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ABSTRACT

An Honors-Pass-Fail (H-P-F) grading system was introduced experimentally to replace A-B-C-F grading in all graduate education courses. H-P-F was more effective than A-B-C-F grading in distinguishing between exceptional and average student achievement. The percentage of highest possible grades declined from 50 percent A's to about 25 percent H grades where it stabilized for 2 successive years. The new grading system was evaluated twice by graduate students and faculty. At the end of the first year, student approval was overwhelming, whereas the faculty was about equally divided among instructors who approved H-P-F and those who either disapproved or were uncertain. In the second year, student and faculty approval was slightly greater than in the first year. (Author)

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An Honors - Pass - Fail (H-P-F) grading system was introduced experimentally to replace A-B-C-F grading in all graduate education courses. H-P-F was more effective than A-B-C-F grading in distinguishing between exceptional and average student achievement. The percentage of highest possible grades declined from 50 percent A's to about 25 percent H grades where it stabilized for two successive years. The new grading system was evaluated twice by graduate students and faculty. At the end of the first year, student approval was overwhelming, whereas the faculty was about equally divided among instructors who approved H-P-F and those who either disapproved or were uncertain. In the second year, student and faculty approval was slightly greater than in the first year.

Student-Faculty Evaluation of a Three-Point Grading System in Graduate Education Courses

In recent years, traditional grading systems have come under considerable fire at all education levels from the elementary to the university and professional schools. The 5-step letter grade scale, A-B-C-D-F, and the 0-100 numerical scales, long regarded sacred cows of academia, have been attacked as anachronistic, unfair, subjective, the cause of destructive competition, a white middle class device which discriminates against minority students, a deterrent to students who might take a course but are unsure of themselves, and, in general, an obstacle to real learning (Sparks, 1969). The protagonists of traditional grading defend it on the grounds that it is an incentive for learning, an objective measure of achievement, and an integral part of our competitive society (Miller, 1967).

A survey of grading practices among American institutions of higher learning (American Association of College Registrars and Admissions Officers, 1971), reveals that about half the schools have modified their grading system within the past five years, and were adopting combinations of traditional and non-traditional schemes. Over 60 percent offer pass/fail or credit/no credit grading options, for some, but rarely all courses.

Despite the increasing numbers of high schools and colleges that are replacing multi-step with two step grading systems , there appears to be no likelihood that such non-traditional systems will completely replace traditional grading (Chansky, 1973). The A-B-C-D-F system remains the heavy favorite of directors of admissions of undergraduate, graduate, law and medical schools. (Stevens, 1973).

The two major reasons cited by four-year colleges and universities for supporting a pass/fail system are (1) to encourage students to explore subjects outside their major without fear of jeopardizing their grade point average, and (2) to minimize fear of failing (Quann, 1970). However, one of the conclusions emerging from a review of recent studies of new grading systems is that students do not take pass/fail courses to explore areas out of their major but rather to make school easier for themselves (Davidovicz, 1972). Insignificant numbers of undergraduate education students selected science and mathematics courses which were offered as pass/fail electives (Metzger & Sharp, 1971). Instructors reported that students suffer some loss in motivation in pass/fail courses (McLaughlin, 1971) which often results in lower quality scholarship (Office of Institutional Research, Wisconsin University, 1973).

Nevertheless, students, for the most part, are enthusiastic about non-traditional grading systems. They feel that the absence of traditional practices relieves pressures about grades, gives freedom to explore new areas, facilitates close student-faculty relations, and reduces competition with fellow students (Bailey, 1972).

The greatest resistance to non-traditional grading comes from graduate and professional schools. Although half of the schools have adopted some modifications of traditional grading either in part or in total (Benson, 1969), most deans of graduate schools have serious reservations about non-traditional systems (Schoener, 1973). Overwhelmingly, they prefer letter grade transcripts since it allows greater ease and accuracy in evaluating students (Hassler, 1969). Grade point averages

evidence that undergraduate grades are predictive of graduate performance (Iadarola, 1969) or of success in the job (Hoyt, 1970).

An in-depth study (Goldsmith & Tilker, 1971) of student attitudes toward 3-point (H-P-F) and 4-point grading systems (A-B-C-F) among undergraduates, graduates, and faculty at Richmond College, a unit of The City University of New York, indicates a general preference for the 3-point grading system with the strongest support coming from graduate students in teacher education. The faculty was least favorably disposed toward H-P-F grading system and was actually close to being equally divided in its preference for the two systems.

Present Study

This study concerns itself with an Honors-Pass-Fail (H-P-F) grading system which was introduced experimentally in the Fall, 1971 semester by the graduate division of an urban university. It replaced the traditional A-B-C-F system for evaluating student achievement in all courses offered in its teacher education program.

Among the reasons offered for instituting this non-traditional grading system was the general dissatisfaction with the A-B-C-F system under which about half the final grades in graduate education courses were A's, half B's with very few C's, and practically no F's. The education faculty felt this grading system failed to discriminate between exceptional and average student achievement in graduate education courses. It was hoped that a three-point grading system such as H-P-F would achieve this goal. Several aspects of this experiment are unique. The use of a non-traditional grading system for all courses in a graduate program appears to be an innovative practice with little precedent.[1] The evaluation of this grading system by students and faculty (at the end of the first year and again at the end of the second year) provided unusual data that describe their reactions to an experimental grading system.

The present study attempted to answer three questions:

1. Does the H-P-F system discriminate more clearly between exceptional and average student achievement than the conventional A-B-C-F system?
2. How do graduate students evaluate the H-P-F grading system?
3. How does the graduate instructional staff evaluate the H-P-F grading system?

I. Comparison of Grade Distribution with A-B-C-F and H-P-F Systems

Grades in the A-B-C-F system used for assessing student achievement in graduate education courses are defined as follows:

A - excellent (90-100 percent)

B - good (80-89 percent)

C - satisfactory (70-79 percent)

F - fail (0-69 percent)

The three grading categories on the H-P-F scale, are defined in the following terms:

Honors (H) - awarded for genuine intellectual or creative performance and/or for superlative mastery of the assigned work

Pass (P) - awarded to the student who has completed the assigned work and demonstrated a sufficient mastery of it

Fail (F) - denotes that the student has failed to do a significant portion of the assigned work or has been unable to demonstrate a sufficient mastery of it.

The effect of substituting one grading system for another, was measured by comparing the distribution of final grades based on the A-B-C-F system in 1969 & 1970 with the distribution of grades based on the subsequently used H-P-F system in 1971 & 1972. The results of this comparison are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Comparison of Grades in Graduate Education Courses Under H-P-F and A-B-C-F Grading Systems

Year	Total No. Grades	A No.	A %	B No.	B %	C No.	C %	F No.	F %	Others[a] No.	Others[a] %	GPA
1969-70	3154	1468	46.5	1542	49.0	59	1.9	0	0.0	85	2.6	3.45
1970-71	3645	1866	51.0	1495	41.0	28	0.8	0	0.0	256	7.2	3.52
Total 1969-71	6799	3334	49.2	3037	44.8	87	1.3	0	0.0	341	4.7	3.48

Year	Total No. Grades	H No.	H %	P No.	P %	F No.	F %	Others[a] No.	Others[a] %	Chi Square
1971-72	3688	1048	28.4	2408	65.3	15	0.4	217	5.9	3.46*
1972-73	4315	1152	26.7	2891	67.0	22	0.5	250	5.8	
Total 1971-73	8003	2200	27.5	5299	66.2	37	0.5	467	5.8	

*Not significant.

[a]These were administrative ratings: "J" for failures for other than academic reasons, "W" for withdrawal, "Abs" - absent from final exams, and "Inc" - incomplete classroom work.

Table 1 reveals that for the two year period prior to H-P-F, about half the final grades in graduate education courses were A's, over 40 percent were B's, slightly more than one percent were C's, and there were no F grades. The percentage of A grades and the GPA increased during this period. This trend [illegible] (see [illegible], 1971).

On the other hand, under the H-P-F system slightly more than one-fourth were H's, two thirds were P's and F grades constituted less than one percent

of all final marks. There was a slight decline in the percentage of H grades in the second year as compared to the first, but the distribution of H-P-F grades was essentially the same both years.

II. Student Assessment of H-P-F

The reactions of graduate students to the H-P-F were obtained by an anonymous questionnaire at the end of the first year and again at the end of the second year. Questionnaires were distributed to all graduate education classes; however, only those who had been graded under the H-P-F system were asked to respond.

The questionnaire contained inquiries about (a) the number of graduate courses completed prior to the introduction of H-P-F in September, 1972, (b) number of graduate courses in which they had been graded by H-P-F, (c) reactions to H-P-F: approve - disapprove - uncertain, and (d) alternatives to H-P-F.

Responses to the first survey were received from 765 students representing 66.5 percent of the graduate student population qualified to participate in the survey. The second survey, at the end of the second year of H-P-F, yielded 844 or 56.5 percent of the eligible graduate population, significantly fewer than in the first survey.* However, both groups were representative samples of their respective total student population. It is also estimated that at least two-thirds the respondents participated in both surveys.

The survey indicated that on the average, students in both surveys had completed about four education courses prior to the introduction of H-P-F. Students reported that they had been graded in an average of three courses by H-P-F at the end of the first year and an equal number by the end of the

A summary of the reactions of graduate student to H-P-F is tabulated in Table 2.

Table 2

Graduate Education Student Assessment of H-P-F Grading System

	1971-1972		1972-1973		Chi Square
	No.	%	No.	%	
Approval	557	72.8	649	77.3	
Disapproval	124	16.2	95	11.3	8.49*
Uncertain	84	11.0	96	11.4	
Total	765	100.0	840	100.0	

*Significant at the .05 level

Table 2 reveals that for two successive years the great majority of respondents whose academic achievement had been assessed by the H-P-F grading system, approved it; 72.8% in the first year and 77.3% in the second, an increase of 4.5% which is statistically significant. There was a corresponding decline in disapproval by 4.9% and a slight increase of 0.4% in "uncertain" responses.

A study was also made in which the reactions of students graded under both H-P-F and A-B-C-F systems were compared with reactions of students graded only by H-P-F. The results of this comparison are posted in Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of Reaction to H-P-F of Graduate Education Students With H-P-F and A-B-C-F Grading Experience and Students With H-P-F Experience Only

	H-P-F & A-B-C-F		H-P-F Only		
	No.	%	No.	%	Chi Square
Approval	192	71.9	457	79.7	6.44*
Disapproval	38	14.2	57	10.0	
Uncertain	37	13.9	59	10.3	
Total	267	100.0	573	100.0	

*Significant at .05 level.

As seen in Table 3 there was a significant difference between the reactions of respondents who had experience with both grading systems and respondents who experienced H-P-F only. The former registered less approval, more disapproval and more uncertainty than the latter. However, both groups overwhelming approved the H-P-F grading system, about 70 percent and 80 percent respectively.

At the end of the first year, students who either disapproved or were uncertain about H-P-F were about equally divided in recommending as alternatives either the A-B-C-F or the pass/fail grading systems. This represented the sentiments of 208 Or 27.2 percent of the respondents.

By the end of the second year, one-third of the 191 students who either disapproved or were uncertain about H-P-F indicated their preference for the A-B-C-F system, another third favored a variant of the traditional system either

range of non-traditional grading systems.

Students were also given an opportunity at the end of the second year to record any changes in their reactions to H-P-F. About nine out of ten respondents indicated that they had not changed their minds about H-P-F. Of those who had second thoughts, about 25 percent changed from approval to disapproval, another 25 percent from approval to uncertain, and another 25 percent from either disapproval or uncertainty to approval.

III. Faculty Evaluation of H-P-F

The reactions of the graduate instructional staff of the Department of Education to the H-P-F grading system were obtained by means of two anonymous questionnaires distributed at the same time as the student questionnaires.

The first questionnaire, at the end of the first year, sought responses to the following inquiries:

1. Number of courses taught in which the H-P-F grading system was used.
2. Curricular areas in which graduate courses were taught.
3. Reactions to H-P-F: approve_____, Disapprove____, or uncertain____.
4. If you disapprove or are uncertain, the alternatives you prefer.

To the second questionnaire distributed at the end of the second year, the following items were added:

5. Have you changed your mind about H-P-F?
6. If yes, describe the change.

Responses to the first questionnaire were received from 67 out of the graduate staff of 69, 97.1 percent; the second questionnaire yielded 85 out of 94 graduate instructors, 90.4 percent. The size of the samples were not significantly different.* About two-thirds of the staff members in second [illegible]

*Chi square value was 3.54 which is not significant

end of the second year, the average was 3.7. The sample of graduate classes graded by H-P-F was representative of all courses offered by curricular areas during both years of the survey.

The reactions of the graduate faculty to H-P-F at the end of the first year and again at the end of second year are summarized in Table 4.

TABLE 4

Reactions of Graduate Faculty to H-P-F Grading System

	1971-72		1972-73		
	No.	%	No.	%	Chi Square
Approve	34	50.8	48	58.7	
Disapprove	26	38.8	22	23.7	3.97*
Uncertain	7	10.4	15	17.6	
Totals	67	100.0	85	100.0	

*Not significant

From Table 4, it is evident that after one year, half the instructional staff approved H-P-F, and by the second year, faculty support increased by 8 percent. Disapproval declined by 15.1 percent and uncertainty rose by 7.2 percent. The changes in faculty reactions were not significant.

About 60 percent of the 33 respondents who either disapproved or were uncertain of H-P-F at the end of the first year, preferred A-B-C-F, 15 percent favored pass/fail, and the remainder, variations of these two systems. The only new suggestion was that no grade be given to a student who fails a course, a system introduced at Yale University in Fall, 1972 (Taft, 1973). In the second year, about 60 percent of all respondents [illegible] some other non-traditional system.

More than 80 percent of the instructors had not changed their minds about H-P-F. Among those who did, half went from approval to disapproval, 40.0 percent from approval to uncertain, the other 10.0 percent went from uncertain to either approval or disapproval. In general, instructors changed their reactions from approval to either disapproval or uncertain.

DISCUSSION

The general reactions of graduate students and faculty to H-P-F grading were not unlike the reactions of similar populations to non-traditional grading. Strongest support came from the students; they approved the program 3 to 1. The instructional staff was less enthusiastic, about half approved it and the remainder were about equally divided among those who disapproved or were uncertain. There were slight gains in both student and faculty approval at the end of the second year with about 80 percent in each group registering no change in their estimates of the H-P-F grading system.

The overwhelming student approval of H-P-F is probably related to the characteristics of the student population and the Master's program in education. Unlike the typical graduate student, most of these students are full-time employed teachers, the overwhelming majority of whom are teaching in public schools in the greater metropolitan area. These teachers hold provisional licenses which permit them to teach in the state's public schools for a period of five years. During this time the teachers work toward permanent certification obtained upon completion of a Master's degree or the accumulation of 30 additional approved credits of study beyond the Bachelor's degree. Permanent certification insures payment of higher salaries and helps to insure job security. Most of those enrolled in graduate education programs are part-time students, about 80 percent [illegible]

Education Department, 1972). Thus, for the vast majority of students, the Master's is a terminal degree which qualifies them for permanent certification as a teacher. The non-traditional grading system may therefore be more appropriate for this group since grade point average based on conventional grading does not directly determine job opportunity, placement, or promotion.

The unexpected findings were the dramatic decline in the number of "highest possible" grades under the two grading systems, the percentage of H as compared to A grades, and the stability of H-P-F system over a two year period. The A-B-C-F was found "wanting" because it failed to discriminate between exceptional and average student achievement; half the final grades in graduate education courses were A's and the rest were B's with very few C's and practically no F's In essence, it functioned as a two step grading system. To offset its failure to discriminate between superior and average achievement, the 3 step H-P-F grading was proposed with the expectation that instructors would require higher achievement for an H grade than they did for an A grade. This, in fact, came to pass. Half as many H as A grades were awarded to students by instructors, the majority of whom had taught under both grading systems. Moreover, the reduction in H as compared to A grades continued for four successive semesters, and the percentage of H grades declined slightly, but not significantly in the second year as compared to the first year. This is a reversal of the rising grade point average nationally (Burwin, 1971) and of the trend in the percentage of H grades given to graduate students in education in an urban college with a comparable population.[2] In the latter instance, the percentage of H grades for three successive years, starting in 1970-71, were 23.3, and 29.2, and 31.4 percent. In the current study, the

[2] Communication from Richmond College of City University of New York, November 1972.

percentages for H grades, 1971-72, and 1972-73 were 28.4 and 26.7 respectively.

It is possible that the relative stability of H grades, is due to the "Hawthorne Effect", a phenomena associated with experimental situations. Individuals participating in an experiment may improve their performance in response to a new situation, in this case, the H-P-F grading system. As the novelty wears off, the influence wears off. The influence of the "Hawthorne Effect" can be expected to decrease. Continued study is required to determine how stable H-P-F remains in distinguishing between exceptional and average student achievement.

It would also be instructive to determine what effect the H-P-F system is having on student and faculty attitudes towards course work and instruction as well as its impact on admission to professional and graduate schools for post Master's degrees.

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