

Grading in the Time of a Pandemic

Shampa Biswas
Whitman College

This year, I started chairing one of the three primary curricular divisions of my undergraduate residential college. In this capacity, I serve on one of the institution's key decision-making committees. I have few administrative skills in more normal times. I was certainly not prepared for decision-making in the time of a pandemic.

Now, unfortunately, I am, and offer this principle that has helped me find my bearings: *Begin with, and center, the needs and experiences of those students who are most vulnerable, most precarious, and with access to the fewest resources.* A lot of difficult decisions that institutions of higher education have grappled with in the last several weeks could have been addressed more clearly and quickly by embracing it. For example, which, if any, students should be permitted to stay in residence with the transition to online teaching? How should we attend to the needs of students that depend on college employment as a source of income? Should we prioritize asynchronous vs synchronous online learning?

Consider the most recent one of whether or not to change existing grading practices to take stock of our current and unfolding condition. Institutions that have embraced change have adopted one of two models - either [expanding the choice to students to take their classes as "pass/fail"](#) instead of a regular grading scale or [mandating that all courses be marked on a "pass/fail" basis](#). There are some minor variations on these two models. All of them raise critical and vexing issues that are not easily resolved.

Grading, as most faculty already know, is an imprecise, imperfect metric to gauge the academic performance of our students. It is a blunt assessment tool that misses much of the nuance, the struggles, and the labor that shape the intellectual journey of our students. We also know that our students begin this journey from profoundly unequal places, and all the support services our institutions provide to mitigate the disadvantages that students from poorer backgrounds and the biases that students from many minority groups face are inadequate to close the huge achievement gaps in our societies. We may work hard to make our grades as "objective" as possible, but we know that the ordinal scales of our simple grading rubrics reflect all the disadvantages and prejudices that many of our students face.

This is always the case, but the conditions of this pandemic have put this reality into stark relief, perhaps even providing us an opportunity to rethink our reliance on grades as a metric of meritocracy. As colleges and institutions go online in the middle of the semester with little preparation for this enormous transition, let us imagine what this means for our students, now spread out in locations all around the world, trying to engage with their courses in the middle of an existential crisis.

Who is likely to move up our ordinal scales, or choose the ordinal scale over the pass/fail option, if given the choice? Will it be the student who lives in a cramped house that offers little opportunity for either social distancing or online learning, in a poor neighborhood in Chicago or

a dense neighborhood in Dhaka, or the student with a room of her own in an affluent suburb of Seattle? Will it be the student with the poor wifi connection or limited data on a phone, or one with easy and fluid access to the internet on a well-functioning device? Will it be the student who has had to take on childcare and sick care responsibilities in a thinly-stretched family struggling with healthcare costs, or the student with adequate access to medical care and more resources for a nutritious recovery, if ill? It may be the case that all our students are confronting the question of their embodied fragility in these unusual times, but the terms of that confrontation are not democratically distributed across class, race, and nationality.

Institutions that value in-person instruction, and especially residential institutions, strive to create learning environments that can level the playing field. Frequently they fail, but they try. But every inequity that faces our students in more “normal” times is severely exacerbated in this moment. Centering the needs of our most vulnerable, most precarious, and under-resourced students means realizing that a grading system that is imperfect in the best of circumstances will only further disadvantage the students who need our support for academic success the most in this moment. Choice is always a matter of privilege, but this moment, like no other, exposes the fiction of inclusion that choice suggests. If we adhere to the principle, a mandatory rather than a choice-centered “pass/fail” system is a more responsible way to level the playing field.

This is not an argument for diminishing the quality of our educational offerings, whose value and worth are even more necessary in a moment of crisis when the impulse is to foreclose critical inquiry, debate and dissension, informed creativity, and intellectual rigor in the name of other values. Health, well-being, and community are some of these other values, and while their importance cannot be undervalued, they can and should stand on par with the value of critical thinking right now. As educators, our goal is to enlist our students in that task to the best of our abilities, but trying to distinguish between an A- or B+ seems like a poor and fraught expenditure of our also diminished energy. And surely, as faculty find their own conditions more unstable with rising sickness amongst us, is the minutia of assessment calculations a worthwhile project in our desire and duty to intellectually engage our students?

We are all struggling to find our footing in times that only promise to become more challenging in the months to come. Using the needs of the most vulnerable and precarious amongst us as our guiding post will help us weather these storms in ways that help keep our sights on what we do best as educators.