

## Exploring Faculty Attitudes about Grades and Alternative Approaches to Grading: Pilot Study

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**Abstract :** Grading approaches in higher education have not changed meaningfully in over 100 years. While there is variation in the types of grades assigned across countries, most use approaches based on simple ordinal scales (e.g, letter grades). While grades are generally viewed as an indication of a student's performance, challenges arise regarding the clarity, validity, and reliability of letter grades. Research about grading in higher education has primarily focused on grade inflation, student attitudes toward grading, impacts of grades, and benefits of plus-minus letter grade systems. Little research is available about alternative approaches to grading, varying approaches used by faculty within and across colleges, and faculty attitudes toward grades and alternative approaches to grading. To begin to address these gaps, a survey was conducted of faculty in a sample of departments at three diverse colleges in a southeastern state in the US. The survey focused on faculty experiences with and attitudes toward grading, the degree to which faculty innovate in teaching and grading practices, and faculty interest in alternatives to the point system approach to grading. Responses were received from 104 instructors (21% response rate). The majority reported that teaching accounted for 50% or more of their academic duties. Almost all (92%) of respondents reported using point and percentage systems for their grading. While all respondents agreed that grades should reflect the degree to which objectives were mastered, half indicated that grades should also reflect effort or improvement. Over 60% felt that grades should be predictive of success in subsequent courses or real life applications. Most respondents disagreed that grades should compare students to other students. About 42% worried about their own grade inflation and grade inflation in their college. Only 17% disagreed that grades mean different things based on the instructor while 75% thought it would be good if there was agreement. Less than 50% of respondents felt that grades were directly useful for identifying students who should/should not continue, identify strengths/weaknesses, predict which students will be most successful, or contribute to program monitoring of student progress. Instructors were less willing to modify assessment than they were to modify instruction and curriculum. Most respondents (76%) were interested in learning about alternative approaches to grading (e.g., specifications grading). The factors that were most associated with willingness to adopt a new grading approach were clarity to students and simplicity of adoption of the approach. Follow-up studies are underway to investigate implementations of alternative grading approaches, expand the study to universities and departments not involved in the initial study, examine student attitudes about alternative approaches, and refine the measure of attitude toward adoption of alternative grading practices within the survey. Workshops about challenges of using percentage and point systems for determining grades and workshops regarding alternative approaches to grading are being offered.

**Keywords :** alternative approaches to grading, grades, higher education, letter grades

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