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LDES 503  
University as a Design Problem  
Prospectus

There are myriad reasons why grades are problematic. For one, they are inconsistent and differ between instructors, disciplines, and institutions.<sup>1</sup> They are rife with human subjectivity and leave the door open for bias and questions of equity.<sup>2</sup> Grades have been shown to negatively impact student motivation<sup>3</sup> and self-esteem.<sup>4</sup> And believe that grades are not an accurate measure of learning.<sup>5</sup> It is no surprise that educators across the country have been attempting to solve some aspects of grading for decades. However, with the interruption of traditional in-person school brought on by COVID-19, the question of how to deal with the problem of grades came front and center.<sup>4</sup> While several temporary remedies were used, such as pass-fail or frozen grades, ultimately to solve all of these issues requires a much deeper look at how we evaluate students. The dominant paradigm is that learning is quantitatively measured and defined by instructors and institutions. Grades are one part of this paradigm, tangled up in the web of credit hours, degree requirements, standardized testing, credentialing and many more systems at play.

In order to solve the problem of grading, the entire paradigm of how we measure student success would need to change. Learning would be defined by students, with assistance from instructors and institutions. It would require a significant shift in the student-teacher dynamic, where students are active directors of their own learning journeys. Rather than the sage on the stage, teachers would turn into guides on the side, connecting their students with resources and opportunities, and when appropriate, their own knowledge. It need not be without structure and guidance, but would require a reorganization of higher education institutions. It could open the door to more diversity of students, courses, and assessment. Students would finish their programs when their own learning goals had been met and they could demonstrate the knowledge and skills. While hard data may provide some insight into a student's learning, this demonstration would be based primarily around qualitative indicators.

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<sup>1</sup> Blum, Susan Debra, and Alfie Kohn, eds. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. 1st edition. Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Feldman, Joe. *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. First edition. Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin, a SAGE publishing company, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Kohn, Alfie. "The Case Against Grades." *Counterpoints* 451 (2013): 143–53. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42982088>.

<sup>4</sup> Spring, Laura, Diana Robillard, Lorrie Gehlbach, and Tiffany A Moore Simas. "Impact of Pass/Fail Grading on Medical Students' Well-Being and Academic Outcomes: Impact of Pass/Fail Grading on Student Outcomes." *Medical Education* 45, no. 9 (2011): 867–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2923.2011.03989.x>.

<sup>5</sup> Schinske, Jeffrey, and Kimberly Tanner. "Teaching More by Grading Less (or Differently)." *CBE—Life Sciences Education* 13, no. 2 (2014): 159–66. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.cbe-14-03-0054>.

In some ways, we have already begun the shift to qualitative measures. Application to many degree granting programs require a personal statement and letters of recommendation, in addition to the quantitative measures of test scores, GPA, and transcripts. However, there is a movement of students, teachers, and institutions working towards alternatives to grades today.<sup>6</sup> There are several promising ideas that could help transition to this student-centered future.

First are mastery transcripts<sup>7</sup> and narrative transcripts.<sup>8</sup> These two innovations aim to replace the traditional grade and credit transcript that are used in secondary and higher education. While these are both used more frequently in secondary schools, there are places using them (or accepting them) in the higher education space as well. While they differ from each other, both new types of transcripts paint different and fuller pictures of a student's learning. By being more descriptive, outsiders can see more clearly a student's knowledge and skill base, rather than a letter associated with a course title. While it does not solve the problem of implicit bias or the power dynamic between students and teachers, it does give significantly more information about a student's learning.

Another innovation that works well with narrative or mastery transcripts is standards-based learning. This development of curriculum and evaluation is best seen in higher education AAC&U's VALUE rubrics.<sup>9</sup> Though designed for use at the institutional level, there is strong potential to be used for individual student learning evaluation. Standards-based learning connects well with either mastery transcripts or e-Portfolios to provide some framework for creating and evaluating learning goals.

Portfolios have also become popularized as a form of communicating learning.<sup>10</sup> While they are generally used today as a supplement to transcripts and grades, as they are in the LDT program, the high school where I teach, and in my own high school graduation many years ago, they show strong potential in disrupting traditional grades. As a form of communicating cumulative learning across a degree or program, portfolios can allow students to voice their own learning journey and exactly what they learned. Though more time consuming than traditional grades, this innovation disrupts the power dynamic and communicates examples of what student's believe to be their strongest abilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Blum, Susan Debra, and Alfie Kohn, eds. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. 1st edition. Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> "Why The Transcript | Mastery Transcript Consortium® (MTC)," August 12, 2019. <https://mastery.org/why-the-transcript/>.

<sup>8</sup> Hampshire College. "Narrative Evaluations: A Portrait of You." <https://www.hampshire.edu/narrative-evaluations-portrait-you>.

<sup>9</sup> AAC&U. "VALUE Rubrics." <https://www.aacu.org/initiatives/value-initiative/value-rubrics>.

<sup>10</sup> AAC&U. "EPortfolios," January 13, 2023. <https://www.aacu.org/trending-topics/eportfolios>.

One final innovation that occurs at the individual course level, rather than the programmatic or institutional level, is the practice of ungrading or de-grading.<sup>11</sup> These are a set of tools that instructors can use to evaluate and give feedback to students without attaching letter or numeric grades to them. Generally, in this practice, a system of assessment is put in place, but grades are ultimately assigned at the end of the course because the instructor is in an institution where grades are still needed for a transcript. This practice represents a small disruption, existing within the current system.

These few innovations are the primary drivers in a transition to a gradeless future. For any of these innovations to exist, teachers and institutions must relinquish some of the control they exact over assessment of student learning. The power dynamic must shift in order to address all of the flaws with grading in its current form and ultimately shift the entire paradigm of measuring student achievement and success.

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<sup>11</sup> Blum, Susan Debra, and Alfie Kohn, eds. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. 1st edition. Teaching and Learning in Higher Education. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020.