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A Survey of

Prevailing Grading Procedures

In Representative Colleges and Universities*

By R. Grann Lloyd

No institutions has a perfect grading system. Perhaps no college or university has a grading system that would be accepted as generally satisfactory by the teaching profession. However, most institutions of higher education are constantly seeking to improve their services and to establish policies and precedures that are academically sound. Consequently, the writer conducted a study of the grading systems in use in 200 colleges and universities in the United States and surveyed the attitudes of professional educational and accrediting agencies on various phases of the study. Of the 200 institutions to which questionnaires were sent, 112 or 56 per cent processed and returned them. The data are as follows:

Of the 112 institutions of higher education * * responding to the inquiry, 65 or 58.0 per cent report that the major purpose of their grading systems is to evaluate, record and report

* The Investigator is indebted to the President W. K. Payne for a financial grant and other assistance which made this study possible. Deep appreciation is also expressed to the members of the Special Committee on the Grading System at Savannah State College for their cooperation and assistance.

**The 112 institutions responding to the questionnaire are: Georgia State College for Women, West Georgia College, Middle Georgia College, South Georgia College, Albany State, North Georgia, Fort Valley, Valdosta State, Georgia Southwestern, Arkansas State A. M. and N., Appalachian State Teachers, Alfred University, Allegheny College, Augsburg College and Theological Seminary, Augustana College, Asbury, Claflin, Central State, Capital, Barber-Scotia, Belbit, Bradford Durfee Technical Institute, Bowling Green, College of Commerce, Bluefield State, Bishop, Berea, Concord, Th College of St. Catherine, Carroll, Davidson, Dickinson, Dillard, Dunbar Junior College, Edward Waters, Emanuel Missionary, Elizabeth City State Teachers, Ferris Institute, Fisk, Florida A. and M., Florida State, Gammon Theological Seminary, Howard Payne, Huntingdon, Indiana Technical, Johnson C. Smith, Knox College, Kentucky State, Lewis and Clark, Lebanon Valley, Lenoir Rhyne, Linfield, Lincoln, Louisiana, Marygrove, Miles, Maryville, Mississippi State Teachers, Mount Union, Mount Mary, Mount Holyoke, Northwestern, Nazareth, Nebraska Wesleyan, New Jersey Teachers, Northeastern State, Northern Michigan, North Central, Northwest Missouri State, Oakwood, Ohio Northern, Otterbein, Paul Quinn, Paine, Pacific Lutheran, Pacific, Parsons School of Design, Pennsylvania Military, Prairie View A. and M., Quachita, Rust, Salmon P. Chase, St. Phillip's College, State College, Stout Institute, State Teachers, College of Cortland, N. Y., and Oswego, N. Y., State Teachers College (Oshkosh, Wis.), Southern, Stowe Teachers, Shaw, State Teachers College (Cheyney, Pa.), St. Vincent, St. Mary's, State Teachers College (Kutztown, Pa.), State Teachers (Slippery Rock, Pa.), State Teachers (East Stroudsbury, Pa.), St. Norbert, Stillman, Texas College, Texas Southern, Trinity, Ursinus, University of Tampa, Wilberforce University, Wiley, Winston-Salem Teachers College, Whitman College, Wisconsin State, Western Maryland, and two unidentified Colleges of Atlanta, Georgia.

the progress and quality of academic work; 45 or 40.2 per cent indicate that the major purpose of their grading systems is to measure the academic growth and development of the student as shown by various evaluation techniques used by instructors. The few remaining institutions list such similar purposes for their grading system as: (1) to evaluate the intellectual accomplishments of students in such a way as to reward meritorious work and to stimulate all to their best efforts; (2) to determine student capabilities in various subjects in order to better teach and counsel them on the basis of aptitudes and interests; (3) to help teachers measure their success or failure.

One hundred and ten colleges and universities reacted to the question regarding the manner in which grades are expressed. At 104 or 92.9 per cent of them grades are expressed in letters; at 4 or 3.6 per cent grades are expressed in arabic numbers; at 1 or .9 per cent in percentages; at 1 or .9 per cent in numerical points. Incidentally, three institutions use both letters and arabic numbers to express grades.*** Of the 112 institutions co-operating in this study, only 37 or 33 per cent use plus or minus signs after letter grades or grades expressed in numerals as part of their official grading system, 73 or 65.2 per cent do not and at 2 or 1.8 per cent the use of plus and minus signs is reportedly optional. In this connection, it is thought-provoking to note that 12 or 16.4 per cent of the 73 institutions responding in the negative report that although plus and minus signs are not included in their grading systems some instructors persist in using them when reporting grades. This, and comments by some respondents, seems to indicate that such instructors are either unfamiliar with the official grading systems at their institutions, or that they seek to appease and/or compromise with students relative to grades.

All of the colleges and universities involved in this study agree that the grade "I" or incomplete should be given only when a student's work is in general satisfactory, but such student has failed to complete a major item of the course work

***Whereas the investigator examined a fairly large number of articles and research reports concerned with grading and grading systems, it appears that nothing significant would result from an attempt to relate the findings of this study to those of other studies. Most of the articles and research reports examined were either based on the study of some specific aspect of grading peculiar to a given institution or personal opinion. The studies examined included, "Evaluation of College Students," by G. Norman Quam, *Journal of Chemical Education*, November, 1953; "How Do You Grade," by Otto J. M. Smith *Science Education*, April, 1953; "Grade Distribution in 80 Mid-Western Liberal-Arts Colleges," by Frank G. Edson, *School and Society*, May 19, 1951; Whitman's New Grading System," by Chester C. Maxey, *The Quarterly Newsletter* of the Northwestern College Personnel Association, February, 1949.

and then only when such deficiency results from providential cause or extreme emergency. The time limit for removing the grade "I" or incomplete varies greatly among the responding institution, from "almost immediately," to "within two weeks after it is passed into the Registrar's Office," to "within the term following" the one in which such grade was earned, to "one year," to "anytime prior to graduation." However, it is revealing to observe that 74 or 66.1 per cent of these institutions of higher education require that the grade "I" be removed "within the term following" the one in which such grade was earned; 21 or 18.8 per cent allow students to remove the grade "I" at "anytime prior to graduation." There is no limit on the highest grade a student may receive when the requirements of the course are completed. In other words, if the student is without fault, as in the case of illness or extreme emergency, he may receive whatever grades he earns. Conversely, several institutions indicate that if the "I" is the result of negligence the student is reduced in grade to the next lower grade; 1 or .9 per cent report that the highest grade a student may receive by removing this grade is B; the highest grade permitted by another is D; 2 or 1.8 per cent allow C as the highest grade. One hundred and five or 93.8 per cent of responding institutions leave the requirements for removing the "Incomplete" to the discretion of the instructor; 3 or 2.7 per cent require that application for such removal to be made through the offices of the Dean and/or Registrar; the remaining few have various other regulations and practices.

The findings of this study reveal that 70 or 62.5 per cent of the institutions cooperating in this study do not use the "condition" grade,* generally recorded as "E." It is interesting to observe further that the trend toward the elimination of the "condition" grade from college and university grading systems has steadily increased during the past decade. Typical reaction to the "condition" grade recorded on various questionnaires were: "It (the condition grade) is unpopular and unnecessary" and "we found it to be a big nuisance." However, 24 or 70.6 per cent of the responding institutions using

*Seven of the nine institutions within the University of Georgia System cooperating in this study do not give the "E" or condition grade.

The nine institutions within the University of Georgia System cooperating in this study are: Georgia State College for Women (Milledgeville), West Georgia College (Carrollton), Middle Georgia College (Cochran), North Georgia College (Dahlonega), South Georgia College (Douglas), Fort Valley State College (Fort Valley), Valdosta State College (Valdosta), and Georgia Southwestern College (Americus).

the "condition" grade award it to the student whose work does not seem to merit a passing grade, but who has not actually failed (borderline cases); 6 or 17.6 per cent give this grade to students who have a passing grade in the course, but fail the final examination; at 2 or 5.9 per cent if a student has done failing work, but the circumstances are such that the instructor feels he should be given an opportunity to try to improve his work in the course, the student may be given the "condition" grade; 2 or 5.9 per cent use the "E" or "condition" grade to denote incomplete work instead of the "I."

The "condition" grade must be removed during the school term immediately following the one in which such grade was earned at 26 or 76.5 per cent of the colleges and universities involved in this study that use such grade; within one year at 5 or 14.7 per cent; before the opening of the next school year at 1 or 2.9 per cent; prior to the opening of the next regular session at 1 or 2.9 per cent; such grade is given only in the first term of an academic course in a sequence which continues a through second term at 1 or 2.9 per cent. The highest possible grade a student may receive by removing the "condition" grade at 23 or 67.6 per cent of the institutions using it is "D"; at 8 or 23.5 per cent the highest possible grade is "A"; at 2 or 5.9 per cent "C"; at 1 or 2.9 per cent "E". The manner in which the "condition" grade is removed is left to the discretion of the instructor at 20 or 58.8 per cent of these institutions, whereas at 14 or 41.1 per cent such grade must be removed by an examination. Several institutions attach a small fee to this examination.

Of the 112 colleges and universities participating in this study, 107 or 95.5 per cent report that the grade "F" is final at their institutions and cannot be changed by taking "another examination or otherwise"; only 5 or 4.5 per cent report that the grade "F" is revocable at their institutions and can be changed by re-examination or otherwise.

The comments of many respondents relative to whether or not the grade "F" is final or irrevocable are not without significance. A few typical ones were:

"Final. If the grade could be raised, it should not have been reported as F, but as E or I."

To do otherwise (not to make the grade "F" final) subjects the instructor to all kinds of pressures from students, parents, coaches, politicians, etc. It would be un-

fair to students because some can bring greater pressure than others will or would."

"Every 'failed' course, unless it is a free elective, must be repeated here, and under the same teacher."

One hundred and eleven institutions reacted to the inquiry concerning the grade "D." Of this number, 107 or about 97.3 per cent report that the grade "D" is final; 4 or 3.6 per cent indicate that the grade "D" may be raised by taking "another examination" or otherwise.*

In order to change a grade after it has been submitted to the registrar or appropriate officer, instructors at 67 or 59.8 per cent of the cooperating colleges and universities must present proof that the grade was given in error; at 18 or 16.1 per cent instructors must petition the Faculty Council; setting forth all the facts, with the decision of the Council being final; at 17 or 15.2 per cent instructors must get the approval of the Dean and/ or Registrar concerned; at 6 or 5.4 per cent the grade is considered permanent after it is reported to the registrar and no changes are permitted; at the few remaining institutions slightly different regulations prevail, with one institution requiring "specific approval of the President" before an instructor may change a grade.

Only 14 or 12.5 per cent of the 112 participating institutions do not have an Honor Roll for students who excel in their academic work; 98 or 87.5 per cent use the Honor Roll. Of the 98 institutions that employ the device, 52 or 53.1 per cent require that students earn a "B" average or better while carrying a "full load"; 36 or 36.7 per cent require a "B" average or better; 7 or 7.1 per cent require that the student be in the upper 10 per cent of the student body academically; 1 requires a student to be in the upper 12 per cent; 1 the upper

*Of the nine institutions in the University of Georgia System participating in this study, only the Georgia State College for Women at Milledgeville report that the grade "D" can be raised. The regulation appearing on page 54 of the 1952-53 catalog reads: "Upon recommendation of the head of the department and with the permission of the Dean of Instruction, a student may repeat a course she has passed with a grade of 'D'. If the course is repeated, the student does not receive additional credit, and the last grade becomes the official grade of the course."

A glance at the May, 1953 issue of *The University of Georgia Bulletin*, p. 58 reveals that: "A senior in line for graduation who makes a grade of . . . D in his senior year in a course numbered 200 or above necessary for his degree will have the privilege of one re-examination, provided there is no opportunity to repeat the course. Grades in not more than two courses may be thus changed." On the other hand, a glance at the April, 1952 *Georgia Institute of Technology Bulletin*, p. 61 reveals that the grade "D" is final and cannot be changed by re-examination or otherwise.

15 per cent. It is stimulating academically to discover that many institutions stipulate that the student becomes ineligible for the Honor Roll during any school term in which he becomes subject to discipline or earns any grade lower than "C", including "incomplete" and/ or "condition" grades. Of course, as one institution pointed out, extension and correspondence courses are not considered in determining whether or not a student is entitled to a place on the Honor Roll. Incidentally, 97 of the institutions using the device report that they adhere strictly to the criteria established by the institutions for membership on the Honor Roll. However, they also indicate that loose grading on the part of some teachers enables undeserving students to qualify for the Honor Roll; thus creating the impression that either scholastic standards are inadequate or the academic officers involved are lax in enforcing established requirements or criteria.

Instructors in 99 or 90 per cent of the 110 colleges and universities replying to the inquiry are not bound by institutional regulations regarding the number of students receiving various grades; in 7 or 6.4 per cent there are established regulations regarding the number of students receiving 'A's', 'B's', 'C's', 'D's', and 'F's'; the few other replies were unintelligible. Several institutions seemed to be adamant in objecting to any institutional regulations regarding the number of students receiving various grades. For example:

"We give students what they make. We do not grade on the curve or have any system by which a number of students receive high grades or low grades."

and

"Absolutely NO. To do so would be a crime against the student. Grades represent accomplishment, not a game of chance at the carnival."

Several institutions report that studies of their grades are made regularly and the results are made available to teachers for discussion and use. Others indicate that the normal curve of probability is regarded favorably and instructors are urged to consider its application to their grade curve.

The nature of admission regulations and the manner in which they are enforced play a major role in determining the caliber of students in colleges and universities. The caliber of the student body should affect an institution's grade distribution. Consequently, it might be of some value to note that

62 or 55.4 per cent of the colleges and universities involved in this study consider themselves "liberal" in enforcing their admission rules; 50 or 44.6 per cent consider themselves "rigid". It is highly probable that the improvement of admission rules and the manner in which they are enforced will contribute to a more desirable grade distribution in institutions of higher education.

The responses from eight (8) professional educational and accrediting agencies, and the Georgia institutions in the University System of Georgia* indicate very strongly that it is academically unsound to permit students to remove deficient grades ('D's', 'E's', and 'F's') through correspondence study. All of the professional education and accrediting agencies agree that students should not be permitted to remove deficient grades earned in residence (deficient grades earned in class) through correspondence. Furthermore, (a) six of the ten responding institutions within the University System of Georgia do not permit it; (b) one permits it "in some cases . . . provided all of the residence requirements have been met", but admits that an institution would be "exactly right by not allowing students to remove deficient grades through correspondence study"; (c) only three of these institutions seem to permit any student to remove deficiencies earned in class through correspondence study, and even one of them suggests that "there is much merit" in any recommendation to prevent such a practice.

CONCLUSIONS

On the basis of the findings of this study involving 112 colleges and universities in the United States and a considerable number of educational associations, agencies and accrediting bodies, the following conclusion seem to be justified: 1. Colleges and universities would be well advised, and would

*The professional educational and accrediting agencies cooperating in this study are: The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, National Commission on Teacher Education and Professional Standards, American Council on Education, Association of American Colleges, College Entrance Examination Board, Division of Higher Education of the United States Office of Education, The Division of Teacher Education, Certification and Curriculum of the (Georgia) State Department of Education, and the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.

The institutions in the University System of Georgia responding to this specific inquiry are: The University of Georgia (Athens), Middle Georgia College (Cochran), Valdosta State College (Valdosta), Georgia Institute of Technology (Atlanta), North Georgia College (Dahlonega), Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (Tifton), Georgia Southwestern College (Americus), Georgia State College for Women (Milledgeville), Georgia Teachers College (Collegeboro), and South Georgia College (Douglas).

- eliminate many of their current problems, if they would specifically state the purpose (s) of their grading systems.
2. The "condition" grade "E" is an anomalous grade, and is apparently being rapidly eliminated from the grading systems of colleges and universities.
 - A. It is highly desirable, and consistent with the most respected current practices, for colleges and universities to require students to remove the grade "I" or "Incomplete" during the next school term (quarter or semester) in residence.
 4. An institution's grading system should be unmistakably clear and instructors should adhere strictly thereto in reporting students' grades. For example, instructors should not use plus (+) and minus (-) signs in reporting grades if such signs are not part of their institution's grading system.
 5. The grades "D" and "F" should be *final* and *irrevocable* by re-examination or otherwise.
 6. The best current practice seems to indicate that no student should be eligible for the Honor Roll who has been subject to disciplinary action by constituted institutional authority, or who has incurred any academic deficiency in the school term for which the Honor Roll is computed.
 7. It is academically unsound to permit students to remove deficient grades earned in residence through correspondence study.