

5 Common Reasons for the Importance of Letter Grades

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Given the wide variety of assessment possibilities today, why do so many educational institutions remain committed to using letter grades? I spent the last several months asking people this question and exploring books, journals and online articles about letter grades. The majority of responses fit into five responses. People refer to other reasons as well, but it seems as if most of the conversations end up focusing upon one of these five. Each of these reasons are important and worth consideration, but there are counterpoints, and I provided some of them below. What do you think? Should other reasons be added to this list? What counterpoints would you add?

1) Letter grades motivate students.

Yes, letter grades motivate many students. The goal of earning an “A” or avoiding an “F” is often enough to help students study and prepare for that next exam. Such goals are not enough to help students develop a growing and persistent interest in the subject, one that will empower them to continue learning beyond the tests, or even to use or remember what they learned. While letter grades motivate, they also demotivate students, some of the same students that they motivate. In *Drive*, Daniel Pink points out the danger of using carrot and stick tactics to keep people motivated. He points out that this works, sometimes quite well, in the short-term, but not as well in the long-term. In the long-term, he argues that they can...

1. extinguish intrinsic motivation,
2. diminish performance,
3. crush creativity,
4. crowd out good behavior,
5. encourage cheating shortcuts and unethical behavior,
6. become addictive, and
7. foster short-term thinking.

Letters grades don't have to be carrot and stick motivators. I've seen many educators cultivate an environment that minimizes the role of grades as motivators while still using them. Ultimately, a teacher that depends upon letter grades as the sole or primary motivator risks missing out on the experience of cultivating a high-impact learning community of purpose and possibility. It is one thing to learn alongside a group that wants to get a good grade. It is a completely different experience to learn with a group of people who develop a drive to learn for other reasons (maybe because of the possibilities that it opens for them, to meet a larger goal in life, because of a love of the subject, because of curiosity, etc.). I have participated in far too many learning communities without grades to think that they are necessary to motivate students. There are many and better ways to help students stay engaged. Of course, the best teachers may still use grades, but they don't use them as the primary motivator. That is a recipe for a culture of drudgery and compliance.

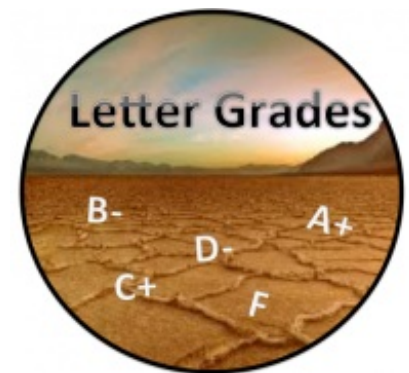
2) The next “level” of education uses them. Unless they change, we can't.

This is hard to ignore. Educators in elementary school prepare students for high school. College prep high schools prepare students for higher education. This argument comes in a couple of forms. One is the idea that students need to experience letter grades so that they are better prepared for grades on the next level. The other angle to this is that students coming from a school without letter grades may be at a disadvantage in the admission process at the next level (this is usually in reference to going from high school to college).

Interestingly, when we look at the University level, most individual classes typically have far fewer grades. It is rare to have a college class with more than ten graded assignments, although there are exceptions depending upon the content area. In fact, in the United States, there are still a good number of college courses where one's grade is based largely or entirely upon a couple of tests and a couple of major papers or projects.

With this in mind, a key to success in college courses is for students to learn to stay motivated in the short-term by something other than the next grade, as poor performance on the first grade in the class may be enough to prevent any chance of the highest letter grade. If preparing students for the next level is the main reason for maintaining the use of letter grades, then it might be worthwhile to gradually work toward students having fewer grades in each class. By the way, I'm not arguing that fewer opportunities for feedback is necessarily good instructional design. From a pure teaching and learning perspective, we know that providing frequent and meaningful feedback (which doesn't need to be in the form of a grade) is a key to improved student learning.

Are students coming from schools without letter grades at a disadvantage when they apply to the next level of education? Grade point average is only one of many factors that are considered when a student applies to a University. If we review the admissions processes at some of the elite Universities in the United States, we see that SAT/ACT, an essay, an interview, and letters of recommendation are more significant. This is largely because GPA does not tell us much. At best, it is simply a comparison of one's performance with other students at the same school. These other parts of the application play a much more important role in admissions. One group that conducts a great deal of research on this topic is the Home School Legal Defense Association. [Their pages on admission](#) to college should offer plenty of assurance that students are not at a disadvantage if they come from a school without letter grades (or even traditional transcripts).



3) Moving away from letter grades is a sign of decreasing academic rigor.

A response to this concern requires that we better understand what is meant by academic rigor. Is this about holding students to a high standard of academic performance? If so, do letter grades do this better than alternative documentation? Other forms of documentation often provide much more detail about what students learned in a given lesson, unit, or entire course of study. This fact certainly makes it possible to maintain high standards. Ultimately, it is up to the teacher to maintain academic rigor, and this can happen regardless of whether or not one uses letter grades.

In some cases, others seem to define rigor by the distribution of student performance in the class. If everyone received an "A", then they might conclude that the class lacked academic rigor, that it must have been too easy. While I do not agree with this perspective, it is worth our attention. We all know that some teachers grade harder than others. An "A" in one class does not equate the same level of effort or learning in another class, sometimes even when it is just a different section of the same class, but with a different instructor. For such reasons, the standards of the teacher typically determines rigor, not use of letter grades.

4) Letter grades allow us to compare student performance across different institutions or organizations.

Unless every teacher in every school is using the same standards and assessments, letter grades do not provide data that is comparable across schools. Letter grades are not standardized. They allow one to compare student performance in an individual class, and sometimes across classes in the same school. That is about the comparative limit of grades as they are currently used.

5) They work fine, so why change?

In some ways, this is the most compelling argument to me. Out of all the changes and improvements that we can make to enhance student engagement and learning, are letter grades the most important factor? There are many great schools and classrooms that use letter grades. However, the most engaging classes are just that...engaging, regardless of grades or no grades. Yet, letter grades have limitations, and for that reason, a growing number of schools are supplementing or replacing grades on report cards and transcripts with other types of documentation. This might be a more detailed description of student performance on individual course goals, a rich narrative assessment about student performance, a separate "report card" that focuses upon 21st century skills, student self-assessments, and/or a collection of student products that show each student's best work in the course. These efforts get to the heart of the matter, providing quality, substantive and meaningful documentation of student learning.

