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Are Grades Necessary?

College grades and grading systems have become targets of criticism for several reasons. Before the rules concerning student deferment were changed earlier this year, some students objected to the release of grades to draft boards. Grades have symbolized objective examinations, machine records, and other efficient devices and practices that critics have sometimes indicted as evidence of the dehumanization and regimentation of higher education. And students have objected to having permanent grade records given by instructors from whom they feel alienated for courses they consider irrelevant.

There is irony in this situation. Students sometimes complain of the impersonality of undergraduate instruction, and often justly so. Yet in the impersonality of language laboratories, computer-assisted instruction, and other "teaching stations" that provide the student with a range of instructional material and with rapid feedback to his responses is to be found the best hope of achieving the maximum individualization of instruction—an educational objective that would permit students to decide what and when they want to learn and would permit each to progress at his own self-determined rate. Under such conditions—in theory, although never completely in practice—each student (given the time he needed) could master each course he took. What then would course grades mean?

There is a further irony, for many instructors are also skeptical of the grading system. That grading standards vary widely among institutions, departments, and instructors is generally known; a student's grade in a particular course is at best an imperfect measure of what he knows of the course content. When college grades are used to predict success in later life, the correlations usually turn out to be too close to zero to be of much practical use. The scores received by graduating students on tests of the Graduate Record Examination, whether in the humanities, the natural sciences, or the social sciences, appear to be nearly independent of available measures of university or college quality or excellence, after account is taken of differences among students at the time of college admission (Alexander Astin, *Science*, 16 August 1968).

In short, a student's accomplishment in college and later is primarily determined by his own ability, knowledge, and motivation, and at best only slightly by the characteristics of his teachers and his college. This state of affairs is no excuse for abandoning efforts to improve teaching and educational facilities. But it does mean that instructors can be more relaxed about the necessity of assigning grades; that students cannot escape responsibility by explaining their own deficiencies in terms of instructor or college inadequacies; and that students can therefore be given substantial responsibility for deciding whether they are to be graded.

The practice of allowing students to take some courses without credit or without grades is spreading. The practice is not one to be made universal and mandatory, for grades provide some students with standards for self-appraisal and for motivation, and they provide the institution with comparative information concerning students. But educational effectiveness and the ability to make institutional decisions concerning the earning of college degrees do not require that grades be given to all students in all courses. A student has wide latitude in deciding which courses to take, how assiduously to apply himself, and how long to remain in a course or in college. Why should he not also be permitted to decide whether he is to be graded, and even whether he is to receive a certificate of enrollment for a specified period of time instead of a grade record and a degree?—DAEL WOLFLE

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Dael Wolfle

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