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## Making the grade: Motivating factor or outmoded barrier to academic achievement?

Jeffrey W. Beebe  
*University of Maine*

Rhette Wieland  
*University of Maine*

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# Making the grade: Motivating factor or outmoded barrier to academic achievement?

Story by Jeff W Beebe • Photography by Rhett Wieland

Education is fast approaching the stage where students are crossing a line between a desire to succeed and the fear of failure. Although UMO tends to shrug off the pressure of grades, many students think of great concern. They gulp their meals and rush to the dorms to study, they toss in bed, losing sleep before tests—if they go to bed at all—and many sweat out every test and grading period as if waiting for the judgement. The fear of failure is well hidden in most cases, but it is there.

The harshest fact is that little beyond conjecture is being done at UMO to ease the pressure and make learning an effective preparatory experience instead of an uphill battle against outmoded standards of achievement.

"I believe in grades," says Academic Affairs Vice President James M. Clark, "both as motivation and evaluation." Dr. Clark equates grading to efficiency reports of large corporations such as IBM, or to the efficiency reports issued by the military. "You are being evaluated here just as you will be in the world of work. You have to realize this is a real life situation," he says.

However, Clark sees their greatest value as motivation. "If you remove grades entirely, the natural reaction is to go at a slower pace. Grades do serve as an extrinsic motivating factor rather than an intrinsic one. Ideally, the motivation should come from the satisfaction of learning—one should have fun learning. But some learning is just not fun and some people should have that extrinsic motivation of grades."

Clark speaks with experience about grading policies. As a professor of American Government and Politics at the University of Toulouse, France, in 1965-66, he taught in a system that does not issue periodic grades. The French rely on one yearly exam, and Clark says that until the last few weeks "Students spent their time in coffee houses, touring, and goofing off. They didn't work and they didn't learn. I flunked 40 per cent of my classes."

Last year 158 students withdrew from UMO, and this semester is keeping pace as 61 have already departed. Kris Dahlberg, assistant dean of student affairs, says that half of the withdrawals cite academic problems as the main reason. She conducts withdrawal interviews with Donna Hitchens and Vice President Arthur



Kaplan. Asked if the pressure of grading shows on students, she answers simply and firmly, "Yes, it does."

"I see some freshmen who want to withdraw after the first week of prelims because they start out getting 'C's' or 'D's' or 'F's' and they're very discouraged and at that point are afraid to try harder," she explains. Dahlberg says grades should not be used for motivation, but for positive reinforcement, or else not at all.

"If one does an honest effort and gets back a 'D' paper or an 'F' exam, it's a big risk then to try harder and do even more for the next one. Maybe some students can use an 'F' as a motivation to work harder but I see only discouragement."

The voice of this discouragement can be found, but it has to be ferreted out. In Kris Dahlberg's office, it is heard too late.

At informal meetings between Clark and students earlier this semester, the subject of grading, along with the calendar, was in the forefront of students' concerns. At a

meeting for Hilltop residents, students charged the administration does not care about grades, they have little recourse if they feel a professor put them on the wrong side of a 'B-minus C-plus' borderline.

"I was very surprised at the hostility that came out at that meeting," commented Clark later. Many students decried the administration's lack of concern for the individual grades that corner so much of the students' efforts and worries.

The difference between an A-minus and a B-plus, which can mean the difference between a grade point average of 3.0 and 2.8, can also make a difference in a student's future. For example, the Civil Service Commission in Augusta reports that a student holding a bachelor's degree and a 3.5 GPA or standing in the top tenth of his class can qualify for government employment without taking the Federal Employment Examination. Applicants passing the examination must have at least a 2.9 GPA or standing within the top third

of his class to qualify for a starting GS 7 pay scale. The difference between a GS 7 and a GS 5 is about \$1800 a year.

Cost of automobile insurance maybe lowered by academic achievement. State Farm Auto Insurance Co. offers an across-the-board discount of 25 per cent for dean's list students and AETNA offers graduated discounts, also equaling about 25 per cent, depending on the individual's classification.

Vice President of Finance and Administration John M. Blake says that he has known corporations to reimburse a student on employment for his education at rates determined by the student's GPA.

And then there is graduate school—and medical school. Any senior considering continuing his education beyond college is constantly pressured by professors and advisors to produce good grades for the watchful eyes of the graduate admissions office.

Clark says coordination with graduate schools is one of the prime administrative reasons for using a letter-grade system. According to Clark, grades represent a necessary evaluation of performance used as an admission criterion by grad schools and industry.

Associate Prof. John Horan agrees grading is "not just a university problem—since the university serves as a channel into the job market, there are

pressures from society as well. They want to know more than just whether a student passed or failed a course. They want to know his level of achievement."

But these views are disputed by Dr. Eric Duplisea, an assistant professor of education. "If an employer wants to hire someone, they seldom look to grades anymore. Grad schools have their own forms of determining interviews." Duplisea has done extensive studying of grading history and alternatives, both on his own and as a former member of the College of Education Policy Advisory Committee.

Duplisea claims that grades are not necessary. "the fact that grading is being done in no way justifies it," he says.

"You ask are there alternatives, and I say there are. The majority of professors probably haven't given it much thought and if they did they would say 'let's keep it as it exists.' But the important thing is that just about every piece of research ever done on the effects of the grading system indicates that it is undesirable."

Duplisea says the responsibility should be spread around, among students, faculty, and administration. "Everyone involved in the process should step back now and then and look at what we're doing, collectively, to see if we can't come up with some better ways of doing things."

## Here's where to get that '3.0'...

If you want to improve your grade point average, one college seems to be making life a little easier for its students. A statistical study of grades shows in 1971-72, the College of Education gave nine "A's" and "B's" for every ten grades, or a percentage of 88.5

Stay away from Business Administration however, because it has shown the lowest number of "A's" and "B's" during the last four years, with 45 per cent in 1971-72. Other figures:

	PERCENTAGE OF 'A's' AND 'B's' GIVEN				
	A & S	B. A.	ED	LSA	Tech.
1964-65	49/53	--	52/54	55/59	43/44
1965-66	50/51	39/44	60/67	55/60	42/42
1966-67	47/51	45/47	49/71	50/57	36/38
1967-68	46/51	44/44	66/73	51/59	39/44
1968-69	47/51	41/40	73/77	57/60	42/47
1969-70	50/55	38/47	83/86	60/68	44/50
1970-71	49/52	38/38	82/86	60/6	44/48
1971-72	51/56	43/47	88/89	59/63	46/52

The alternatives most favored by Duplisea and Dahlberg are a system of evaluation by written transcript, done by the professor and the student together, and another known as pass-no credit, where no penalty is given for failing a class.

"Some schools that are using written evaluations have very good academic reputations," says Dahlberg. "Some, after a period of time, will attach an equivalent letter grade but most don't use letter grades at all unless the students requests them."

This would be somewhat akin to the contract grading system, where a professor and student would get together at the beginning of a semester and agree on a grade and the amount of work needed. They hold progress discussion to insure the student's keeping pace.

The contract and written transcript grading methods entail more student-professor interaction than occurs presently which means smaller classes and more professors. The extra cost of increased faculty may be prohibitive, however, and administrative priorities are set to increase enrollment to 10,000 by 1976, making prospects dim for lower student-professor ratios.

Pass-no credit, which is also being advanced as a viable alternative, is used by Brown University, Providence R. I. in 70 per cent of its courses. The Brown *Admission Information Booklet* explains "failure is registered where it does the most good — with you, the student, and not on a piece of paper in the Registrar's files." Brown professors base evaluations on Course Performance Reports and conversations with students. "This is much more consistent with the idea of not grading," says Dahlberg.

But UMO maintains pass-fail options should be used only to encourage study outside a major field of concentration. Dahlberg says that many of the students want pass-fail's few options expanded.

"As far as grade pressures are concerned, we should look at whether there are enough pass-fail options," reasons Dahlberg. "We should question whether we need to adopt a policy about the first semester of the freshman year. Maybe we shouldn't give grades during that time." At the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge all courses

during the freshman are pass-fail, and the program is reportedly successful.

"I'm a great believer in options," continues Dahlberg. "Some students want the A-B-C-D-E system, some do not. To me it's possible to have a pluralistic model. I wouldn't want to hurt any of the



engineering students, pre med., or law students who feel they have to have grades, by going totally pass-fail.

"At the same time there are others who know they would be less intimidated, less afraid and more open to learning, and simply would enjoy learning more in a pass-no credit system."

A recently published detailed study of students at Kansas State University concluded very strongly that grading is detrimental to learning, despite the motivation and reinforcement value.

"The chief obstacle to a more scholarly approach by students to their academic studies is their belief that they must give first priority to the pursuit of grades..." *Making the Grade...The Academic Side of College Life*, said that "If we deemphasize or abolish grading systems, the calculation of grade point averages, and their use as a way of discriminating among students, we destroy a major obstacle to academic activity."

It appears that these obstacles will be present here at UMO for some time because Dahlberg feels "We're not looking at the grading problem hard enough. I'm

very aware that other schools have started looking and have altered their policies because of their studies."

According to Duplisea, a lack of concern by the administration hurts the interests of all. "What a waste — for the administration to spend man-hours

studying the grading system here, and they never talk to us about it. I don't know that they ever talk to students about it, and that's disturbing," he says.

Duplisea charges the administration "doesn't examine the whole concept of grading itself. They just look at administrative ways to change the grading and that's all."

"We're supposedly an institution of higher education — I'm worried about grades and so are many students here, so why does the administration go about making these noises about grades...and yet we've never really gotten together and looked at them."

Eric Duplisea and Kris Dahlberg agree the grading policy must be changed, but both look to the future with despair. Duplisea feels "Any kind of a move to alter the grading system would be desirable...it might not be the most ideal, but I think we can improve education."

Dahlberg agrees, remembering the students who pass through her office on their way out of college. "I'd like to see more options open to students. In a way it kind of makes sense."