

An A Is Not An A Is Not An A: A History Of Grading

Mark W. Durm

- 1 “Is that information going to be on the test?” This question is one teachers often hear from students. When instructors hear this, they should realize those particular students probably consider grades a higher priority than learning. It seems, for some, that securing a higher grade point average takes precedence over knowledge, learning career-related skills, and other aspects needed to compete in today’s world. This fact, coupled with the realization that many college students will, if given a choice, opt for the “easy teacher” rather than one from whom they may learn more, should make teachers reexamine the current system of grading.

Measuring Progress

- 2 Why do most schools use the A, B, C, D and F marking system? What happened to E? Why divisions of grades? Why not three, four, seven, or eight for that matter? I. E. Finkelstein (1913), concerned with these questions, offered the following:

When we consider the practically universal use in all educational institutions of a system of marks, whether numbers or letters, to indicate scholastic attainment of the pupils or students in these institutions, and when we remember how very great stress is laid by teachers and pupils alike upon these marks as real measures or indicators of attainment, we can but be astonished at the blind faith that has been felt in the reliability of the marking system. School administrators have been using with confidence an absolutely uncalibrated instrument.... What faults appear in the marking systems that we are now using, and how can these be avoided or minimized?

- 3 Finkelstein wrote this in 1913! Can we better answer these questions today? Is our grading system still uncalibrated?
- 4 Finkelstein further wrote:
... [V]ariability in the marks given for the same subject and to the same pupils by different instructors is so great as frequently to work real injustice to the students.... Nor may anyone seek refuge in the assertion that the marks of the students are of little real importance. The evidence is clear that marks constitute a very real and a very strong inducement to work, that they are accepted as real and fairly exact measurements of ability or of performance. Moreover, they not infrequently are determiners of the student’s career.
- 5 Because of the truthfulness of Finkelstein’s assumptions, academe may have created its own nightmare. By looking back to the original sources of grading in this country, we may find answers to the questions raised about the present state of college grading systems. A brief study of the origin of grades appears to have merit.
- 6 There is no doubt that colleges from the very beginning had some method of student evaluation, but there was no standard. Differentiating between students in the very earliest days of American colleges and universities seemed to center around social class. For example, in the early years of Harvard, students were not arranged alphabetically but were listed according to the social position of their families (Eliot, 1935).
- 7 In addition, there was apparently no standard process for the selection of the valedictorian. Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale in the late eighteenth century, had an interesting valedictory oration in his

diary concerning the valedictory oration in Latin for July of 1871. The valedictorian was elected by the class. Stiles wrote: “The Seniors presented me their Election of Gridly for Valedictory Orator, whom I approved...” (Stiles, 1901).

Yale Beginnings

- 8 The history of grading in American colleges was eloquently detailed by Mary Lovett Smallwood (1935). She related that marking, or grading, to differentiate students was first used at Yale. The scale was made up of descriptive adjectives and was included as a footnote to Stiles’s 1785 diary.
- 9 President Stiles wrote that 58 students were present at an examination, and they were graded as follows: “Twenty Optimi, sixteen second Optimi, 12 Inferiores (Boni), ten Pejores” (Stiles, 1901, vol. 3). In all probability, these may have been the very first collegiate “grades” given in the United States.
- 10 Yale took the initiative in formulating a scale. Smallwood quoted the following from the Book of Averages — Yale College:

“Record of Examinations,” 1813 — 1839: Rules respecting this Book and its records, 1. This book shall be kept with the Senior Tutor of the College, whose duty it shall (be) to see that the following rules are carried into effect. 2. The average result of the examination of every student in each class shall be recorded in this book by the Senior Tutor of the class.
- 11 Also this very same book from Yale gives a reference to marking on a scale of 4. In all probability, this was the origin of the 4.0 system used by so many colleges and universities today. There was, however, still no connection to letter grades. For example, an A was not a 4.0, for at this point in time, there was no A.
- 12 The gap of 28 years between President Stiles’s remarks of 1785 and Yale’s in 1813 is also interesting. It is hard to imagine there were not any records or statements concerning grading written during this time, but apparently none have been found.
- 13 After 1813 the records show a variety of attempts to evaluate and grade students. Smallwood noted that in the William and Mary Faculty Reports of July 16, 1817, the following classification of students was used: No. 1. (Names listed) The first in their respective classes; No. 2. Orderly, correct, and attentive; No. 3. They have made very little improvement; No. 4. They have learnt little or nothing.
- 14 The first numerical scale used at Harvard was dated 1830 and employed a scale of 20, not 4, and was used in an examination in rhetoric. In 1837 at Harvard, mathematical and philosophical professors used a scale of 100 (Smallwood, 1935). Yale, which had used the 4.0 scale starting in 1813, apparently changed later to a 9.0 scale. In 1832 the faculty records report a desire of the faculty to return to the 4.0 system, and apparently the institution did so (Smallwood, 1935).
- 15 There is no record that William and Mary had ever used a numerical scale until 1850. Before 1850, teachers used expressive adjectives in reports that were sent to parents (Smallwood, 1935). The University of Michigan was an example of an aggressive institution trying to find a workable grading system. It first used the numerical system, then opted for a pass-no pass system in 1851. In 1852 an examination book recorded a plus sign to indicate if the student passed. By 1860 Michigan added a “condit” (abbreviation for conditional) grade in addition to the plus sign. Shortly after 1860, they reinstated the 100 scale numerical system. By 1867 they had adopted a P for passing, a C for conditioned, or A for absent (Smallwood, 1935). Apparently Michigan believed in the adage “try and try again.”

Letter Grades at Harvard

- 16 Evidently such experimentation with grading systems at universities was the norm. As Smallwood wrote, “Before 1850 descriptive adjectives and various numerical systems of evaluation had been tried. Through

the next fifty years, several new scales of merit and demerit were devised.” The following (Smallwood, 1935, 50-52) is a chronological list of those scales:

1. 1877 — Harvard faculty started classifying students in six divisions, based on a 100 percent basis. The following is taken from the Harvard Faculty Records, April 2, 1877:
 1. Students shall be ranked in each study in divisions according to merit.
 - Division 1 — 90 or more on a scale of 100
 - Division 2 — 89 to 75
 - Division 3— 74 to 60
 - Division 4— 59 to 50
 - Division 5— 49 to 40
 - Division 6 — below 40
2. 1883— At Harvard there is a reference to a student making a B. This apparently was the first use of a letter for a grade that can be found.
3. 1884 — The Annual Report of the President of Harvard, 1885 stated: “The Faculty last year did away with the minute percentage system of marking, and substituted a classification of the students in each course of study in five groups, the lowest of which includes those who have failed in the course.”
4. 1886 — The Harvard Faculty Records, February 2, 1886, reported:
 1. Classes I, II, III (corresponding approximately to the nineties, eighties, and seventies of the present percentage scale). Those students who have passed with distinction, and are worthy of a place on the rank list.
 2. Class IV (corresponding to that part of the present scale which lies between the lower limit of the rank list and the minimum mark for passing). Those who have passed without distinction.
 3. Class V. Those who have failed to pass.
5. 1895 — Harvard adopted three classifications for merit — “Failed,” “Passed,” and “Passed with Distinction.”
6. 1895 — Michigan adopted the following: Moved and carried that there shall be 5 marks on Examinations: Passed — Incomplete — Conditioned — Not Passed — Absent.
7. 1896 — Yale related to its students that they must have a standing of 225 for the previous term or half term in order to continue. Thus, the decimal point at Yale must have been dropped.
8. 1897 — This year should be a red letter year in the annals of college grading. It was this year that Mount Holyoke adopted letters for marking students. The following was used:
 - A Excellent, equivalent to percents 95—100
 - B Good, equivalent to percents 85—94 (inclusive)
 - C Fair, equivalent to percents 76—84 (inclusive)
 - D Passed (barely) equivalent to percent 75
 - E Failed (below 75)
- 17 Mount Holyoke in 1897 was using a marking system that combined the three types of grading: descriptive adjectives, letters, and percentages. In 1898 they again changed the scale in a minor fashion to read: A—95—100; B—90—94; C—85—89; D—80—84; E—75—79; F—Failed.
- 18 Therefore, what Mount Holyoke adopted in 1897 became the cornerstone for college grading. Some colleges and universities have altered this standard in different ways. In addition, at most colleges and universities, the letter grade also denotes the early point scale: A for 4.0, B for 3.0, C for 2.0, and D for a 1.0.
- 19 As the record reveals, the history of grading in schools in the United States is replete with trial and error. Is it the best we can accomplish? Probably not.

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