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ABSTRACT

A faculty committee was commissioned at Ohio State University's College of Social Work to study that College's grading practices. In fulfilling this charge a survey of the faculty was conducted and the results presented along with a review of useful literature on grading and recommendations for change. The survey of faculty used a questionnaire which sought demographic information as well as information regarding grades and grading practices, grading philosophy, and faculty orientation to learning and grades. Thirty questionnaires were distributed and 18 were returned. Themes that emerged from examination of the responses included a general desire to make grading a useful tool for students, a need for clarity about what grades mean, a concern about grade inflation, and teacher orientation toward learning. Several recommendations are offered including the following: further exploration of the themes raised, further research among the university faculty as a whole, and seminars or other training in grading for new faculty and teaching assistants. Appendixes include a copy of the questionnaire, further discussion of implications concerning grading issues, and results of the literature review which includes 35 references. (JB)

The Ohio State University
College of Social Work

Ad Hoc Committee on Grading

FINAL REPORT
June, 1991

Stanley Blostein, Chair
William Eldridge
James Lantz
Beverly Watkins

Preface

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College of Social Work

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> "Grades motivate students. They provide feedback to the student and their instructors about the quality of the students' work. Grades allow institutions to make discriminations about students' performance." (Gross & Butler, 1975.)
>
> A grade is "an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material." (Dressel, 1983.)

BACKGROUND

In June, 1990, the College Faculty sanctioned the appointment of a committee to look at grading practices in the College. The committee was established by the Dean on February 14, 1990, with Stanley Blostein, Chair, Bill Eldridge, Jim Lantz, and Beverly Watkins as members. The Charge to the committee was:

A. Study the grading practices of faculty in the College in terms of:

   1. Ideology and philosophies.
   2. Practices and preferences with respect to evaluating student work, both in the classroom and the field.
   3. Grades of social work students-both undergraduate and graduate (by program if possible) in comparison to other colleges at OSU.

4. Grades of social work students--both undergraduate and graduate--in courses taken outside the College.

B. Summarize the findings of the above referenced investigations and present these findings to the faculty in the context of:

1. Gleanings from pertinent literature on approaches to grading and evaluation.

2. OSU policy on evaluation and grading.

C. Recommend action alternatives or further study in relation to any findings or problem areas which the faculty, as a whole, may choose to define by consensus. (Charge to committee, 2-14-90.)

Over the period of study, the committee met as a whole, as well as members individually reviewing materials distributed to them, to determine an overall work plan; to review the thinking of the members of the committee regarding grading, as a basis for the questionnaire; to review the results of the questionnaire and develop and approve the Final Report.

INTRODUCTION

Like the weather, grading is always a part of the lives of members of a faculty--sometimes it's taken for granted; sometimes it's a problem and, very often, it's not fully understood. Whatever it is, there seems little we can do about it, so we learn to live with the vagaries surrounding the meaning and practices of grading. There are few "recommendations" that this committee can offer on grading. Part of the reason is that grading is ultimately the responsibility of the individual faculty member, within the rules and regulations of the University. (It is suggested that faculty members review appropriate University policy on this subject, particularly

that found in the University Rules, paragraphs 3335-7-19 through 3335-7-23.) That is the practice and that is what the faculty of the College believe is the appropriate practice. (See section on questionnaire.) The literature on "grading" is massive and offers useful insights, some of which are included in this Report. A brief review of selected parts of this literature, however, indicates that "grading" cannot be studied without also looking at the environment in which faculty engage in grading practices. Unless, that is, one chooses to look only at some of the technical issues regarding grading, e.g., grading on the curve; the length of time the impact of a grade lasts, the appropriate reference group for grading, etc. The committee chose not to take that approach. Rather, in this Report, we will share with our colleagues a review of selected literature, the results of a questionnaire survey of faculty, and, finally, a series of themes and issues which we have identified in this process. We hope that this Report will be informative to individual faculty, and, perhaps, should the faculty desire to do so, could serve as the basis for further discussion by small groups of faculty, or the faculty as a whole.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The committee is appreciative of the initial work done on the review by Lisa Marquant, MSW II, and for the extensive work by Bill Martin, doctoral student. The committee, at its initial meeting agreed on a focus for the review, as it was apparent that there were a number of related topics, but that these were topics that would have expanded the scope of the committee far beyond the charge given to it. Among these related topics which are not addressed in this Report are evaluation of teaching; learning styles; use of student evaluations; grading practices by major field; and student self-assessment. The Review by Mr. Martin is presented in its

entirety in the appendix for informational purposes, and to provide a background for the remainder of this Report.

THE FACULTY QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire was developed by the committee in an attempt to identify faculty thinking about the meaning of grades as well as grading practices in the College of Social Work. The questionnaire (see Appendix) contains four sections: the first section is to obtain demographic information from the respondents, particularly in regard to those characteristics which have been demonstrated as related to grading philosophy and practices, i.e., age; number of years as a teacher; gender; tenure status, and the curricular area in which the respondent teaches. The second section elicits responses to general statements regarding grades and grading practices, and is intended to identify the positions of the faculty in regard to a number of issues. The third section obtains information on grading practices and grading philosophy, and the final section is a standardized instrument (Eison and Janzow, undated) that is used to identify faculty orientation toward learning and toward grades. It was anticipated by the committee that the questionnaire would serve a purpose in addition to gathering data. This was related to the charge to the committee to be "educative," and it was intended the items included in the questionnaire would serve that purpose by stimulating thinking about grades and the grading process.

Methodology

A total of 30 questionnaires were distributed to faculty mailboxes on February 6, 1991, and an announcement was made that same day in a faculty meeting indicating the questionnaires were being distributed. It was requested that questionnaires be returned by February 15, 1991. A follow-up note was placed in faculty mailboxes on February 11, 1991, reminding faculty to return the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed to all full-time regular and adjunct faculty who have responsibility for assigning grades (classroom and field). A total of 18 completed questionnaires were returned by the due date for a return rate of 60 percent. One questionnaire was returned too late to be included in the tabulations. Due to the relatively small number of returns in relation to an already small population, it is not feasible to draw generalizations, nor to make some of the planned cross-tabulations. However, for information, some comparisons of the respondents with the total population are made.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Respondents

Of those who returned the questionnaire, the mean number of years in full-time teaching is 12.5 years, and the median is 13 years. The range is 1-25 years.

The faculty rank of the respondents can be seen in Table 1, with the rank of all 30 faculty shown in comparison for the information of the reader: (Note: All percentages indicated in this Report do not total 100 percent due to rounding).

Table 1

Percent of Respondents and Percent of Total

Faculty, by Rank

Rank	% Respondents (N=18)	% Total Faculty (N=30)
Assistant	29.4	33.3
Associate	29.4	36.6
Full	23.5	23.3
Adjunct	17.7	16.6
Missing	.05	n/a

The gender of the respondents is 37.5 percent women and 62.5 percent men, compared with 46.6 percent women and 53.3 percent men in the total faculty. The mean age is 48, with the median age being 47.5, and the range 29-63. Two-thirds of the respondents (66.7 percent) are tenured and one-third (33.3 percent) indicated they are not tenured as of the 1990-91 school year.

In response to a question about the program area in which they teach, the respondents indicated the following:

Table 2

Percent of Respondents by Program Area

in Which They Teach

Program	% Teaching
BSW Only	12
MSW Only	18
BSW/MSW Combined	18
MSW/PHD Combined	06
BSW/MSW/PHD	47

General

The next major section of the questionnaire addressed some general statements regarding grades and grading. Respondents were asked to respond on a five point scale: "strongly agree"; "agree"; "undecided"; "disagree"; and "strongly disagree." For the purpose of this discussion, the responses to "strongly agree" and "agree" are combined, and the "strongly disagree" and "disagree" are combined. Table 3 presents the responses to the statements.

Table 3

STATEMENTS ABOUT GRADING BY PERCENT OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE, ARE UNDECIDED, OR DISAGREE

		Strongly Agree & Agree	Undecided	Disagree & Strongly Disagree
1.	There is "grade inflation" in general at OSU.	55.6	38.9	5.6
2.	There is "grade inflation" in the College of Social Work.	94.5	5.6	0.0
3.	Faculty patterns in assigning grades are a consideration in the awarding of tenure, promotion, and salary decisions.	11.1	33.3	55.5
4.	The reputation a faculty member has in regard to grading directly effects the way students evaluate that faculty member.	44.5	2.78	27.8
5.	Grades received by students in each of the following curriculum areas are important in obtaining employment after graduation:			
	Research	27.8	16.7	55.5
	Human Behavior	38.9	5.6	55.5
	Practicum/Undergrad	38.9	16.7	44.5
	Practicum/1st year	38.9	22.2	38.9
	Practicum/2nd year	44.5	16.7	38.9
	Policy/Foundation	27.8	22.2	50.0
	Practice/Foundation	27.8	16.7	55.5
	Practice/Specialized	44.5	16.7	38.9
	Field of practice (mental health, child welfare, etc.)	50.0	16.7	33.3
6.	Grading policy and practices, and grades assigned in a class should be the exclusive responsibility of the faculty member assigned to teach that class, within the rules established by the University.	89.9	0	10.1
7.	Grading policy and practices, and grades assigned in a class should be influenced by college, department, and collegial norms and expectations, as well as being within the rules established by the University.	50.0	16.7	33.3

While slightly over half of the respondents (55.6%) agree there is grade inflation in the University, there is overwhelming agreement (94.5%) that grade inflation exists in the College of Social Work. At the same time, the majority of the respondents (55.5%) do not feel that the way grades are assigned plays a part in the awarding of tenure, promotion or salary decisions, with an additional one-third of the respondents being undecided. On some interest is the fact that in no instance do the majority of the respondents indicate they feel grades are important in obtaining employment after graduation. This is across the board in all curricular areas. The greatest division of opinion is related to Field of Practice courses, where one-half of the respondents agree grades are important in obtaining employment and one-third disagree.

Methods of Grading

This section of the questionnaire asked about methods of grading used to determine the final grade in a class. While it is assumed that different methods might be employed depending on the content area of the course, the number of total responses limits the value of that portion of the information, so there is no attempt to present the responses by area of the curriculum. The following (Table 4) are the percentage of respondents who indicated they use that particular method for grading. Respondents were asked to indicate all methods they employ.

Table 4

Methods of Grading and Percentage of Respondents Using Method

Method of Grading	% Use
Tests	
True/False	44
Multiple Choice	44
Brief Answer	56
Essay	72
Papers	78
Class Participation	50
Homework Assignments	39
Student Effort	28
Number of Absences	28
Case Analyses	22
Student Enthusiasm and Attitude	11
Other	
Presentations	11

In response to the question about the number of major assignments given during a quarter, 5.6 percent indicated one assignment; 61.1 percent indicated two, and 33.3 percent said they gave three. In determining grades for students on a major assignment, most respondents (72.2%) indicated they compared students with other students in the class, while 27.8 percent said they did not compare. An even larger number of respondents, 94.4 percent, compare the performance of a student on a major assignment with performance criteria prepared in advance, while 5.6 percent of the respondents indicated they do not do this. The responses to whether they graded on the curve in any classes showed 44.4 percent responding yes, and 55.6 responding no.

Purposes for Grading

The following section required respondents to select one statement which best reflected her or his philosophy regarding grades. The statements and the percentage of respondents who selected that statement are as follows:

A. Grades should reflect the extent to which a student has met the requirements of a course. (77.8)

B. Grades should reflect a rough ranking of the students in that course. (5.6)

C. Grades should reflect the effort of each individual student, regardless of the students overall performance in a course. (0.0)

D. Grades are necessary in our educational system. (16.6)

In answering the question about using exactly the same grading procedure and standards for all students in a class, almost 95 percent of the respondents indicated they did, while only 5 percent indicated they did not. The responses to the statements contained in this section appear to suggest some lack of consistency about the purpose of grading. While nearly three out of four respondents say they compare students with other students in the class to determine grades on a major assignment, responses to other statements indicate that grades should "reflect the extent to which a student has met the requirements of a course," and that the same grading procedure and standards should be used for all students. These positions appear to be in conflict with each other.

"Purposes for Grading"

The section on "Purposes for Grading" presented a series of statements which the respondent assessed on a scale of "no importance"; "little importance"; "somewhat important"; "important"; and "great importance." Assigning a score of 1 to no importance and 5 to great importance, Table 5 presents the mean responses to each of the statements.

Table 5

Purpose for Grading by Score* of

Mean Response

	Purposes for Grading	Mean Score
A.	To provide a direct learning experience for the student.	3.267
B.	To contribute to student motivation to learn.	3.389
C.	To establish where the student is in relation to other students in the class.	2.412
D.	To provide feedback to the student regarding what the faculty member considers is important to learn.	4.167
E.	To provide feedback to the student regarding what the student as an individual has learned, regardless of overall class performance.	4.167
F.	To reward desired performance or punish negative performance.	2.611
G.	To provide a stimulus for student-teacher dialogue on student performance.	3.167

*Score is 1 = No importance; 2 = Little importance; 3 = Somewhat important; 4 = Important; 5 = Great importance.

These responses indicate support for the purposes of providing feedback to the student regarding what the faculty consider important to learn, and what the student as an individual has learned. On somewhat less importance is to contribute to student motivation and to serve as a direct learning experience. Grading is clearly not seen as a means of either providing rewards or punishment or attempting to rank students in a class. These responses tend to support other findings from this group of respondents of a clear philosophic orientation toward grading as an adjunct to learning, rather than as an end in itself.

Respondents were asked to describe how they put into operation in class those purposes they indicated were of "great importance." These responses fell into two general categories: Feedback to Students and Expectations of Faculty. In reference to Feedback, comments were directed toward the need for timely, written comments by faculty for students on assignments. In addition, respondents indicated they discussed assignments in class following evaluation of the assignment, as well as providing overall class feedback. A number of respondents stressed the need to provide to students in advance the expectations of the faculty in regard to an assignment, and how the assignment would be evaluated. The importance of deadlines also was mentioned by a number of respondents. From a completely different perspective, a small portion of the respondents indicated that grades can be a barrier to learning.

Self-Descriptions as Teacher

Responding to a request to provide two or three words or phrases that they believe describe them as teachers, the most commonly used word is "fair." This is followed by

"enthusiastic," "helpful," and "high expectations." In general, faculty believe students perceive them in much the same way.

Ethical Issues in Grading

The next section requested a description of what are considered the most important ethical issues or problems in regard to grading. A sampling of the responses are presented:

"I am concerned about how 'objective' I can be in grading a 'subjective' exam."

"I have concern about the legal considerations that can influence grading."

"Cheating is a problem, e.g., when it is clear that outside assistance was obtained, but cannot be documented."

"How (or should) special populations of students be evaluated differently, using different standards, e.g., students with physical handicaps, minority students."

"Temptation to be 'popular' by being lenient in grading, thereby enhancing chances of getting higher evaluation from students . . . less rigorous standards would save time in grading and give more time to be 'productive.'"

"I worry that my examining methods (tests, papers) do not allow students the same (equal) opportunity to perform because of different learning styles."

"Faculty who won't give an honest grade because of fear of a student grievance."

Many of the comments are reflected by the respondent who said, "I do agonize over grades!!"

Orientation Toward Learning and Grades

Respondents were asked to complete an instrument developed by Eison and Janzow (1986, undated) that is intended to determine faculty orientations towards learning and towards grades. This is based on previous work to determine orientations of students toward learning and grades. They identify two general orientations, which they describe as a "Learning Orientation," (LO) referring to attitudes and behaviors based upon the view that college courses provide an opportunity to acquire knowledge and obtain personal enlightenment; and a "Grade Orientation," (GO) referring to attitudes and behaviors based upon the view that the pursuit of course grades is a sufficient reason for being, and doing, in college. The authors point out that research with undergraduate students demonstrates that LO and GO differences are reliably related to differences in (1) personality, (2) learning styles, (3) level of test anxiety, (4) study attitudes and skills, (5) preferences for multiple-choice or essay-type tests, (6) participation in an honors program, and (7) perceptions of teaching excellence. They developed this instrument to identify faculty who implicitly or explicitly conduct classes. or view students, with an LO or GO focus.

For the 18 individuals who responded to the questionnaire, the mean Learning Orientation (LO) score is 34.167, with a range of 27 to 45. The mean Grade Orientation (GO) score is 25, with a range of 16 to 33. For purposes of general comparison, the scores obtained at two other universities showed a mean LO score of 32.40 and a mean GO score of 28.48. Perhaps of more interest, of the 18 respondents, 14 scored higher on the LO scale; 2 scored higher on the GO scale and one scored the same on both scales.

What is suggested by the results of this section, as well as the responses to other portions of the questionnaire that inquired about the purposes of grading, is that the faculty of the College

of Social Work have a clear orientation toward the use of grades for the purpose of student learning. Of interest, and potentially of some concern, is whether or not the students in the College of Social Work have the same orientation as faculty. This is an area that should be studied further.

Comments

The following are a sample of the statements by respondents in response to the request for further comments on grades and grading.

"Multiple section courses concern me--both in kind and number of assignments and how they are evaluated . . . I think a grade ought to reflect to a student what he or she has learned in a course . . ."

"In general, I do not believe this topic is of interest to many, if not most faculty. I hope I'm wrong."

"My biggest concern regarding grades in the College of Social Work is that students who receive A's in other courses expect A's in all courses. When they don't receive them, they react as if they were wronged . . . students . . . behave as if a B, B+ are failing grades."

"I worry that my tests are not always a fair representation of the knowledge a student should have mastered in the class."

"I wish you had provided a separate section on field. I think this is a major problem area with respect to grades because of variations in assignment and expectations . . ."

DISCUSSION

There will be no attempt to generalize the findings from the questionnaire beyond the respondents. As is often the case, some may well not agree with our interpretations of the data. But in the spirit of the charge to the committee to identify issues and themes and use these to be educative, we wish to attempt to do that in this section of our Report as a basis for further discussion.

Themes

1. Do the right thing.

   This is a clear feeling that comes from the responses that faculty, in regard to grades, want to "do the right thing," and to make grades (and, by extension, the evaluative process) a more positive part of the teaching-learning experience for students, and for themselves. They are not sure, however, just what the "right thing" is. Accompanying this is a sense of frustration that arises out of attempting to focus on one part (grades) of a complex process (teaching-learning).

2. What does a grade mean?

   To the extent that the members of the faculty desire a grade to represent the degree to which a student has achieved the stated objectives of a course, there is an apparent high level of agreement among faculty. At the same time, there is great doubt that this, in fact, is what occurs. This doubt is related to a number of considerations, e.g. what a grade "means" to students appears to be different than what a grade "means" to the faculty who assign the grade; the mechanics of grading, which faculty want to be an

objective process, are filled with subjective elements. This, then, gives rise to the next theme.

3. Grade inflation.

While only slightly over half of the faculty (55.6%) strongly agree or agree that there is grade inflation at Ohio State, 94.5% strongly agree or agree that there is grade inflation in the College of Social Work. There was no attempt, by the way, to differentiate between field and class, as that requires the inclusion of a number of other issues that are beyond the scope of this committee. The observations and responses indicate, however, that the focus is on the larger issue of teaching and learning. There is danger, however, in assuming what is meant by "grade inflation." If this term is read in the context of responses to other statements, it can be perceived, not as a "problem," but as a symptom, i.e., inflated grades are not a problem that, in and of itself, should be addressed and corrected, but inflated grades may more properly be perceived as an indicator of a flaw or flaws in the teaching-learning process. The latter is where attention should be focused.

4. Orientation toward learning.

The orientation of the respondents toward learning is clear and is reinforced by a number of areas of the questionnaire. The respondents just as clearly do not believe that grades are important in securing employment after graduation, with anywhere from one-half to nearly three-quarters of the respondents indicating that did not feel that grades in any curricular area were important in this context. This suggests a need to begin to identify how to better integrate the grading process, and by extension, the entire evaluative process, into the teaching-learning experience.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The focus of this Report is that grades and the grading process are a part of the larger teaching-learning process, and that grades cannot be seen or understood in isolation from that larger process. Therefore, the committee recommends that the faculty of the College, with the necessary support of the administration of the College, begin to explore those issues and themes that are identified in this Report, and to begin the process of bringing them to some resolution.

2. In recognition of the finding that most of the respondents to the questionnaire are learning-oriented, i.e., grades should be perceived as a part of the teaching-learning process, it would be beneficial to both faculty and students for further research to determine if that orientation is representative of the faculty as a whole, and, just as important, to determine the predominant orientation of subgroups of students in the College. (Note: this is based on the research that suggests that one factor contributing to learning is a match between the orientation of the faculty and the students, as well as those studies that demonstrate the learning orientation of students is highly dependent on the maturational level and life experiences of the student.) The results of that research could contribute greatly to a better understanding and resolution of the issue of "grade inflation."

3. The College should make available for new faculty and TA's a seminar or series of seminars on teaching. This could be open as well for all faculty who wish to participate.

4. While not directly an issue addressed by this committee, the members agreed that it would appear wise to offer within our doctoral program a course on teaching-learning in social work for those students who intend to make teaching their career.

5. The committee recommends that the College initiate a series of Quarterly Faculty Forums to present the Teaching-Learning philosophy of one or several faculty at each forum. Those faculty willing to present their philosophies will be able to substitute this responsibility as a portion of their workload, e.g., teaching one course less during the quarter, or having this assignment considered as meeting the research requirement, in order to have the time necessary to develop the presentation. It should be noted that the College of Social Work is fortunate in having two individuals who have received University Distinguished Teaching awards, and who could serve as valuable resources in addressing the topics of this Report. While presentations will be individual, the findings of the questionnaire suggest a number of areas which might be addressed, and could provide a basis for collegial interchange. Included in the appendix are statements developed by Dr. Eldridge for the committee which could provide such basis.

6. The committee is highly cognizant of the fact that there are many concerns and issues within the College that tend to take the attention of faculty, or, in some instances, to repel faculty from the activities of the College. At the same time, our individual professional interests, e.g., research, tend to pull us in diverse directions. This is in addition to the regular and necessary demands placed on everyone. On the other hand, the enterprise of teaching and learning is what makes us a community. The curriculum in its entirety and in its parts is what binds us together. The committee recommends that the faculty

re-direct some of the truly impressive intellectual resource that is the faculty, toward the resolution of this most profound and, for an academic community, fundamental issue.

APPENDIX

Literature Review

Questionnaire

Implications Concerning Grading Issues

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bill Martin
Doctoral Student

Milton, Pollio, and Eison (1986) in a National Grade Survey explored attitudes toward grades of over six thousand people: faculty, students, parents, and business representatives. They found that "all groups agreed on the importance of emphasizing the chief purpose of grades--to let students know how much and how well they have learned, not simply how well they have prepared for a test (sometimes at the expense of learning)" (p.xvi)

- There is little overlap in the kinds of information business recruiters and faculty members view as most important in selecting college graduates. (p.95)

- Both groups agree that grade inflation should be controlled, and both agree on the chief causative factors: the declining quality of precollege education, and the point that college and university faculty expect less of students. (p.95)

- For business recruiters well over three fourths of the companies reported grades to be of moderate to great importance for initial hiring. The vast majority of companies were found not to have conducted any studies about the predictive validity of grades. (p.95)

- 38% of the faculty reported that students should emphasize grades more; 42% of the faculty reported that students should emphasize grades less.

- 52% of the faculty reported that they had given a student a final course grade on the basis of some information or criterion not used for the remainder of the class; 48% of the faculty reported that they had never done so.

- 37% of the faculty reported believing that there was a high or very high relationship between the grades a college student receives and how s/he will do in life; 10% of the faculty felt the relationship was slight or very slight.

- 44% of the faculty reported that the fact that they assign grades has little or some influence on their relationship with students; 24% of the faulty described the degree of influence as strong or very strong.

The authors make five recommendations which they contend "if implemented properly, will improve college learning."

1. We must clarify what we want grades to do: Are they to serve the purpose of promoting learning and teaching, or are they to serve the purpose of rank ordering students? If we select the former purpose, test and grades are in the service to teaching and leaning. If we select the latter, tests and grades will continue as exercises in ranking, not teaching and learning.

2. Let us improve the quality of classroom tests so that whatever purpose tests and grades serve for us will be fairly and properly implemented. Test questions should be written more clearly than many are and should seek more than isolated factual information.

3. We must supply considerable information to students (far more than the letter symbol) about their performance on course tests and other academic exercises.

4. Let us use less, rather than more, differentiated grading systems and let us not reify grades or any other metric used to describe academic performance. The perspective should be that grades are not more precise than the techniques used to create them; as it now stands, such techniques are relatively less precise than the metrics by which they are quantified.

5. Let us abolish the GPA; it is a useless and misleading statistic for either teaching or research purposes. If administrators or researchers feel the need for an overall summary of student college learning, we should redesign transcripts so they show patterns in a student's academic career; let us never condone or condemn a student on the basis of a single number, artificially significant to two decimal places. (pp. 202-203)

- Studied the rise and fall of SAT scores and GPAs from 1950-1980. Found that when one goes up, the other goes down.

Milton, Pollio and Eison (1988) argued that "GPAS are poor predictors of performance because (1) GPA is a flawed statistic that is composed of grades from easy and hard classes, from examinations that test both simple and complex thought processes, and from poorly designed and artfully designed tests; (2) GPAs are derived idiosyncratically and are only meaningful in the specific context in which they are earned; (3) GPAs are calculated in a different manner at different schools; and (4) the occurrence of cheating is not accounted for in the measurement process" (p.43). They further maintain that "tests and grades . . . have a deleterious effect on studying and learning. The necessity to maintain the GPA causes students to drop courses and to choose study methods based on the structure of the test. Also, faculty members tend to ask questions about the lest important material in order to produce grades that differentiate students into grade categories" (P. 44-45).

Goldman, Schmidt, Hewitt and Fisher (1974) conducted an investigation of nearly 2000 undergraduate students enrolled at the University of California, Riverside, during the 1972-73 academic year. The investigation was concerned with grading standards in different major fields, and adaptation-level theory was hypothesized as a model for describing grading behavior of instructors. Adaptation theory would predict that grading standards are determined, in part, by the ability level of the student population providing the "background stimuli" for the academic ability of the student begin assessed.

- The regression of GPA on HSGPA, SATV and SATM were computed for students in each of 12 major fields. This information was used to project hypothetical GPAs if students were to major in fields other than their own.

- The results seemed to support the adaptation-level explanation of college grading practices at low and middle ability levels. For middle and low ability students those fields with lowest ability students adopt lowest grading standards (social sciences and humanities). Similarly, high grading standards are adopted by fields with high ability students (science fields). In general, the expected performance of low ability students is much lower in science fields than in social science or humanity fields.

Barnes (1984) describes a phenomenon encountered at an English university in assigning grades to American exchange students. These students, having become obsessed with the need to achieve good grades through acculturation in the American university, attempted to persuade staff at the English university to make personal concessions in their evaluation and grading of students' work on the basis of generosity to foreign students. These concessions were requested on moral rather than academic grounds and a moral contract was implied. An opportunity developed to exploit the mismatch between the two institutions with regards to academic programs and academic procedures.

McLaughlin (1987) suggests an ethical dilemma faced by teachers in the area of grading students' work. He raises questions such as: Is it just to establish grading procedures based on what is best for the majority of students in the class, or should unequals be treated unequally? Does each teacher having his/her own approach to learning enhance the learning of students, or does it lead to playing the grading game? Is the system of education flexible enough to place students in classes where the style of the teacher best supports the student's learning? Do some students fail in one teacher's class while that student would be passing in an other teacher's classroom?

Pollio, Humphreys and Milton (1989) suggest that college grade meaning is composed of four major components: social meaning, trait meaning, personal meaning, and procedural meaning. "When we use grades for postcollege purposes, such as selection, we are concerned with their (presumed) ability to define student strengths and weaknesses (trait meaning) and/or to provide information to graduate schools or business (social meaning). We scarcely, if ever, are concerned with what they might mean to the student receiving them (personal meaning) and are even less concerned with the idiosyncratic ways they are produced (operational meaning)" (p.90).

- students who see only an A as a good grade tend to perform better than students who view a B or C as a respectable or even a good grade.

- a college grade is a unideminsional symbol having multidimensional meanings.

Lunneborg (1977) found that faculty members use a number of different procedures in arriving at specific grades for students including some combination of classroom tests, term papers, class participation, student effort, homework assignments, special reports, impressionistic evaluations of enthusiasm, numbers of absences, and so on. While it is always possible to provide an exact procedural definition for any given class, it is clear that the pattern is idiosyncratic to individual instructors and, perhaps, to individual large section courses, such as introductory courses.

Strenta and Elliott (1987) found that the differential grading standards describe by Goldman and Widawski (1976) existed in the same magnitude and in roughly the same order a decade later in a different kind of institution.

- Major fields that attract as majors students who score higher on SATs employ stricter grading standards.

- These differential grading standards serve to attenuate the correlation between Sat scores and grades.

- The general verbal and quantitative reasoning abilities represented by SAT scores are about as valid in one major field as in another as indicators of ability.

* explanation: Disciplines like the physical sciences demand for success considerable preparation and high degrees of mastery at each level of a hierarchical series of courses; less able or less well-prepared students are likely to be either not attracted to them or driven from them. Subjects like engineering, the premedical sciences, and, in recent times, economics and business are seen as conduits to successful careers. They attract able and ambitious students willing to compete for success in them, again with the effect of driving away or not attracting some less able and ambitious students.

- Any given degree of talent will look less outstanding in the fields in which the more talented have congregated than in fields in which the less talented have gathered, so there will be differential grading of the same students taking courses in different fields, much as there is differential grading of equal-ability students in different institutions. Thus, the factors that attract more talented students result in their being graded harder. (p. 290).

Elliott and Strenta (1988) did a correlational analysis of the above data and found that the preadmission indicators showed a stronger positive relationship to GPAs that were adjusted for the index of differential grading standards than the raw GPAs in all but three comparisons. Loss in predictive ability over the four years of college was also smaller when the GPAs were adjusted than for raw GPAs. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores were the worst predictor of raw GPA for the black students, but use of adjusted GPA substantially improved the prediction. The prediction of adjusted grades for black students showed no erosion over the four years of college. Adjustment also reduced the underprediction of grades for women.

Hanford (1985) pointed out the usefulness of standardized tests, compared with local rank-in-class data, for helping students and their guidance counselors channel their applications to appropriately challenging colleges and universities.

Goldman and Hewitt (1975) talk about adaptation level as it relates to college grading. Adaptation level concerns the anchoring effects of background stimuli upon the perception of focal stimuli. In relation to college grading "when the performance of the individual student is considered as a focal stimulus, the performance of all other students in the class can be considered as background stimuli against which the individual's performance is judged. Thus, grading standards would be partly determined by the ability level of the student population" (p.149). The authors believe that their results demonstrated the existence of different grading standards in different major fields, consistent with an adaptation level hypothesis.

Summerville, Ridley and Maris (1988) found that "typically, education and the fine and applied arts granted higher grades than did the physical sciences, mathematics, and the social sciences. Of the colleges that reported five or more years data, about as many reported a decline in average grades over the years as reported an increase" (p.21).

McMillan (1988) argued that evaluation of learning is most effective when designed and implemented by individual faculty members in their own classes.

Zangenehzadeh (1988) looked at course evaluation questionnaires completed by students in 77 undergraduate courses in the School of Management at Widener University. He found that the overall quality of the course was predicted by expected grade, overall rating of the instructor, and ratings of the instructor's organization, presentation, and knowledge of the subject matter. Grade expectations were predicted by student GPA and ratings of the quality of the course, course difficulty, and instructor. When the ratings of the instructors were adjusted for the difference between the average expected grade in the course and the overall GPA for the school as a whole, ratings changed in almost all cases, some becoming more positive and some becoming more negative.

Cohen (1989) examined ratings of 13 clinical courses by students at the University of Texas Dental School. In addition the students indicated their expected grade for the course and assessed how much they learned in each course. A strong relationship was found between the students' assessment of learning in each of the courses and course ratings. In general when the students felt they learned more in a course, that course was more favorably rated. Neither expected nor actual course grades were related to course evaluations.

Boud and Falchikov (1989) focused on one aspect of student self-assessment: the comparison of student-generated marks with those generated by teachers. In the extensive literature review they conducted the following was found:

- In most studies greater number of student marks agree than disagree with staff marks.

- There is much greater chance of agreement between staff and students when a five point scale is used rather than percentages.

- "Good" students tended to underrate themselves compared to staff marks, whereas "weak" students tended to overrate themselves. The weaker the student, in terms of teacher ratings, the greater the degree of overrating.

- The trend is for students in later years of courses and graduate students to be more accurate in their ratings, or to tend towards increasing underestimation of their performance.

- There is no consistent tendency to overrate or underrate performance.

Duke (1983) found six years of grading disparities at one university with reliable grading differences found at all levels examined (college, discipline, instructor). The author suggests reforms to increase the validity of grading: Grade Centile Averages based on performance in selected courses are proposed to determine honor and rank status, while simplified traditional grading is suggested to determine discipline status and whether or not course credit will be earned. Envisioned for the future would be a more valid index of academic achievement and higher correlations between the new index and other measures of aptitude and/or achievement.

Johnson and Beck (1988) studied the relationship between strict and lenient grading scales, SAT scores, and performance on tests administered in an undergraduate Educational 1 Psychology class. ANOVA revealed that students with relatively higher SATs obtained better tests scores than students with lower SATs and that students evaluated with the strict scale earned higher tests scores than students graded with the lenient scale. The Grading Scale X SAT interaction was also found to be significant. The lenient scale impaired the performance of students with low SAT scores but did not significantly affect the performance of students with moderate or high SAT scores. Other educational psychology students were administered the LOGO II Scale to determine why the grading scale variable had its greatest impact on the achievement of students with low SAT scores. A significant negative correlation was found, indicating that students with lower SAT scores are more grade-oriented than students with higher SAT scores.

Billingslea and Bloom (1950) arbitrarily assigned passing grades on an examination to half of the students in an advanced psychology class and failing grades to the other half. Subsequent note taking was not affected by the grades the students received.

Clark (1969) demonstrated that grades can motivate students to learn. He found that graduate students who competed for grades earned higher tests scores than students who did not.

Goldberg (1965) compared undergraduates who were graded on a midterm examination using either a strict scale, a lenient scale, or a scale based on bimodal, normal, or rectangular distributions. The five grading policies did not produce a significant difference in performance on a test administered one month later, but a secondary analysis provided some evidence that

students evaluated with the strict scale obtained higher scores on the following test than students evaluated with the lenient scale. Goldberg concluded that grading policies have a negligible effect on subsequent test performance at the college level.

Brown (1988) contributed the following insights:

- Tests can serve as useful learning tools for students by highlighting what the instructor thinks is important to learn and by providing students feedback on their performance.

- For the most powerful impact testing and instructional strategies need to emphasize critical thinking.

- Some faculty have difficulty seeing the relationship between testing and learning, and some who see the potential relationship have difficulty tying the two together in practice.

- Grading on the curve is more an ingrained tradition than an accurate reflection of student learning.

- Repeated studies have found college grades to have slight or no correlation with alumni success in later life--no matter how you define success.

- An important consideration in grading should be whether or not the students learned what you wanted them to learn, not how much they learned compared to other students.

- Ideally, students' answers in grading an essay exam should be compared to a previously outlined answer than can be used flexibly and papers should be read and graded anonymously.

Geisinger (1980) divided 165 faculty at a large Eastern state university into three groups of 65: high graders (whose mean grade assigned was above 3.04), middle-level graders (whose mean grade assigned was between 2.66 and 3.04), and low graders (whose mean grade assigned was below 2.66).

- Compared to middle-level or low graders, high graders (1) had smaller enrollments, (2) placed greater weight on class participation, (3) placed greater weight on student interest, effort, and enthusiasm, (4) place greater weight on term papers, book reports, and special projects.

- Differences in grading leniency (or difficulty) were not related to (1) total years teaching experience, (2) experience in teaching a particular course, or (3) weight placed on examination and quizzes.

Geisinger and Rabinowitz (1982) developed a Faculty Orientation Toward Grading Inventory (FOG) containing scales to measure the following frames of reference:

- Criterion - referenced orientation to grading (the extent to which a student has met the requirements of a course should determine his grade)

- Norm-referenced orientation to grading (grades in a course should represent a rough ranking of the students in that course)

- Self-referenced orientation to grading (a student who works harder than s/he ever has before should receive an "A" regardless of his/her overall performance in the course)

- Overall evaluation of grading in higher education scale (grades are necessary in our educational system)

*Faculty scoring high on the norm-referenced scale were generally low graders; faculty scoring high on the self-referenced scale generally awarded higher grades.

*Faculty grade orientations were related to the types of assessment procedures they used (e.g., faculty using examinations and quizzes most frequently tend to have higher norm-referenced attitudes and lower self-referenced attitudes).

Geisinger, Wilson and Naumann (1980) used the FOG inventory to compare faculty teaching at three different types of institutions: (1) a large state university, (2) a small, private, four-year college, and (3) an urban community college. Findings include:

- University faculty were more norm-referenced than the other two groups.

- Community college faculty strongly espoused the self-referenced perspective.

- Faculty at the different types of institutions did not differ significantly on the criterion-referenced scale.

* Some questions to be considered in future research include:

- Do faculty who differ in learning and grade orientations evaluate students using different types of tests, assignments or criteria?

- Is the distribution of grades awarded by faculty related systematically to their learning and grade orientations?

- Are the things said and done on the first day of class related to faculty orientations toward grades and learning?

Hudson (1981) presents a procedure referred to as a "sequential criterion-referenced educational evaluation" or SCREE system that was initially developed to help students overcome high anxiety often associated with the study of research and statistics in a school of social work.

- based entirely on (1) developing a formal test that covers the content of an entire course or unit of instruction, and (2) having each student take the same test once every two weeks over the grading period.

- the test asks the students to report their judgment as to whether they have mastered the content or the skill represented by the items on the test.

- the student is asked to state for each item, "Yes, I know the correct answer" or No, I do not know the correct answer."

- the procedure guides the learning of material.

Corcoran (1985) discusses the use of the SCREE system in social work education. He reports a pilot study which examines the system's reliability and validity. The results support the utility of this repeated assessment with the following limits:

- The SCREE is not used to assign course grades and consumes valuable course time.

- To write a SCREE item the instructor must have a clear and concise notion of what the student should learn in the course.

Zirkel (1990) discussed the results of a federal appellate court decision regarding grades and academic freedom.

- The court recognized that academic freedom is "a special concern of the First Amendment" that provides the college or university with protection from governmental interference (including protection in the supervision and evaluation of nontenure faculty) and also provides the individual faculty member at a public college or university with protection from institutional interference (in certain circumstances).

- These circumstances include grading "because the assignment of a letter grade is a symbolic communication intended to send a specific message to the student".

- Limits of the above decision include: (1) The academic freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment applies only at public institutions, and (2) In public institutions of higher learning individual faculty members have won in less than 15% of the cases in which their First Amendment academic freedom claim has reached a conclusive court judgment.

Starke and Bear (1988) analyzed 65 questionnaires from a random sample of four-year colleges.

- Ninety-one percent of the colleges grade their students on an ABCDF system.

- Fifty-one percent use +/- modifiers in addition to the ABCDF landmarks. This appears to be a national tarend.

- A or A+ was the grade most often awarded at 34% of the institutions in spring 1986. At an additional 56% the modal grade was B or B+.

- There seems to be a trend away from nonpunitive grading, the practice of awarding no credit instead of an F.

Groos and Butler (1975) reported that most educators agree on a number of important needs fulfilled by grading:

- It motivates students.

- It provides feedback to the students and their instructors about the quality of the students' work.

- It allows institutions to make discriminations about students' performance.

Dressel (1983) has a more negative opinion of grading, stating a grade is "an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material" (p. 12).

Hanna and Cashin (1988) critique the two prototype grading systems in college grading.

- An important consequence of the size, openness and lack of incisiveness description that characterizes most college level test domains is an uncontrolled test item difficulty.

- Raw scores and percent scores are not only functions of student achievement, but are also artifacts of test difficulty. For this reason advance information concerning "absolute standards" such as, "you must average at least 86% in this class to earn a B" creates an illusion of informative clarity; it really tells nothing.

- The only method of achieving norm referencing of which most instructors are aware-grading on a class curve-is ordinarily unsatisfactory because it introduces instability arising from small samples.

- Class-curve grading forces students to compete for grades, despite the fact that learning is not inherently competitive.

- Grading on a class curve does not encourage group study or cooperative learning: instead, it encourages isolation and exclusion.

These concerns lead to the following criteria for judging college grading systems:

(1) A sensible system of college grading must be referenced to some relevant reference group of other people.

(2) Sound grading systems must also be referenced to stable groups large enough to avoid marked group-to-group fluctuation. Similarly, grades should reflect section-to-section oddities in dispersion.

(3) The reference group should be external to the section being graded to avoid the psychological evils of a fixed-sum game.

(4) The grading system should provide a sense of efficacy. Students should know that if the achievement is unusually high (or low) in their section, the grade distribution will reflect this status.

(5) The marking and reporting system should be defined and as interpretable as possible. The definition of grades should also be consistent from instructor to instructor and from section to section.

The authors advocate for an anchor measure, a device with which one can judge or "take bearings" of the status of a class.

- To provide anchorage a variable need have only one attribute: it must correlate with performance in the course being graded. The greater the correlation, the better.

- Thus, common exams across sections would provide stronger anchoring than would prior GPAs.

- A variety of anchor measures can be used to achieve meaningful grading in varied contexts without intruding into instructors' record-keeping practices.

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COLLEGE OF SOCIAL WORK
TASK FORCE ON GRADING

QUESTIONNAIRE

The Task Force on Grading requests that you complete the following to assist us in our work. Since the faculty is a relatively small group, it is most important that each member of the full-time, regular faculty complete a questionnaire. The results will be shared with all members of the faculty, and the Task Force plans to make a final report to the faculty no later than June, 1991.

PLEASE RETURN YOUR COMPLETED QUESTIONNAIRE NO LATER THAN FEBRUARY 15, 1991 TO STANLEY BLOSTEIN, CHAIR, TASK FORCE ON GRADING. THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP.

1. Please indicate the total number of years you have taught, full-time at all institutions including OSU:

   _____

2. Please indicate your faculty rank:

   _____

3. Please indicate your gender:

   Female _____ Male _____

4. Please indicate your age:

   _____

5. Please indicate if you are tenured at OSU as of 1990-91:

   Yes _____ No _____

   If no, are you in a tenure-track position?

   Yes _____ No _____

6. Please place a circle around the programs in which you teach:

   undergraduate master's doctoral

7. Please check those curriculum areas in which you teach:
   - _____ Practice/Undergrad
   - _____ Practice/MSW 1st year
   - _____ Practice/MSW 2nd year
   - _____ Specialization/Clinical
   - _____ Specialization/Social Administration
   - _____ Policy
   - _____ Human Behavior and the Social Environment
   - _____ Research
   - _____ Field Practicum

I. GENERAL

The following are some general statements regarding grades and grading practices in courses in which letter and numerical grades are assigned. Please indicate for each statement, whether you strongly agree, agree, are undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree.

	SA	A	U	D	SD
1. There is "grade inflation" in general at OSU.					
2. There is "grade inflation" in the College of Social Work.					
3. Faculty patterns in assigning grades are a consideration in the awarding of tenure, promotion, and salary decisions.					
4. The reputation a faculty member has in regard to grading directly effects the way students evaluate that faculty member.					
5. Grades received by students in each of the following curriculum areas are important in obtaining employment after graduation:					
Research					
Human Behavior					
Practicum/Undergrad					
Practicum/1st year					
Practicum/2nd year					
Policy/Foundation					
Practice/Foundation					
Practice/Specialized					
Field of practice (mental health, child welfare, etc.)					
Other (Please specify):					

(Questions continued on next page)

	SA	A	U	D	SD
6. Grading policy and practices, and grades assigned in a class should be the <u>exclusive</u> responsibility of the faculty member assigned to teach that class, within the rules established by the University.					
7. Grading policy and practices, and grades assigned in a class should be influenced by college, department, and collegial norms and expectations, as well as being within the rules established by the University.					

II. GRADING PRACTICES

1. As a general rule, what methods of grading do you use in determining the final grade for a student in your classes? Please indicate all that apply and the curriculum area in which you use each of the methods.

	Policy	Research	Practice	Ed.
Tests				
True/False				
Multiple choice				
Brief answer				
Essay				
Papers				
Class participation				
Homework assignments				
Student effort				
Number of absences				
Case analyses				
Student enthusiasm and attitude				
Other (Please specify):				

2. On the average how many tests, papers, and other major assignments do you usually give to a class during a quarter? (Please indicate number.)

_____ Per class

3. In determining grades for students on a major assignment, do you compare students with other students in the class?

Yes _____ No _____

4. In determining grades for students on a major assignment, do you compare the performance of the student with performance criteria you have prepared in advance?

Yes _____ No _____

5. Do you grade on the curve in any of your classes?

Yes _____ No _____

6. Please indicate which of the following statements best reflects your philosophy regarding grades: Please select only one statement.

A ____ Grades should reflect the extent to which a student has met the requirements of a course.

B ____ Grades should reflect a rough ranking of the students in that course.

C ____ Grades should reflect the effort of each individual student, regardless of the students overall performance in a course.

D ____ Grades are necessary in our educational system.

7. Do you use exactly the same grading procedure and standards for all students in your class?

Yes _____ No _____

8. If the answer to #7 is "No," what determines your use of differential procedures and standards? Please describe. If necessary, use other side of page.

_____

_____

_____

9. Which of the following terms do you believe best describes your approach to grading?

Strict Grader _____ Lenient Grader _____

10. Which of the following terms do you believe <u>your students</u> would use to describe your approach to grading?

Strict Grader _____ Lenient Grader _____

11. Please give two or three words or phrases that you believe describe you <u>as a teacher</u>.

_____

_____

_____

12. Please indicate the importance you assign each of the following <u>purposes</u> for grading:

Purposes for Grading	No Importance	Little Importance	Somewhat Important	Important	Great Importance
A. To provide a direct learning experience for the student.					
B. To contribute to student motivation to learn.					
C. To establish where the student is in relation to other students in the class.					
D. To provide feedback to the student regarding what the faculty member considers is important to learn.					
E. To provide feedback to the student regarding what the student as an individual has learned, regardless of overall class performance.					
F. To reward desired performance or punish negative performance.					
G. To provide a stimulus for student-teacher dialogue on student performance.					
H. Other (Please specify):					
_____					
_____					
_____					

13. For those purposes in question #12 you indicated were of Great Importance, please describe how you put them into operation in your class. Please indicate letter of purpose, i.e., "A," "B."

14. Please describe what you consider some of the most important ethical issues or problems that you face in regard to grading. Please be as specific as possible.

III. ORIENTATION TOWARD LEARNING AND GRADES

The following is an instrument* designed to measure faculty orientations toward learning and toward grades. Please read each statement carefully, and indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each item using the following scale:

SD - strongly disagree
D - disagree
U - undecided
A - agree
SA - strongly agree

	SD	D	U	A	SA
1. Without regularly scheduled exams most students would not learn the material I present.					
2. I think students should be encouraged to collaborate rather than compete.					
3. I think college grades are good predictors of success in later life.					
4. Students' concern about grades often interferes with learning in my classroom.					
5. I think it useful to use grades as incentives to increase student performance.					
6. I wish my colleagues across the campus were tougher graders.					
7. I don't mind if students enroll in my classes under the "pass/fail" or "audit" options.					
8. I think my colleagues across campus place too much emphasis on using grades to motivate students.					
9. I worry about colleagues who are giving an ever increasing number of A's and B's.					
10. I would prefer teaching a course in which no grades were given than a typical graded course.					

*Elson, Jim and Fred Janzow. "Understanding Faculty Orientations Towards Learning and Grades," Center for Teaching and Learning. Southeast Missouri State University, (undated).

Please read each of the following statements carefully. Using the following rating scale, indicate how frequently your behavior coincides with the action described:

1 - never 2 - seldom 3 - sometimes 4 - often 5 - always

	1	2	3	4	5
11. I set grading standards that are designed primarily to challenge the brightest students in my classes.					
12. I emphasize in my conversations with students the importance of studying to obtain "good grades."					
13. I allow students the opportunity to choose among alternative assignments as a way to enhance motivation.					
14. I encourage students to raise questions in class that are topic-related but which also go beyond the scope of the tests which I prepare.					
15. I am willing to make exceptions to stated grading criteria when unusual circumstances arise.					
16. I design course assignments that encourage students to read outside of my discipline.					
17. I orient my teaching style (e.g., content, pace, difficulty level) to satisfy the needs of upper level students (and hope that the others can keep up).					
18. I encourage students to focus primarily on their studies and to limit their participation in extracurricular activities which might jeopardize their GPA.					
19. I tell students that competition for grades prepares them for the competitive nature of life.					
20. I reward student improvement and growth by weighing the students' progress in my grading system.					

IV. COMMENTS. Please give us any further comments on grades and grading you might have.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP. PLEASE RETURN TO STAN BLOCKLIN BY February 15, 1991.

The Ohio State University
College of Social Work

Implications Concerning
Grading Issues

1. Grade Inflation

In question #2, with its obvious bias toward presumed college inflation, there are several important considerations to keep in mind as this very clearly "directional" preference is noted. One major point about views of inflation is that grade outcomes are necessarily assumed to be inflated beyond some focal point of demarcation, which in turn is also assumed to represent some evaluative standard related to learning outcome. Inflation might be assumed to extend beyond some domain of indexed "averaged or expected competencies," but this "mediated standard" is a number or level of competency which does not necessarily ground the relevancy of degree of variation of grade outcomes beyond its hypothetical point of baseline consideration; and the assumption of any average beyond which grades have "run away," also keep the more central question of what learning competency is anyway--whether viewed from some hypothetical middle or some widely variant and deviant inflated or deflated external boundary or apogee.

The assumption of a fictive standard of average or mean competencies against which inflationary trends are evaluated may lead to dangerously erroneous conclusions of insufficient student competency because of extraordinarily high measurement outcomes, partly because this "liberal" orientation raises serious philosophic questions of comparative faculty-student competencies which preponderant percentages of students

appear to register in the more superordinate ranges of outcomes, and also assumes a possibly spurious regressive mentality that suggests students, because they are students, can only be learning normally if they tend toward more moderate means grade point averages, and that learning in the ultimate ranges must, ipso facto, not be true or honest learning. In this regard, although grades are viewed holistically to appear to represent normal curves of population demography representing standardized achievement criteria relative to learning objectives the subjectivity and high variability of faculty decision-making about grades and associated achieved competencies, would necessarily raise serious questions about the truth of outcome averages, when the input function of faculty selective perception and bias might suggest some collusive factor based on the grading categories themselves as prejudged outcome--rather than more honest allowance of student variational freedom to demonstrate competencies, after which grades are assigned. The obviously preferential similarity of faculty attitude may, therefore, represent cultural and group bias about grade options available to students, decided prior to the actual achievement of grades. Students with highly inflated grades may be either competent or incompetent, but this decision needs to consider some measure of student-relevant baseline, and must have some correction factor for faculty prejudice, before it can be assigned any implicatory meaning.

The clearly indicative opinion of college grade inflation can be easily misconstrued to suggest inadequate levels of learning outcome relative to a presumed hypothetical standard of "average competencies" indicated by a more moderate mean and median of grade result. Unfortunately, assigned grade represents a potentially volatile

index of variable instructor selectivity and bias which is not necessarily related to either amount of "objectified" learning outcomes achieved, or the overall potency or value of any outcome result within a range of possible phenomena to be learned.

Inflated college grades relative to more moderate university wide averages, for example given differential "significances" of learning objectives that represent various dimensions of bodies of knowledge, renders little useful information about some aspect of "efficacy" of knowledge or skill gained. For example, faculty in the college may consciously or unconsciously grade inordinately high as a reactive factor relative to their apriori selection of more difficult learning criteria or because of the conceptual difficulty of learning social science concepts and methodologies, wherein students who learn moderate amounts of material which is very difficult, or actually perform better on harder competencies may achieve grades that cannot be compared to other university averages--and faculty may grade particularly high as a true reflection of very satisfactory student learning or as a reward for student struggles and possibly very competent learning of difficult material. Particularly high grades of course, may represent non-learning of either easy or difficult material, but it is premature to assume direct variation or correlation between grades, criteria, student capacity, and faculty decision-making modes wherein some inversions of association may certainly be possible.

One very important issue in the above context is the nature of faculty decision-making in the selection of quality, comprehensiveness, difficulty, etc. of learning goals within the parametric influences of an inflated normative system, and also the extent to which longitudinal student development is adversely or beneficially affected by either

resultant high grades of a consistent pattern, or self-awareness (maybe a collective consciousness influences this outcome) of "easy" grading relative to either easy material or inversely programmed difficult material. This suggests a developmental and interactive dialogue between numeric manifestation of grades, and antecedent or consequent learning effort, retention, or selection of incrementally more difficult material in a reactive educational modality.

Decisions by faculty, obviously, to avoid grade de-escalation, if inflation truly exists, represents an interesting interpretive dilemma because of concerns of faculty intimidation at actual consequences or presumed consequences of grade assignment deviation relative to relationships with administration, colleagues or students. Complicity in collective maintenance of exaggerated evaluative outcomes suggests considerable broad-based faculty "learning" of accepted practices, but patterns of consistency in minimal standard deviations from grade means also raises questions of the extent of faculty communication about very clear patterns of its own behavior.

Obviously these are potential "payoff" contingencies operating within any college where inflative demeanors exist, which may represent a more significant "process," rather than "content" issue. The extensiveness and longitudinal stability of this alleged inflational pattern may also represent a collaborative reaction or opinion about nature of student constituents, a professional confirmation of pro-person and humanitarian approaches to delivery of academic services, or a negative acting out wherein negative views of students or of self (faculty) may be compensated for through very positive public manifestation of "satisfaction" (through high grades) with social work students.

The philosophic, humanitarian and ethical, as well as methodological validity concerns should not be interpreted as necessarily correlated with actual learning competency--all of which may have little, no, or inverse associational linkages to effectiveness of social service inputs after graduation, which in turn has an uncertain connection to individual or nomothetic categories of client outcome in short or extended time and life quality references.

2. Grades and Employment

A second general domain of concern is the value placed by faculty, students, or employers on grades relative to employment selection, and as a projective index of potential work competence. As noted in question #5, there is little definitive belief, collectively in the "importance" of grades relative to post-graduate employment. One important dimension of this data pattern questions the value of any performance differentiation within boundaried curricular content areas, when parallel discriminative judgment is perceived to be of little impact external to the training situation. Quality of ultimate work performance, obviously is assumed to relate to "specific" aspects of curricular segmentation. Since faculty spend considerable time and effort organizing content into "units of relevancy" related, particularly in social work to work performance "expectations," or presumptions thereof. The "holistic" view of the graduate however, may further suggest a community need for more integrated and amalgamated learning, not necessarily corresponding to traditional concepts of course or learning objective/content separation. The interaction of various subdimensions of content relative to an evolutionally mature graduate practitioner is undetermined and maybe

undeterminable, although agency non-utilization of specific educational outcomes indices (if this is correct) may suggest that current organization of curriculum into instructional units, content areas, or even whole courses, may not "relate" to the real world of work; and/or that agencies utilize some form of composite perspective of performance potential to select employable personnel which are not specifically associated with any set of currently definable differentiations of curriculum.

Graduates who retroflectively examine differentiated domains of learning may be reinforced by agency practice and norm to diminish the potency of various influential impacts of specified outcomes organized by some form of exclusionary criteria within curricula, or may more rapidly integrate constructs as practice demands this perceptual consolidation.

An overall educational institution issue, viewed across or within departmental jurisdiction, questions the rationale of separating curriculum vis-a-vis any "particularistic" criteria relative to a potential pattern of more universal application and disinterest in educational "linearity"--which may no longer accurately represent more generalist forms of knowledge base and practice behavior. Closer dialogue with social service agency supervisors would certainly be useful as an exploratory and qualitative study to help determine the effectiveness of sequenced and multi-lateralized content design in light of either integrative demands of community practice which may be hindered by current content delivery formats, or a more broadly superordinate holism which suggests more substantive overhaul of the entire arena of adult educational developmental design.

3. Comparisons of Students

As suggested in the responses to questions #3-#8, the very strong preference and practice of comparing students with one another, in light of even more preponderant emphasis on using "exactly" the same grading procedure and standards for all students, raises considerable issue with faculty decision-making rationale and criteria, in light of seemingly "objective" outcome standards that represent core content agendas as compared to the seemingly subjective dimension of each student as compared to other students, which raises questions of the validity of "objective" or "subjective" when they are employed in decisioning relative to one another. The selection of essential learning goals (facts, principles, thought processes, analytic capabilities, etc.) of course confirms the validity, internally, of the curricular content in suggesting a normative standard and empirically verifiable baseline of desirable content, which seems compromised potentially, however through the process of allowance of nonstandardized student variation (i.e. the "individuality" of "learning" and the "learner") (which is logically the only rationale of comparison for grading purposes) and, fluctuation in the learning variable relative to some objective criteria of quality. This presupposes that there is commensurate variation potential not only among grade results, but also among content to be learned, otherwise there would be no value in assessing discriminated learning achievement relative to other equally transient student characteristic factors, unless, as is often the case, grades are "curved" which necessarily implies that baseline characteristics as immutable standards of content are also compromised. If students or student personality represent some aspect of validity of what is known or learned, and

if what is to be learned is also some index of validity, it is hard to determine how fair and standardized grading can survive with such disparate baselines of "value of competency."

Using identical grading procedures on students who are compared suggests additionally that comparative associational inter-student linkages are significant for learning, yet grade outcomes are not traditionally shared between students, wherein their performance fluctuations would only have meaning ideographically relative to their single case baseline and developmental profile although certainly the comparative process may be a useful instructual tool for conducting remunerative competency-based learning although comparison "in order to," rather than "as a result of," grade assignment--is unclear as a process currently used by faculty. This process would require further study per instructor or determine grade change or improvement opportunities and profiles with this "recycling philosophy" as it does or does not reflect "standardized" grading within a "subjective" person-centered philosophy using "objectivized" learning goals.

Comparing students might be utilized, of course, as a more purely methodologic process of informal factor analysis to fine tune decisions about subjective learning outcomes, so that relativity is "averaged" across student variations where outcomes are reintroduced and content analyzed as reconstructed baselines, although this again challenges the stability of preset content objectives and standardized outcomes. Proclivity for standardization plus comparative flexibility may point to the dilemma of professional or scholastic uncertainty about factual validity of core course content, so a "leveling" process is used to progressively validate content outcomes through student (consumer)

patterns of acquisition. Using students for comparison, however, suggests an infinite regress unless quality of students is collectively improving by cohort admission patterns, so comparative analysis may be more functionally achieved through content standardization and associational averaging with post-graduate practitioners, rather than using "in-vitro" subjects.

An associated issue of more self-proclaimed "strict" graders in the college (question #9 and #10) further complicates the above problem, because of the presumed ego-integrative need to maintain this biased view of self which suggests that "grading" is a different existential domain from "content" to be acquired, as a subjective bias is introduced which confuses "who I am" (faculty) from "who the student is."

As faculty members "need" to maintain an identity as a strict, moderate or lenient grader, for example, then student "freedom to vary" along the continuum of competency achieved or grade received would seem to be "checked" and "balanced" in context of an intricate formula that takes into consideration the "difficulty of content" relative to simply grading according to course objectives achieved vs. grading or some dimension of strictness, which could already be subsumed within "strict" definition of competencies, or may possibly be applied later relative to student capacity vs. outcome goal difficulty vs. instructor identity. This is a very interesting yet cloudy issue. If a strict grader grades a competent student learning difficult material, for example, would the grade be predicted to be high or low--and would discretion (which is assumed to undergird the delineation of type of grader, e.g., strict) actually play a role at all.

Strictness of grading also may subsume an interactive and power mediated association with students which may include or exclude the nature of content, and further conjure ethical questions of behavioral manipulation as a legitimate contracted service negotiated, expected, or not expected by student consumers. The modifier of adjectival "strictness" may represent an energy or influence vector that similarly presumes student profiles to represent strict or lenient learners, wherein objective content "in the middle" represents an interesting position of stability or variation relative to teaching and learning factors as part of a broader system of influence on learning achieved and grade reception.

4. Grades as Learning Tools

In question #12 (A & B) a preference for viewing and "using" grades as learning experiences for students, and to a somewhat lesser extent as a motivational stimulus to learn, brings to light very interesting questions of competency-based education as a college model on at least an informal basis, in that developmental theories of learning suggest most generally that evaluative conflicts as represented by grades as the ratio of "ego ideal" to "real" achievement, represent "status" outcomes for learners who then re-examine antecedent processes of learning behavior to correct self or group perceived deficits in hopes of achieving more satisfactory evaluative results subsequently. In cases where grades are incrementally given in some classes, this model appears reasonable with the participation of students in conferences with the instructor, or in the context of class exercises or discussion to illustrate discrepancies in outcomes from ideal standards as learning processes are elucidated with their context. Students with consistently or even acutely high grades are presumed to be learning satisfactorily, so might conceivably be

disadvantaged in their more advanced or differentiated learning needs or opportunities if high grades are presumed to symbolize learning competency. Lower graded students should, therefore, potentially be able to achieve a greater self-awareness and rate of learning competency while more successfully high grade students will be held back in individual growth relative to their starting point, although will appear to master content which assumes, but does not necessarily comprehensively address the validity of and value of learning to learning vs. knowing or demonstrating achievement outcomes. Grades given only at the conclusion of a particular course appear to contradict the above faculty preferences unless transference across or between course content and outcome measurement models is assumed, but certainly definitive final grades only suggest little opportunity to evolve as a learner in any one course, or to achieve competence in negotiating a higher frequency of learning outcomes per course as a result of learning capability or process improvement.