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## Imagining College Without Grades

SEATTLE — Is it time to move beyond grades? That was the question considered — largely in the affirmative — at a workshop Wednesday at the annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities. It may seem counterintuitive to think that this is a time for colleges to consider giving up grades. Many college administrators feel that accreditors are breathing down their necks, demanding more and more evidence of student learning. With the economy falling apart, parents want to be assured that their children are learning something. And the vast majority of colleges award grades.



But when organizers of the workshop had audience members describe their experiences with grading, the closest they came to a fan was an associate provost who admitted that he saw grade inflation as completely out of control and said that for more students at his and similar institutions, the grade-point average range is around 3.4 to 3.8. It seemed that everyone else in the room had been motivated to attend by their sense that the system isn't working: Other academic administrators who said grades had become meaningless. A registrar who said that she was struggling to understand the apparent inconsistencies in faculty members' grades. A professor who tells his students that "grades are the death of composition." Another said: "Grades create a facade of coherence."

Many said they assumed that it was politically impossible to eliminate grades. But they heard from educators at colleges that have done so and survived to tell the tale. And notably, they heard from colleges offering evidence that the elimination of grades — if they are replaced with narrative evaluations, rubrics, and clear learning goals — results in more accountability and better ways for a colleges to measure the success not only of students but of its academic programs.

Kathleen O'Brien, senior vice president for academic affairs at Alverno College, said she realized that it might seem like the panelists were "tilting at windmills" with their vision for moving past grades. But she said there may be an alignment of ideas taking place that could move people away from a sense that grades are inevitable. First, she noted that several of the nation's most [prestigious law schools have moved away from traditional letter grades](#), citing a sense that grades were squelching intellectual curiosity. This trend adds clout to the discussion and makes it more difficult for people to say that grades need to be maintained because professional schools value them. Second, she noted that the growing use of e-portfolios has dramatized the potential for tools other than grades to convey what students learn. Third, she noted that just about everyone views grade inflation as having destroyed the reliability of grades. Fourth, she said that with more students taking courses at multiple colleges — including colleges overseas — the idea of consistent and clear grading just doesn't reflect the mobility of students. And fifth, she noted the reactions in the room, which are typical of academic groups in that most professors and students are much more likely to complain about grading than to praise its accuracy or value. This is a case of an academic practice, she noted, that is widespread even as many people doubt its utility.

At the same time, O'Brien said that one thing holding back colleges from moving was the sense of many people that doing away with grades meant going easy on students. In fact, she said, ending grades can mean much more work for both students and faculty members. Done right, she said, eliminating grades promotes rigor.

Maribeth Clark, provost of the New College of Florida, described a system in which students must work out a contract with a faculty adviser each semester; the contract outlines which courses should be taught and how success will be measured. Professors contribute to a record of the student's success (without using grades).

Dislike of the traditional student transcript is so great that the college doesn't send them out. Students are in charge of sending out their own records when applying to graduate school.

Marie Eaton, a professor of humanities and former dean of Fairhaven College, described the evaluation system at that institution, a non-traditional liberal arts division of Western Washington University, a more standard comprehensive state university. At Fairhaven, students do not receive grades, but participate in a two-way evaluation process with professors for every course, and for their majors and degree programs. Students evaluate their own work first and then their professors follow with their own takes, and there is much discussion. Many assignments feature self-evaluation, as students complete a paper, and also write about what they learned from the process of doing the paper (or how the assignment didn't work for them).

When she was dean, Eaton said, she used to read students' concluding self-evaluations, and she said she found out more about the college's strengths and weaknesses than a review of traditional transcripts could ever have revealed.

And O'Brien detailed the very precise definitions of course outcomes used by Alverno. It's not just that professors are writing narrative evaluations about whatever they feel like saying, she said, but they are describing in detail how students meet very specific goals. She gave as an example a fifth semester chemistry course, "Spectroscopic Methods of Analysis." Faculty members have agreed on six specific outcomes for students from the course. (No. 4 is: "applies spectroscopic techniques — flourometry, atomic absorption, infrared, visible and ultraviolet spectroscopy — and wet chemical techniques with accuracy, precision, and safety.")

When faculty members are providing written, detailed analyses of multiple course objectives and are also — for majors — relating performance to larger goals for the major, so much more is taking place she said, than in a letter grade.

Some audience members — while not defending grades — raised questions about the feasibility of replacing grades with narratives. Several asked about the training that colleges provide to professors before they start producing narrative evaluations, and officials of the no-grades colleges all said that training was extensive, and that faculty members needed mentors as they started out. O'Brien said that she thinks it takes new Alverno professors three years before they are really up to speed on the system and using it effectively.

Some in the audience said that their institutions rely heavily on adjuncts, and they wondered whether their institutions would be willing to invest resources in training them.

Others said that certain populations of students really seem to want grades. Several said that first generation college students or immigrant students cared a lot about grades (or their parents cared a lot and so needed to be satisfied).

Eaton responded by saying that many students at Fairhaven are older, non-traditional students who are attracted by the college's commitment to that population, but who come to value the approach to grading. O'Brien noted that the top major at Alverno is nursing and that most students are working class or disadvantaged — and that they end up favoring the evaluation system.

Alverno gets a lot of attention for its various assessment methods, but less for its abandonment of traditional grades. But O'Brien said that the college took the issue very seriously. In response to a question, she said only one thing could get the college to issue grades — the need to get funds for a needy student. Some scholarships require an annual report with letter grades to be renewed, O'Brien said, and many Alverno students need every scholarship they can get. In these cases, O'Brien said that Alverno first tries to show the scholarship provider how much better an Alverno record is than a traditional listing of grades. Nine times out of 10, she said, that does the trick.

For the other scholarship, she said, Alverno asks the student's professors for a traditional grade, and turns them over. But as soon as the scholarship funds are awarded, she said, "we destroy the record."

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at  
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