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# Grading Policy and Student Retention

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## GRADING POLICY AND STUDENT RETENTION

**U**NIVERSITY administrators and faculty typically assert two policies that work at cross purposes to one another. Schools are actively resisting grade inflation trends (Durm, 1993) while at the same time seeking to retain students (Porter, 1992). While there are many reasons why students drop out of school this report is focused on one of the primary reasons, poor grades. Working collaboratively, faculty and administrators should create grading policies that identify candidates for remedial support. At the same time, sanctions that punish precisely those conscientious educators that strive to maintain rigorous academic standards while helping marginal students to achieve must be avoided. Certainly institutions and academic programs that pass students that are actually failing do disservice to all involved. While "social promotions" are inappropriate, administrators and faculty must strive to implement defensible, alternative approaches to the dilemma described above that preserve the integrity of the institution (Cole, 1996).

## DEFINITION OF A BORDERLINE STUDENT

Admissions procedures reflect more than a college's mission and academic reputation. They are carefully constructed means of allocating resources. Because institutions cannot afford to admit every applicant, screening procedures (Crocker & Algina, 1986) such as setting minimum scores on standardized tests, are used to identify prospective students with the greatest potential for academic success. As a result, college officials annually admit students who eventually persist until graduation (true positives) and exclude candidates who would not succeed had they been allowed to attend (true negatives). However, college entrance examination scores and other admittance standards vary in their *sensitivity*, the extent to which they recognize all types of academic talent, and their *specificity*, the extent to which they identify learners with particular abilities. Because no set of screening procedures is completely effective, some students prove unsuccessful

(false positives) while some excluded applicants succeed at other equivalent institutions (false negatives). Each case of mis-identification leads to institutional waste. Allowing incapable applicants to enter college means that classroom space is wasted on students who will fail or drop out. Therefore, admissions policies must be constructed to identify students most likely to succeed. According to Burstall (1995) such policies are undemocratic and discriminate against borderline students. This results in policies of neglect more often than policies that target borderline students for improved performance.

Traditionally, college officials have devised strategies for dealing with invalid admissions decisions. For example, somewhat relaxed summer school admissions standards have allowed transfer students or entering freshmen to demonstrate their qualifications. Successful students can then be admitted despite lower entrance scores by virtue of having proven the original decision to exclude to be a false negative.

False positives create more serious problems. Students in this category are affected by a variety of impediments such as low native academic ability, personality problems, lack of social maturity, and learning disorders (Gerdes & Mallinkrodt, 1994; Merces, 1993; Moores & Klas, 1989; Vallerand & Senecal, 1992). While such students may be helped by developmental education programs and services, the investment of institutional resources can be cost prohibitive. State supported institutions provide special services for poor performing students but legislatures have reduced funding for remedial course work. Escalating operating costs sometimes combined with a stagnant or diminished income stream invokes more stringent budgetary discipline.

Despite the best efforts of administrators and faculty, some proportion of the admitted students will not perform adequately. Confronted with the declining number of traditional aged students and the future loss of non-traditional aged ones, institutions must encourage students to stay in school in order to maintain current enrollment levels (Wilder, 1992). In light of the budgetary, staffing, and programmatic constraints placed on departments, administrators must frame policies that will identify and assist in the remediation of borderline students.

The term "borderline" can be used to describe a variety of cases, such as a student that is almost making a "B" or one that is at the bottom of the "A" distribution. However, defined in the context of this report on student retention the term "borderline student" refers to student performance falling between the cutoffs for "D" and "C" letter grades. In common parlance the term borderline is associated with the boundary of what is acceptable and academic policy generally reflects the view that a "C" is fully acceptable but a "D" is not. From this perspective, educators should target borderline students for special attention because they are the closest substandard performers to being fully acceptable and therefore the easiest to remediate. The following discussion will address some approaches useful in resolving this complex issue.

### **IMPENDING ACADEMIC DEMISE WARRANTS HEROIC INTERVENTION**

Maintaining an acceptable grade point average in order to keep an academic or athletic scholarship, sustain one's membership in a sorority or fraternity, or satisfy parents or other supporters that such assistance is justified, are good motivations for student achievement. But students that are at risk of being denied the opportunity for further study are indeed a special case and a major concern to university officials and to society in general. Consequently, the position advocated in this report is that they should be afforded special opportunity to work their way to the other side of the border. Three tactics, working conjointly and aimed at achieving that goal, are (1) remedial extra-credit assignments, (2) focused re-testing, and (3) integrated grading systems. The policy authorizing such activities should be made crystal clear to all students at the beginning of any course to which it

applies. Elaborate handouts or supplements to the course syllabus should describe the conditions under which such policies would take effect.

### *Remedial Extra-credit Assignments*

Implementing an intervention program for borderline students requires a precise definition of each individual learner's specific areas of weakness. Reliable measures of student performance clearly tied to stated course objectives will help to facilitate this goal. After specific shortcomings in the work of borderline students is identified, instructors should design learning activities concentrating on the deficiencies a borderline student has presented. These assignments might include focused readings, solving selected problems aimed at the student's demonstrated deficiencies (logical/mathematical concepts, language skills, group discussion skills, or a public presentation). Slater (1997) has used portfolio evaluation as an alternative to standard performance testing in order to provide what she calls a more holistic approach to estimating the actual ability of the student.

Written student reports detailing precisely the issues that caused confusion and a thorough explication of new insights and understandings are beneficial. Remedial assignments should be substantive, indeed, so as to dispel early on the notion that a borderline student has been given credit that was not earned. An appropriate student reaction to the policy might be "Well, I was thankful for the additional opportunities to earn a passing grade but it sure was a lot of work!" Implicit in that statement is a sensitivity to possible reactions of students that made a "C" on the assignment the first time around. Ideally, those students would be pleased that they had done so thereby having avoided the extensive and time-consuming remedial work.

Point allocations and the amount of final grade variance accounted for by remedial work must be carefully planned and thoughtfully scrutinized in order to function according to the avowed purposes of the grading/retention policy. Credit for assignments such as those described above can be awarded to the student directly, thereby raising that student's overall grade in the direction of, and hopefully beyond, the borderline. More conservative instructors may wish to treat the remedial assignments only as additional learning opportunities thereby permitting grade apportionments to be made only after additional re-testing. Some proponents of special retention procedures suggest that helping marginal students to succeed should involve the use of advanced students or adults as mentors or advocates (Trimble, 1996; Langenfeld & Cumming, 1996). In light of the overall purposes of the special policy for treating borderline students, both of these methods are defensible with the strongest case made for combining remedial assignments with additional testing.

### *Focused Re-testing*

Borderline students perform better in some areas than others and so it is most efficient to focus retroactive testing and learning on their special individual areas of weakness. The focused re-testing should zero in on the narrowed areas covered by the remedial work. As the instructional focus is narrowed the chance of success is enhanced thereby further increasing the odds for specific remediation and the eventual success of the overall effort.

Meyer, Cliff, and Dunne (1994) report that intervention programs tailored to the individual needs of learners succeed where traditional large scale programs do not. It is important to note that certification and licensing procedures for admission to many professions employ a similar strategy. For example, a prospective accountant or attorney may pass several sections of the CPA or bar examinations but have deficient scores on other sections. Many states allow applicants under *conditional status* to study for and re-test on those sections failed during the initial examination (AICPA, 1995). If the new sub-section

scores are acceptable, the applicant is admitted to the practice of that profession. Re-testing and remedial training has been an effective weapon for students attempting to achieve acceptable scores on standardized tests (Schneider, 1994).

The question arises as to the number of times a student should be permitted to be re-tested or how many times a test should be further narrowed to focus on the remaining learning deficiencies. The question is largely philosophical with answers depending on the general outlook of those who work in any particular instructional unit. Painting with a very broad brush, B. F. Skinner asserted that there is no room for failure in the academy. A student either has reached a given level of competence or not. Therefore, a failing effort should simply be viewed and recorded as an "incomplete". Assuming that faculty and administrators will not re-test in perpetuity, a given departmental or institutional policy must clearly state a student's options and the conditions or requirements that must be met.

### *Integrated Grading Systems*

**Norm-referenced and criterion-referenced grading.** On the basis of philosophical and methodological assumptions, grading systems tend to fall into one of two categories (for an overview, see, Ornstein, 1993). Philosophically, norm-referenced grading, "involves an explicit acknowledgment that individual performance is given meaning in comparison to the performance of others" while criterion-referenced grading, "...compares student performance to established absolute standards of performance..." (Barnes, 1997, p. 1). Methodologically, criterion-referenced grading specifies performance levels required to achieve particular grades a priori. As an example, students may be required to pass four of five mastery elements or correctly answer 90% of the items on an examination in order to receive an "A." In the case of norm-referenced grading, the a priori information is (1) information on the standard score required to achieve a particular grade or (2) information concerning the usual number of students who receive the various grades.

The information generated by each of these grading systems is important. It is vital to know whether students have successfully mastered a clearly defined content domain. It is equally important to be able to evaluate student performance in relation to more universal standards (such as the relative performance level of past and present students in a public speaking course) and to distribute grades in such a way as to communicate that performance level. These advantages are referred to as the *formative* and *summative* functions of grading (Harlen & James, 1997).

Each grading system has disadvantages (Gallagher, 1998). Norm-referenced grading can (1) create competition between students for class ranking, (2) be applied to situations where ability is not normally distributed, (3) be applied to classes which are too small to achieve normal distributions, and (4) lead to student frustration by allowing no consideration for extraordinary effort. Some of these disadvantages can be ameliorated through expanding the reference group to include past students exposed to the same content (Gallagher, 1998). Criterion-referenced grading poses other problems. For example, the grade is meaningless outside the context in which it was obtained, reliability is inherently difficult to establish (Taylor & Lee, 1995), and cut-off points between grades are determined arbitrarily and often involve meaningless distinctions between student performance levels. Hanna & Cashin (1988, p. 1) assert that criterion-referenced tests produce grades that are artifacts of item difficulty and that statements concerning performance levels needed to achieve particular grades create only the illusion of informative clarity.

**Modular aggregation of grades.** Attenuation of disadvantages and attainment of specific benefits are possible when norm-referenced and criterion-referenced grading systems are integrated. This *dynamic assessment approach* (Cole, Dale, & Thal, 1996) is a national trend, adopted by an increasing number of states and school districts (Kean, 1996; King, 1997). In fact, the approach has been applied to specific examinations such as

the certified internal auditor exam, which reflects elements of *both* systems (*Grading the CIA Examination*, 1989). Practically speaking, effective criterion-referenced tests are covertly norm-referenced in their inception (Hanna & Cashin, 1988). Moreover, when grades on a criterion-referenced test average 70 rather than the expected 80, classroom teachers are prone to "curve" the grades simply by adding points. Such an approach is based on assumptions of norm-referenced grading.

Through the modular aggregation of grades, communication instructors can achieve the dual purposes of formative and summative grading systems. Specifically, grading rigor is maintained and reliably reflects achievement differences, while borderline students are able to pass the course by demonstrating mastery of content and performance behaviors. For example, some assignments (e.g., basic speech performed using only note cards, correctly formatted outline) which are formative in nature can be criterion-referenced, allowing all motivated students to potentially achieve an "A." Other activities (e.g., examinations) are summative in nature and can appropriate grades on the basis of relative achievement levels. The successful aggregation of scores on such tests and assignments makes the attainment of extreme grades (A's, D's & F's) more difficult. The system rewards exceptional performance while rendering heroic effort to reach borderline students. Under the present view, talented students will not begrudge such efforts when they are clearly communicated, built into the framework of grading policy and when the benefits require very hard work from the borderline student in order to pass the course.

Modular aggregation of grades was recently implemented in selected sections of introductory speech communication courses at a large metropolitan community college located in the southwestern region of the United States. Ten sections of these basic courses were tracked over six successive years. During the initial period of three years, content mastery grading was used in the evaluation of all tests and speech performances in the ten sections. For the latter period of three years, grade standards combining both norm referenced and criterion referenced approaches were employed. Under the traditional content mastery grading policy 185 of the 840 students enrolled in these courses withdrew for an overall attrition rate of just over 22%. However, during the three years in which modular aggregation grading was used, 91 of 870 students withdrew from these basic courses. An analysis of variance of these data, in which attrition for sixty sections of the introductory speech course, was significant ( $df=58$ ,  $F=560.94$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

Finally, modular aggregation of formative and summative grades holds additional benefits. Broadening the base of grading systems is a proven method of reaching students with diverse needs (Hendrickson & Gable, 1997). In communication performance classes, the early application of summative grades could increase anxiety and function as a disincentive. It may be advantageous to begin such classes with formative, mastery assignments that are limited in scope thereby allowing all students the opportunity to succeed. On the other hand, final cumulative examinations can be used to summarize differing levels of student competence and achievement.

## CONCLUSION

The borderline student, as described in this essay, is a category of at risk student often overlooked, yet numerous. Rush (1994) found that academic performance was the highest ranked risk factor, accounting for approximately 20% of the variance, while behavior and coping skills was a distant second, accounting for only 6% of the risk factor variance. Borderline students can be efficiently rescued with modest outlays of additional institutional resources and are more likely to persist than students with less ability or more pernicious learning difficulties. Based upon the preceding discussion, it is herein recommended that such students be earmarked for special treatment. At the same time, the

specific operational procedures for the implementation of such special treatment must be pedagogically defensible and not punitive to fellow students or to professors.

Finally, it is important to underline the need for individuals in an instructional unit to have ample opportunity to participate in discussion of such special policies designed to assist these borderline students. It may turn out that only some instructors will elect to offer these options. Hopefully, communication units will make progress toward increased student retention through the suggested forms of remedial extra-credit, focused re-testing, innovative grading approaches, or other policies.

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