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Why not get rid of grades?

Grades are so pervasive at all ages and stages of American education that we assume they are a natural component of learning. In fact, they are a recent invention. For most of human civilization, people learned perfectly well without letter grades. It was only when education became more democratized (a good thing) that it became simultaneously more systematized (sometimes a less good thing).

Grades and rankings emerged gradually through the 18th and 19th centuries, with Mount Holyoke College introducing the first modern letter grades in 1897. Other institutions — including Harvard and Yale, which had experimented with their own grading schemes — followed suit. And by the 1940s, the A-to-F scale became the standard: five letters carved into our schooling edifice the way four presidents are chiseled onto Mount Rushmore.

From their inception, grades were designed more for the efficiency of institutions than for the education of individuals. As student populations increased, grades were simple to calculate, easy to administer and convenient to communicate across an expanding education infrastructure [...].

But using grades as both a measure and a motivator was an inherently flawed pursuit. For starters, grades are far less consistent and reliable than their simplicity implies. A blood pressure reading will be the same in Austin as in Durham, North Carolina. But a Python coding assignment or an essay on the causes of the Spanish Civil War might receive different grades at the University of Texas than at Duke University. Ample evidence shows that grading can vary considerably from professor to professor even within a university; that some instructors aren't even consistent with themselves, assigning different marks for identical work; and that extraneous factors like penmanship and a student's attractiveness can affect grades.

More important, the letter system ran smack into Goodhart's Law, an adage named for British

economist Charles Goodhart, which holds that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases being a good measure. Grades began as a tool for assessing learning but quickly became the point of the exercise. For many students, the goal of school isn't to learn. It's to get an A. [...]

So, what's the alternative? At Hampshire College and Evergreen State College, professors provide narrative evaluations of student work rather than letter grades [...]. Reed College records grades but doesn't distribute them directly to students (provided they maintain a strong performance), instead promoting intellectual growth through detailed instructor evaluations and conferences [...].

These reforms [...] prioritize the growth of individuals over the convenience of institutions. They demand vastly more time and money [...] because they regard students as complex individuals, not interchangeable parts. They treat college students the way we treat artists, athletes and scientists: by setting high expectations, demanding rigor, and offering detailed individualized feedback and opportunities to improve.