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## Grades, Marks, and Scores, Oh My!

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ROSALIE C. OTERO

# Grades, Marks, and Scores, Oh My!

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**M**y granddaughter, Ema, a kindergartener, came to my house the other day to show me her homework. She proudly pointed to a colorful butterfly sticker that she had received. Naturally, I oohed and aahed at the paper with the requisite big hug. We also found an empty spot on my refrigerator to display her work.

From the very beginning students are constantly assessed and graded according to their performance and the particular standard of the teacher. Some schools use letter grades, others use numbers, and still others use E for excellent, S for satisfactory, and so on.

I read Larry Andrew's essay "Grades, Scores, and Honors: A Numbers Game?" with great interest. It's an excellent essay touching on these topics in relation to honors. In the University of New Mexico Honors Program, students are assigned an A for excellent, above average honors work; a CR for acceptable, meeting the basic requirements for the course; or an NC for unacceptable or nonexistent work. In addition, instructors complete an evaluation form that includes both quantitative (numbers) and qualitative (written comments) appraisal for each student.

The University of New Mexico has a plus/minus grading system, and, needless to say, the grading system in the honors program has come under attack various times during its 49-year existence. Some folks on campus have argued that the different grading system for honors students is elitist (where have we heard that before?) and that the "special" system keeps the honors program apart from the rest of the university. My argument is that the benefits of such a system far outweigh any potentially negative results.

Honors students do not "belong" solely to honors. These students are majoring in various fields across the university and taking many courses outside of the honors program. They interact with many other students and faculty during their term at UNM. So they aren't isolated. There is a great deal of interaction and interface between honors students and the rest of the campus. At the same time, I argue that the honors grading system fosters collegiality and puts emphasis on learning rather than on letters or numbers.

## GRADES, MARKS, AND SCORES, OH MY!

I would further argue that the interdisciplinary nature of honors courses requires a specialized kind of assessment. First of all, the classes are small (16–18 students). They are run more like graduate seminars, where emphasis is on interactive, discussion-based pedagogy. The seminars underscore the importance of mastering a subject, reasoning, using knowledge to solve problems, and creating or constructing products. There are no exams, so students are required to demonstrate their learning in other ways including essays, term papers, performances, interviews, conversations, student-teacher conferences, and projects. A holistic process of learning requires high student participation. Although some instructors do rely on a point system for various activities, the emphasis is on timely, high-quality feedback. Instructors and students recognize the quality of learning that takes place.

In addition, students who are concerned (often overly concerned) about their GPAs can take risks and register for honors courses they might not otherwise consider for fear of getting grades that might limit their opportunities for professional or graduate schools. Our grading system levels the playing field for all honors students, including engineers as well as biochemistry, business, and humanities majors. Honors students like challenges, but they also like to do well.

Another argument against the specialized grading system we use is that it gives honors students an unfair advantage—making it easier for them to get As and therefore to graduate *cum laude*, for example. The reality is that graduation with a mark of distinction depends on a number of criteria, not the least of which is cumulative grade point average overall. Since honors students are required to complete only 24 credit hours in honors, their cumulative GPA can't possibly depend solely on their honors courses. Some honors students complain that an A in honors, in fact, brings down their GPA. There have even been students who dropped out of honors because a plain A would bring down their 4.3 GPA.

The issue of grade inflation has been going on for some time. For instance, a C average used to be typical for college students, a statistically average grade. Now it is considered a bad grade. I don't believe there is such a thing as a uniform grading system. "So much depends," to quote William Carlos Williams' "The Red Wheelbarrow" (with apologies!):

so much depends  
upon  
a red wheel  
barrow  
glazed with rain  
water

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beside the white  
chickens.

—depends, that is, on the way a given instructor interprets performance or on the way a potential graduate or professional school administrator or employer interprets transcripts. Some instructors, for example, lower a student's grade based on absences and tardiness regardless of the quality of work performed. We also know that some instructors are considered "hard graders" while others are more sensitive to the possibility of demoralizing their students with low grades. I know faculty on campus who refuse to give an A+. How, then, can students who do receive such a grade be meaningfully compared to those who don't, when some who don't weren't given the chance to get one?

We can't get away from grades. Assessment is with us whether it's done through grades, numerical scores, written evaluations, or stars and stickers. The best we can hope for is to give evaluations of student performance that are as consistent, fair, and accurate as possible. To achieve fairness of this sort, we must begin each of the courses we teach with clear and clearly articulated expectations.

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