

Do Grading Standards Matter? Response to grading standards and institutional pressures

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Once upon a time, a colleague arrived for a University of Pennsylvania committee meeting looking distraught. When I asked him what the problem was, he explained that a capable young professor in his department had failed to receive tenure. But, he added, "He brought it on himself. He didn't follow the rule." So I asked him, "What is the rule?" "You do not fail anyone," he answered. Shortly after that, another colleague said he overheard students discussing the fact that one of them had received a low grade in a class. The aggrieved student said, "I guess I will have to give him the treatment [explained as complaining to the professor and to the administration]."

I thought my colleagues were overstating the case. After all, I had failed students in the past. Some time later, however, I was teaching a project-oriented course that was required for graduation. The class had five groups, but I received messages from the administration that there was another group in the course. I did notice one or two new people in class on occasion, but assumed that they were visitors. I asked the class about this and they said that they were unaware of any other group in the course. Midway through the course, four students showed up in my class and said that they had their plan ready. Their plan was over a month late and it was poorly prepared. I said that if things continued like this, they would not receive credit for the class. I did this because I thought it to be the prescribed procedure; I do not involve grading as having any motivational benefits for learning. (My personal belief, as described in the endnote, is that grading is a required, but harmful process.)

My next communication on this matter was from my department chairman. I was scolded for being unable to properly motivate students, and was told (indirectly, but clearly) that they should get credit for the course. So I called the students in for a meeting. I told them to submit something and that the quality of the work would not be an issue. Their group started a project, but two of them informed me that the other two were not contributing. I met with the uninterested students and it seemed they were having personal problems; one said that he was dropping the course as his parents had advised him to spend another semester at school, while the other said she had no interest whatsoever and dropped the course. The other two completed the project and did a decent job. In fact, some time after this incident, I received a letter from one of the two students who belatedly completed the project. He told me that this incident had a positive influence on him and asked me to write a personal recommendation for him.

It is difficult to recommend institutional policies for grading. It may not be reasonable for schools to publicize the fact that failing grades are not given, nor to report the percentage of customers who fail. One possibility is for schools to devise alternative plans to overcome the negative effects of grading. I expect that there are many creative possibilities. It would be interesting to hear about the use of such plans in undergraduate, MBA, or executive programs. It would be especially interesting to hear about plans that do not involve failure.

Policies for faculty members are a bit easier to apply. What I should have done was to seek the advice of my chairperson before mentioning the possibility of failure to the students. Since my "incident" I have not mentioned the possibility of failure to any students in my classes nor have I failed anyone.

Endnote: I do not mind giving everyone high grades. In fact, I had once proposed that we give everyone the same grade. (You might call it a "P" for "Pass" . . . or "Paid"; I believe Harvard calls it an "A.") Grading wastes faculty resources, harms the learning atmosphere, and reduces learning. It is also an invalid indicator of future success in one's career. I realize that a two-sided argument is more believable, but after reading empirical research on the topic, I have not found the other side. Some of the empirical evidence on this is described in "Learner Responsibility in Management Education, or Ventures into Forbidden Research" with comments, *Interfaces*, 13, 26-38 (under full-text papers at <http://jscottarmstrong.com>). That paper reports favorable evidence on use of a plan to avoid some of the harmful effects of grading. The plan involves grading based solely on the amount of learning time as documented in a learning diary.