



Remote Teaching Updates & Resources

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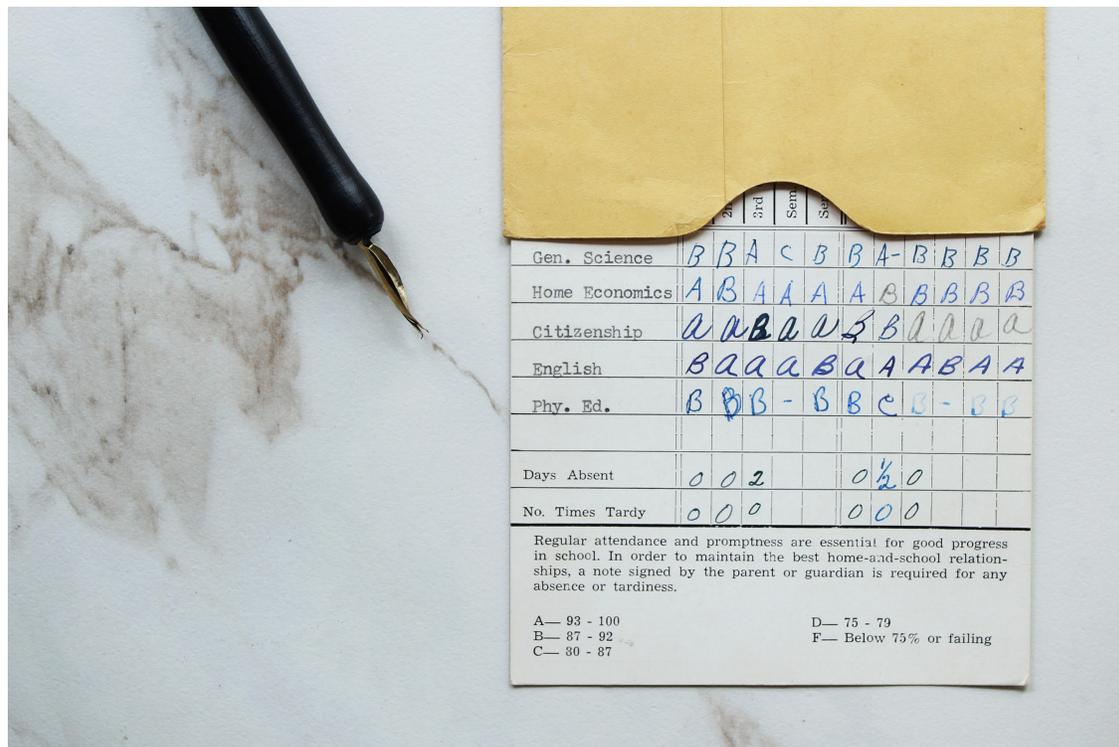
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Wed, Mar 25, 2020 at 7:00 AM



Let's Talk about Grades

By Betsy Barre on Mar 24, 2020 09:00 am



Like most of you, I have many and varied [thoughts about grades](#). Even in the best case scenario, grading is a fraught enterprise. Grading during a global pandemic is even more so.

Among the many features of grades that make them particularly tricky in this scenario, the most important is that they constitute quasi-permanent records that are used to rank and sort our students later in life. That is to say, they have real consequences for financial aid, scholarships, awards, employment, and admission into specific courses, majors, and graduate programs. There are reasonable philosophical disagreements about whether this use of grades is positive or negative, but even the greatest champions of this system will agree that it only works if an “A” in CHEM 101 in the Spring of 2020 is roughly equivalent to an “A” in CHEM 101 in the Fall of 2019.

Yet, given the unprecedented disruption we are facing this semester, it is likely

that our grades will have *widely* different meanings from those we have given in the past. Many of us have cut entire units of material from our courses. Others have replaced carefully crafted lesson plans with last-minute experiments. We may have trouble teaching as well as we normally do in a digital environment, and our students are just as likely to struggle with new modes of learning. Most importantly, many of us will be facing new stressors that make it difficult to focus on our work. One student of mine is stuck in Miami with his brother because the borders of his home country, where his parents are, have closed. Another is helping her mother run the family grocery store. Still another is sick with “something like the flu.” It is hard to imagine how the grades I give in this scenario can be meaningfully compared to those I’ve given before.

But I’m not simply worried about the integrity of my grades. I am also worried about my students who are, even in the best of times, overly anxious about their grades. We know that the mental health of high-achieving students is incredibly sensitive to academic pressure. If their anxiety about grades is normally at a 9, the disruption of the last week and the transition to a new learning modality is likely to raise it off the charts. And that’s not even considering how this intersects with anxiety brought about by the disruptions in their social lives and the clear and present danger of the virus itself.

Given these realities, I am immensely grateful that each of our schools has joined the ranks of [numerous schools](#) across the country who are making revisions to their grading policies this semester. Yet whether you are an instructor in the School of Law moving to a “Credit/No Credit” system, or an instructor in the College moving to an optional “Pass/Fail” system, there are still important pedagogical decisions to be made. How will you decide who passes/gets credit? And how will you grade those students who still opt for a letter grade?

The Pass/Fail Option

On its face, the pass/fail option seems straightforward. We could simply look at our grades at the end of the semester, check to see who has received a D or above, and give them a passing grade. No one will complain if you take this

approach, but it's worth spending at least a few moments reflecting on what it takes to "pass" your class. If you're anything like me, you spend most of your time thinking about what distinguishes an "A" student from "B" or "C" students. But in this scenario, when many more of our students will be asking us to make a binary judgment, it's worth thinking about our floor.

This is particularly important for those of us teaching courses that are part of a curricular sequence. In a pass/fail system, we're essentially certifying that students are ready to move on. What knowledge and skills must a student possess to move on to the next course in the sequence? Does your current grading system prioritize these outcomes? Could a student who hasn't mastered them pass the course? Could a student who *has* mastered them somehow fail the course (because of late penalties, poor attendance, or other "behavioral" grades)? If you answered yes to either of these, consider reworking your grading system to ensure the passing grade is nothing more (or less) than a signal of who has and has not mastered the minimum outcomes.

The Letter Grade Option

If you're teaching in the College with students like mine, it's possible up to 75% of your students will *choose* to retain the traditional grading system. The primary challenge in this scenario is that all the difficulties mentioned at the beginning of this post return. Students will be especially on edge about their grades and we will be attempting to apply a traditional grading system in a course (and context) full of disruption. We may also find ourselves operating with two distinct grading systems if we decide to alter the way we assess pass/fail students in substantial ways. So, what are we to do? How can we assess these students in a way that preserves equitable outcomes, the integrity of our grades, and our ability to extend compassion to ourselves and our students in the midst of a global crisis?

If you're feeling ambitious, you could consider a complete [redesign](#) of your [grading](#) system. If you're like the rest of us, however, a single small change can go a long way. More specifically, I encourage you to take a hard look at your grading system and eliminate everything that awards (or subtracts) points for

specific *behaviors*. In doing so, you will be left with a grading system that prioritizes the achievement of *outcomes* above all else. What would this look like in practice?

In my course, I made the following changes:

- **Attendance Policies:** I now encourage students to join us for our synchronous Zoom sessions, but no longer penalize them for not showing up.
- **Late Penalties:** I've now granted students unlimited extensions for take-home assignments. As long as they get me the work by the end of the semester, I will grade/count it.
- **Participation/Completion Grades:** I have stopped grading assignments for completion. These assignments are still collected, but not graded. I have also completely eliminated my participation grade.
- **Revisions:** Whenever possible, I'm allowing my students to revise their work.

Some educational theorists have argued we should never use grades to enforce behavior. As is hopefully clear from the description of my original course, I tend to think the judicious use of behavioral grading can be reasonable in certain contexts. But in this context, behavioral grading will muddy the waters. By emphasizing mastery instead, we can extend compassion to our students while simultaneously preserving the integrity of our grades.

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