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From Zero to Sixty: A Survey of College Writing Teachers' Grading Practices and the Affect of Failed Performance

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Abstract: Drawing on results from a survey distributed nationally through the WPA and WCenter listservs, we examine the affective aspect of failure in teachers' responses to student writing, aiming to pinpoint teachers' perceptions of why students fail. Overall, we posit that writing studies needs to pay closer attention to teachers' emotional responses to student failure. This article represents a step in that direction.

This study emerges from our curiosity about the link between student grades and teachers' complex emotional responses to those grades. Emotions surrounding failure (or the threat of failure) raise the question of how affect plays into grading when instructors deem any given student performance a failure. The common wisdom is that students *earn* grades. But, as studies from the field of education substantiate, the assessment of student learning is also a very emotional practice for teachers (see, for example, Hargreaves, "Emotional," "Distinction"; Steinberg). We suspect that writing instructors in postsecondary settings also experience complex emotional responses to student failure that may push them to resist assigning grades that are lower than a C. After all, grades, grading, and being evaluated have a lot to do with how we teach, and there are emotional consequences that affect everyone involved (Harris, "Talking," "Centering"). Writing studies scholars have paid increasing attention to failure in multiple contexts, including in relation to retention (Powell) and learning transfer (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak). However, like Nicole I. Caswell and Allison Carr, we believe that scholars in writing studies need to pay closer attention to the (especially emotional) impact of student failure on writing instructors' attitudes and actions toward grading. And we believe that both qualitative and quantitative research inquiries can help us do so.

Drawing on results from a survey distributed nationally through the WPA and WCenter listservs, we aim to begin tentatively examining the affective aspect of failure in teachers' assessments of student assignments and overall course performances. The survey offers a sampling of teachers' thoughts and perceptions of why students fail. We are especially interested in exploring the tension within instructors' attributions of student failure. Attribution theory (see Turner; Driscoll and Wells) deals with how much control a person believes they have over a situation, how much the cause of success or failure is a result of their own actions or circumstances beyond their control. Attribution theory can help us begin to trace connections between what Andrew Hargreaves deems teachers' "moral purpose" ("Emotional")—or what role they may have played in student failure—and the role students themselves (or even the institution) may have played in that failure. Overall, we posit that writing studies needs to continue to pay closer attention to teachers' emotional responses to student failure, and this piece represents our exploratory steps in that direction.

The Survey

Before reporting on and discussing responses to the survey, we should note that in this study we are defining failure specifically in relation to grades. We acknowledge that student failure is ultimately far more complex and plays out in varied ways that cannot be captured by a simple letter grade scale. We focus on grades here because, for better or worse, they function as currency in the triadic relationship between students, instructors, and institutions. With its traditions of process-based pedagogies, as embodied in assessment instruments such as portfolios and grading contracts, writing studies has a complicated relationship with grades as tools for evaluating student work. The survey we designed was intended to examine the role emotion plays in that complicated relationship. We offer a small

glimpse here into its results.

In October 2015, we distributed our survey consisting of 25 questions, a mixture of single choice, multiple choice, and short-answer questions. By the end of that month, 260 respondents had completed the survey. The first five questions solicited data about respondents' employment status and their experience as writing instructors. The data from these questions show that 59 percent of respondents are full-time instructors, while 41 percent are part-time; 70 percent of respondents are non-tenure-track instructors (15 percent are graduate teaching assistants), while 30 percent are tenure-track (13 percent pre-tenured and 17 percent tenured) instructors.

In two separate questions, we asked respondents how they would characterize their emotional responses to assigning failing grades for assignments and for courses at various levels, asking respondents to choose all options that applied. We offered nine options for emotional responses: disappointment, sadness, frustration, anger, joy, vindication, concern, surprise, and confusion. In an attempt to provide an element of cross-research comparison, these options are the same as those Nicole I. Caswell used in her 2011 study (like ours, including a WPA listserv survey) of teachers' expressed negative emotions while responding to their students' writing assignments (with the exception that we included "vindication" and "frustration" and omitted "disgust").

We differentiated failure in assignments (Table 1) and courses (Table 2) because we anticipated that teachers would respond to each differently, which turned out to be an accurate assumption.

Table 1. When you assign failing grades for ASSIGNMENTS, how would you characterize your emotional response(s) to those grades?

Answer	Response	Percentage
Disappointment	189	77%
Concern	186	76%
Frustration	172	70%
Sadness	89	36%
Confusion	54	22%
Surprise	39	16%
Anger	38	15%
Other	32	13%
Vindication	7	3%
Joy	1	<1%

Table 2. When you assign failing grades for COURSES, how would you characterize your emotional response(s) to those grades?

Answer	Response	Percentage
Disappointment	165	67%
Concern	151	62%
Frustration	136	56%
Sadness	131	53%

Other	46	19%
Anger	36	15%
Confusion	22	9%
Vindication	14	6%
Surprise	8	3%
Joy	1	<1%

Regarding assignment failure, three choices clearly led: disappointment (77 percent), concern (76 percent), and frustration (70 percent). The results were not so clear-cut regarding course failure, although disappointment (67 percent), concern (62 percent), and frustration (56 percent) still registered as strong responses. Additionally, 53 percent of respondents selected sadness, which had only registered at 36 percent for assignment failure.

Although the responses to assignment and course failure demonstrate considerable consistency based on the three top responses, we infer from the more pronounced emphasis on disappointment, concern, and frustration in assignment failure that teachers feel a stronger sense of hope that students who fail individual assignments will alter course to achieve a passing grade. The increased emphasis on sadness in the response to course failure suggests that teachers experience an emotional sense of loss when students fail the course. Interestingly, in our survey, only 15 percent of respondents reported feeling anger when assigning failing grades to individual assignments or to the course as a whole. In Caswell's WPA listserv survey, on the other hand, fully 60 percent of the 146 respondents self-reported negative emotion when responding to student assignments. The implications of this striking difference suggest perhaps the chasm between pedagogical performance and the assessment of that performance. When teachers feel anger at poor student performance while they are responding to an assignment, perhaps they attribute that poor performance mostly to the student. But when faced with the task of assigning a student a failing grade, perhaps teachers begin to look more inwards and toward possible self-attribution (Hargreaves's "moral purpose") factors.

Recognizing the limitations of the relatively concise list of emotional responses provided in our survey, we also invited participants to add other terms that more qualitatively characterized their emotional responses to student failure. Many respondents chose "other" and offered their responses in the next question. Although the response rate for these questions was lower than for the multiple choice questions (34 responses for assignment failure and 49 responses for course failure), these responses add a richer terminology for emotional response. Typically, respondents provided longer answers rather than individual terms, but the responses generally fell into these categories: fear, guilt, self-doubt, anxiety, relief, acceptance, resignation, remorse, and exhaustion.

For assignment failure, the dominant response was guilt (8 respondents), which is similar enough to self-doubt (2 respondents) that we think these emotional responses are roughly identical. One respondent wrote, "I feel I have failed to support the student adequately." This sentiment captures a sense among respondents that teachers bear responsibility for student failure—unsurprising since teachers invest so much time and energy into working with students. Guilt as a dominant response points back to conscientious instructors often imposing self-attribution to the role they play when students fail. Another respondent who also provided the term "guilt" immediately questioned that emotional response, asserting that guilt is "totally irrational as it isn't usually anything that is my fault, but I always think I could have done something." Teachers who feel this responsibility seem to use that feeling to spur reflection on their teaching practices; as one respondent put it, "I question what I can do to make it better."

For course failure, the dominant response was resignation (9 respondents), with a category we are calling acceptance (7 respondents) as a close second. These are remarkably similar responses with slightly different affective inflections. One respondent wrote, "[R]esignation mostly replaces surprise. For a student to fail my course, he or she must systematically elect to disregard simple assignments and routine attendance." This response represents a teacher's recognition of the limits of his or her impact, and it acknowledges the complicated contexts surrounding student failure. Another respondent offered "clarity" as a term (which we coded as acceptance), arguing that although they still experience several emotions, "the feeling of clarity is also there, because the end of the road has arrived and the outcome is clear, to everyone."

Additionally, we'd like to contrast responses of part-time and full-time instructors, results that we believe also warrant future deeper exploration. While 59 percent of the 260 respondents to our survey identified as full-time instructors and 41 percent as part-time, only 17 percent in total identified as tenured. So, 83 percent (the vast majority) identified as either non-tenure-track (70 percent) or pre-tenured tenure-track (13 percent). The implications of this status bear some speculative unpacking here (to be continued in future research).

Several survey questions suggest how and why permanent faculty differ from contingent faculty in terms of status-related factors that motivate the assigning of grades and how participants feel about it, as Tables 3 and 4 imply.

Table 3. How much do you worry that assigning failing grades to students will have an impact on your rating or standing as an instructor at your institution?

Answer	Response	Percentage
Very little	86	35%
Some	81	33%
None	51	21%
Very much	27	11%

Table 4. Regarding your rating or standing at an institution, what do you worry will result from assigning failing grades to your students? Choose all that apply.

Answer	Response	Percentage
Lower ratings on student evaluations of teaching	128	52%
Risk of scrutiny from administrators (writing program administrators, department chairs, deans, etc.)	103	42%
None at all	63	26%
Risk of loss of position through non-renewal or firing	43	18%
Other	29	12%
Risk of loss of particular course assignment	19	8%

While the results from Table 3 suggest that not all instructors worry extensively about whether assigning failing grades to students will have an impact on their rating or standing as an instructor at their institution, enough responded with "Some" (33 percent) or "Very much" (11 percent) to give pause. But we must really wonder about the permanent/contingent faculty divide when considering the results of the more fine-grained answers from Table 4, where high percentages suggest faculty who fear, to at least some degree, for the stability of their jobs. Further, several (12) of the 29 open-ended responses to the "Other" answer voiced a fear of students appealing the failed grade and of the effect such challenges would have on their employment. When it comes to factors that affect the attribution of who failed whom and why, we can't neglect the important fact that the institutional status of teachers shapes not only their working conditions but their attitudes and emotions toward assessment—whether in education (Steinberg 15) or in writing studies (see, for example, Welch and Scott).

Final Thoughts

While surveys are excellent instruments for capturing respondents' perceptions and input, we acknowledge that our survey is the first step in a larger research project, in part because the survey we distributed provided relatively crude

data on a question that will benefit from more nuanced and sustained approaches, such as interviews with instructors and large-scale corpus analysis of teacher comments on assignments. Nevertheless, our survey offers some compelling directions for future research on instructors' emotional responses to grading. For example, an aspect of the survey we did not have enough space to cover here is the fact that the vast majority of respondents worry that assigning failing grades to students will have a direct and negative impact on their students' success in college (38 percent responding "Very much" and 51 percent responding "Some"). The forces that affect the attribution and affect of failed performance—whether emanating from the instructor, student, and/or institution—are worth further exploration.

All in all, when we ask questions about the affect of failed performance, we engage issues of human agency and identity. All teachers and administrators of writing (all human beings, really) sooner or later are forced to ask the heavy questions: Who failed whom, and why? Teacher responses to the survey (including questions we did not have space to cover here but plan to in future projects) make it clear that the affect of failed performance is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that affects every aspect of the teaching, learning, and assessment of writing. It is an issue scholar-teachers need to consider carefully, thoughtfully, and frequently.

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