

The Way I See It

Traditional assessment deserves failing grade

Ready or not, midterms are upon us, and it's time to buckle down, stress out and cram everything in before spring break. So what do we, as students, get in return for our work? The short answer is grades: those five simple letters that magically encompass everything from failure to excellence. Grades are inextricably linked to education and wield considerable influence over the course of our academic and professional lives.

We all know the grading system isn't perfect, but it's the best method we've come up with right? Quantitative grading seems to be the only method used for assessment; written evaluations are a rare exception. But this begs the question: what is it about grades that have some colleges, like Hampshire (Mass.) and Evergreen (Wash.), rejecting them altogether? Advocates of grading alternatives would claim that a letter grade or percentage offers no meaningful feedback for a student and is merely the most

convenient means of assessment. Perhaps this is why students evaluate professors using detailed written reports rather than letter grades.

Let us imagine, just for a moment, that I have a 4.0 GPA. Now, what does that number actually convey about me as an individual? Am I smart? Hard-working? Dedicated? Without a more substantive indicator, there's really no way of knowing. Not to mention that one would have to consider other factors that can affect a GPA. For starters, there is grade inflation, field of study/major, as well as the school from which the grades were obtained. But don't forget about grade curving, that contrived method of standardizing grade distributions, which reveals more about the effectiveness of the professor than the abilities of the students.

And what about assignments that are based on creativity? How can a professor really differentiate between a poem, composition or design that



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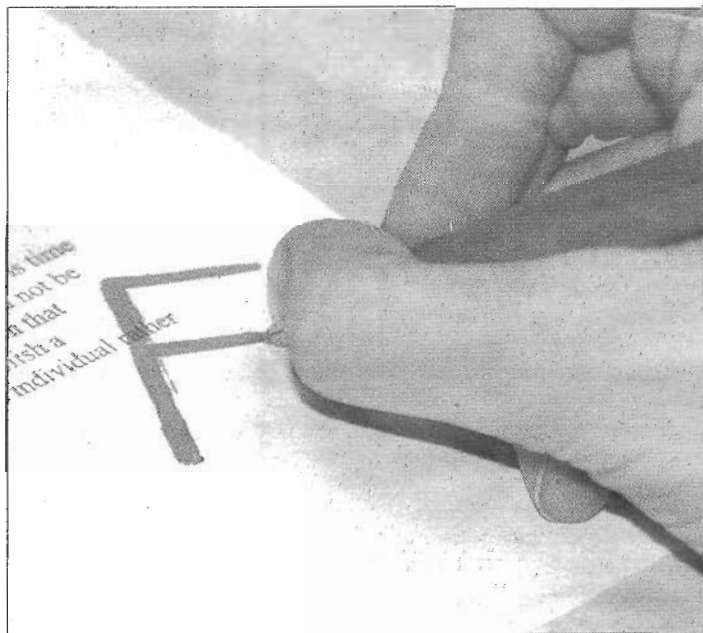


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ITHACA COLLEGE PROFESSORS issue students letter grades every semester, but some people question whether quantitative grading is the best way to assess students' work.

deserves an A and one that merits an A-? Of course there are rubrics to follow, but these oppose the very creativity that is supposedly being encouraged.

This phenomenon is not by any means restricted to studies in the humanities. The sciences rely on sets of objective principles that tend to stress a knowledge-based education over one that requires a strong sense of imagination. These objective principles make it relatively easy to assign an A to one test and a B to another. But in this instance we are overlooking the cornerstone of scientific progress—innovation, which does not stem from memorizing facts and formulas.

What this amounts to is an

arbitrary grading system, one that relies on increasingly subjective means as an "objective" method of assessment. Perhaps it is time to call for an open dialogue on grades and grading. But this conversation should not be relegated to the upper echelons of the administration; it should be a discussion that permeates every school and every class. Only then will we be able to establish a meaningful system of assessment, one that emphasizes the student as an individual rather than the student as a grade point average.

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