "You could change nothing else about how you do assessment in your course," says Stommel, "but set aside one class period to have a conversation with students about grades, motivation, how grades work, how grades make them feel, how grades help them, how grades hinder their learning, and just that conversation itself can productively transform how students engage with an entire course."

The critique central to this practice is based on the acknowledgment that traditional grading has often left students out, and nurtured competition rather than collaboration. "We're leaving out students who don't come with a lot of advantages, so that could be first-generation students, students from low-income backgrounds, students who have migrated, students with different learning needs, students who are neurodivergent, students whose home languages don't match the languages of the dominant academy," says Blum.

For Blum, ungrading comes down to prioritizing learning instead, and moving away from the idea that it needs to be paired with finding fault. "Learning is not inherently about judgment," she says.

Collaborative grading

When it comes to de-emphasizing grades in the classroom, there are numerous approaches. Blum and Stommel embrace a practice sometimes described as "collaborative grading." In Blum's classroom, this means students receive feedback in the form of their own self-assessments, comments from

their classmates, and Blum herself. That "authentic audience," she says, "makes them a lot more serious about getting it right."

At midsemester and the semester's end, students go through a reflection process evaluating what they've learned, and have the opportunity to choose the grade that they feel appropriately reflects their learning. "I don't have to accept it, but I usually do," says Blum.

In Stommel's classroom, students undergo two to three self-reflections throughout the term and give themselves a grade at the end of that process. "I would say that over the course of my career, probably 90 to 95 percent of the time I give students the grade that they give themselves," he says.

Stommel sees this approach as one that takes the power dynamic out of grading. It's also more open for the students, who are involved directly in the grading process, adding to their engagement rather than detracting from it, and maintains rigor while eliminating the pressure of traditional grading.

Other alternative grading methods

While ungrading has become increasingly popular, the world of alternative grading is much larger, and contains a number of methods that, while they may reflect some of the spirit of ungrading, don't fit under its umbrella. These include practices like specifications grading, in which students decide what grade they want to pursue and complete assignments bundled accordingly; contract grading, in which students contract with their instructors on a grade they'll receive based on a set volume of work; and minimal grading, which uses a simpler, more transparent scale of assessment in place of more complex, traditional grading scales of 100 points or 1,000 points, or ambiguous grades like A-minus/B-plus.

These methods can be used together, says Stommel, or even adapted into

classrooms that otherwise espouse more traditional grading models, in the form of allowing students to take exams together, to have as many chances to take an exam as they want, or to incorporate activities like self-reflection into lesson plans.

That's an important consideration, because while proponents of ungrading and alternative grading practices say the approaches can deepen learning and bring greater equity to the classroom, they aren't practical for all educators. Some instructors may have huge classes or heavy teaching loads, or face financial and professional precarity that may induce them to avoid an unfamiliar practice. "I realize that I'm speaking from a position of privilege, where I can focus on my students' learning, but I think if you really go back to fundamentals, that's what we're supposed to be doing," says Blum.

> **"Over the course of my career, probably 90 to 95 percent of the time I give students the grade that they give themselves."**

Grading alternatives also require more engagement from both instructors and students. Proponents of the practice view this as a net positive, with students taking greater ownership over their own academic success. But for students unaccustomed to the practice, taking the leap can make them anxious. "I would say absolutely they are, because" the classes "don't necessarily look like what they're used to," says Stommel. He heads this off at the pass by frontloading his pedagogy with openness so that students know what to expect, giving them time to adjust, and reframing the students' contributions to their own grading as a meaningful learning experience in and of itself.

But the process can especially be hard on students who've been successful in classrooms with traditional grading systems. For Talbert, who has used ungrading only once, the approach served as a way to retrain students who were excessively attached to their grades. He wanted his students in an upper-level abstract-algebra course to stop focusing so much on points and grades and to focus instead on the class's difficult mathematical concepts. He found that the approach fostered a richer learning environment because the distraction of grades was kept to a minimum.

Concerns over equity

But even with these benefits, ungrading requires vigilance on the part of instructors to make sure students aren't replicating the bias that can accompany traditional grading. Stommel says he often sees this with women and students of color, who are more likely to give themselves lower grades. "Over many years, I saw women students, in particular, and minority students, more likely to give themselves A-minuses, and what they would say in their self-reflection is: 'I did everything I was supposed to, I did XYZ, I'm really proud of this and that and these things I did, but it just wasn't perfect'… there would be coded language in their self-reflection, so that the bias was pretty clear to me. They gave me no reason to actually bubble in A-minus when I went to give them a grade." He had to give them higher grades than they'd given themselves.

Talbert, for his part, has also noted that ungrading, for all its benefits, could also

Grading alternatives also require more engagement from both instructors and students. Proponents of the practice view this as a net positive, with students taking greater ownership over their own academic success. But for students unaccustomed to the practice, taking the leap can make them anxious.

unintentionally exacerbate equity gaps, by removing signals or guideposts that students from less privileged backgrounds might need to help them navigate college courses.

Still, says Stommel, it's clear that traditional grading has been harmful in this arena as well. "Oftentimes people ask: 'What are the potentials for bias or the potential for harm done to marginalized students with ungrading?'" he says. "And ultimately, my response to that would be grades are biased, grades are already doing immeasurable damage to our most marginalized. So a critique of grades as a system is necessarily going to help us dismantle that system that's already doing harm."

For Blum, any difficulties grading alternatives may introduce are offset by her students' reactions. "It's a lot more challenging," she says. "But it's a lot more meaningful and successful. My students tell me every semester: 'For the first time, I learned for myself and not for the grade.'"

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION