

After initial discussions amongst the First-Year Experience (FYE) faculty at Barnard College in 2018 about the possibility of Pass/Fail courses in the First-Year Experience Programs, in fall 2019 the directors of FYE Programs began work on proposing a four-semester pilot program of “not graded” courses, where all First-Year Writing (FYW) and First-Year Seminar (FYS) courses would only be offered Pass/Fail (no D). In the white paper and proposal for the pilot, created with research support from the CEP, the directors explain that the goal of piloting these ungraded courses at Barnard is “to determine whether the many documented benefits of P/F first-year courses outweigh some of the possible challenges.”

The pilot began in Fall 2020 and ran through Spring 2022. Surveys given to students and faculty at the end of each semester revealed how valuable qualitative feedback in the form of extensive written comments and one on one meetings was in comparison with letter grades and rubrics, with one student highlighting how much “risk taking” and “true development” they experienced in their P/F FYE course. Some faculty reported being “freed up” from having to justify that their comments “add up” to a letter grade and explained that P/F encouraged their own pedagogical development, as well as held students more accountable for how they approached their course and their own research and writing.

In their proposal to make P/F permanent in FYE courses, created with research support from the CEP, the FYE directors pointed to these faculty and student surveys as providing “overwhelming evidence that P/F assessment is a significant benefit to Barnard students and faculty. “ In April 2022, the Committee on Instruction approved all FYE courses to be P/F at Barnard, with follow-up evaluation to take place in the 2027-2028 academic year, and in November 2022, the full Barnard faculty voted to approve permanent P/F assessment in FYE as well.

We are sharing the original literature review for the pilot program proposal (2020) and an excerpt from the FYE proposal, “Making Pass/Fail Assessment Permanent in First-Year Experience” (2022) in hopes that this research can benefit those within and beyond the Barnard community seeking resources on alternative approaches to grading.

From: “White Paper: Pilot Assessment Program for First-Year Experience Courses Literature Review” (2020)

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This literature review will outline some of the key scholarship about evaluating student work through qualitative feedback and by minimizing or eliminating letter grades. It includes studies particular to the issues raised and analyzed in this proposal: the

specific needs and issues of first year students; ungraded work in writing intensive and writing focused courses; risk-taking and risk-aversion in the context of graded and ungraded work; grade anxiety and its impact on other aspects of students' psychological and physical well-being; students of color, low-income, first generation, working class and multilingual students and their experiences of graded and ungraded courses; faculty-student relationships and how graded and ungraded work affect them. Organized chronologically, it includes scholarly writing and empirical studies from the mid-1960s up until the present so as to contextualize the work of contemporary scholars such as Susan Blum, Asao Inoue, Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner who advocate assessment reform. Though some of the studies noted are grounded in data outside of the US, the majority of the studies included are US-based. While by no means comprehensive as the literature on this topic is vast, it will hopefully provide some helpful context for the issues we raise in our proposal.^[1]

One of the earliest experiments to investigate teaching without grades took place in 1930 at the Medical Center of the University of California, led by Professor of Microbiology Max Marshall. Though conducted almost 30 years earlier, Marshall did not publish his findings until 1960, when the elimination of grades started to gain traction. As described by Marshall (Marshall 1960), dramatic discrepancies amongst instructors who team taught a course in Microbiology for medical students led them to want to experiment with eliminating grades in the course. For two experimental years, the instructors also eliminated examinations and only kept track of the work performed in the class and "operated on the ridiculous assumptions that the students were there to learn and that we were there to teach" (Marshall 1960:24).

The results were surprising on several counts: the students were more relaxed as were the instructors, unburdened of the "constant unpleasant demand for judgment and appraisal" (Marshall 1960:24). Weak students became more confident without the threat of judgment, and all of the students asked for examinations and other forms of structure (such as laboratory notebooks) knowing that they would be discussed with the instructors rather than be evaluated by them for a letter grade. An atmosphere of real discovery flourished and the result was that the students applied themselves to their studies more and the instructors were even more interested and enthusiastic than before (Marshall 1960:24). The input of deans and other instructors combined with Marshall's and his colleagues' experiences and observations led them to favor a descriptive method of feedback that does not judge or grade students (Marshall 1960:27). So that instructors do not become overwhelmed, he put forth the idea of a "flotation technique," where only the most salient comments about a student's work (those that "float to the top") are described. Both grades and descriptive comments are subjective, he argues, but their experiment's findings show that the descriptive

approach is more honest, more direct and produces more relaxed and enthusiastic instructors and students (Marshall 1960:29).

Hofstra Professor of Education George Mannello also conducted an early experiment to investigate the elimination of grades. Conducted in two undergraduate education courses at Hofstra University (then Hofstra College) in 1962, his experiment posed the following question: Is it possible to substitute non-grading methods of evaluation for grades or scores in a college course without deterioration of the quality and quantity of learning (Mannello 1964:328)? Students in these courses (71 in total) were told that except for the final grade in the course, there would be no grades or numeric evaluations. Instead, exams and papers were evaluated qualitatively and also marked either “Acceptable” or “Unacceptable” and students were also invited to provide self-evaluations of their work throughout the semester. At the end of the semester, a questionnaire given to all of the participants and completed by a little more than half of them (40) elicited the following results: participants reported feeling they had worked harder and learned more in this structure and the majority (85%) felt less tension in this type of course than in courses where they were being consistently graded, in which they did not receive qualitative evaluations and in which self-evaluation was not an option. Mannello argues that this study is especially relevant in American culture where excessive pressure for high scores and grades has divorced learning from evaluation and has produced a student body that organizes its efforts around passing tests successfully and getting high grades (Mannello 1964:334). From his study, the hypothesis is made that if no final grade were required in college courses but instead the instructor submitted a report of the student’s performance and course credit, student anxieties would be reduced without diminishing his/her academic accomplishments (Mannello 1964:334).

University of Massachusetts/Amherst English Professor Peter Elbow echoes many of these arguments in his 1968 article, “A Method for Teaching Writing” asserting that weekly writing assignments should be exercises in getting feedback and therefore learning how to write better (Elbow 1968:125). While he does not argue for the complete elimination of grades, he does advocate that students in writing courses be graded on essays revised on the basis of instructor and peer feedback (Elbow 1968:55). Viewing the classroom as a place of conversation, experimentation, mutual negotiation amongst students and instructors and of varied feedback from students and instructors (Cowan 2017:3), Elbow favors qualitative assessment and effectively proposes grading contracts between students and instructors (Elbow 1968:125), similar to the arguments of scholars such as Mannello (1964) and Merla Sparks (1967) in her significant article, “An Alternative to the Traditional Grading System.” A former high school English teacher, Sparks analyzed traditional grading systems as dangerous to the

psychological, behavioral and intellectual health of students, particularly the “weakest” students, and innovated a student-centered classroom with a permissive atmosphere in which no grades were given (Sparks 1967:1032). Howard Kirschenbaum, Sidney Simon and Rodney Napier (1971) were motivated by a research question similar to Mannello’s in their analysis of grading practices written in the form of a novel, *Wad-ja-get?: The Grading Game in Higher Education*. “Is the traditional system of grading the most educationally useful system of evaluation?” (Kirschenbaum et al. 1971). Including an annotated bibliography and appendix detailing alternative grading systems, their review of grading practices and suggestions for innovative substitutes remains influential.

The 1980s saw two potentially oppositional trends: the development of technology that supported large-scale quantitative grading and increased critical pedagogy scholarship about the importance of the diversity of students’ racial, ethnic, gender, class and sexual orientations. Scholars also began to increasingly ask the questions raised by Mannello and Marshall more than two decades earlier: “Did traditional grading allow teachers to have the democratic and egalitarian relationships they would like to foster with their students?” (Cowan 2017:4). Ruth Butler and Mordechai Nisan’s landmark study of the relationship between qualitative feedback and motivation (1986) showed how instructors’ emphasis on quantitative assessment depresses creativity, fosters fear of failure and undermines interest, whereas qualitative feedback was shown to enhance student performance and motivation (Butler & Nisan 1986:215), findings which are reiterated and expanded upon in two more contemporary studies (Lipnevich & Smith 2009; Harks et al. 2014).

One of the most significant publications of the 1990s was former President of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Stephen Tchudi’s edited volume, *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing* (1997), a collection of twenty-five articles critically addressing a range of ungraded assessment options, from advocating writing portfolios to collaborative critique with students and instructors. Several articles in the volume conclude that instructors should consider to what extent grades reinforce hierarchies in the classroom and whether grades are an effective means to encourage students’ independent thinking or to communicate information students can use to improve their writing (Ketter & Hunter 1997).

Another valuable contribution during this period but outside of Tchudi’s anthology is Hunter College English Professor Karen Greenberg’s article, “Grading, Evaluating, Assessing: Power and Politics in College Composition,” (1997). It begins from the premise that all grades, evaluations and assessments of students’ work are exercises in power and that even the most ‘contextualized’ and ‘multidimensional’ assessments

involve asymmetrical attempts to shape experiences, to control others, to maintain authority and to label students (Greenberg 1997:277). She explains that during the 1980s, much of the scholarly literature on evaluating undergraduate writing focused on the diverse development of procedures for evaluating writing, including test formats, writing tasks and prompts, scoring scales and reader training activities (Greenberg 1992: 276). The early 1990s saw instructors critiquing these approaches as problematic and flawed and moved to writing portfolio assessment. But this too, garnered criticism: some instructors rejected this model because of the extra and usually uncompensated work of evaluation and also the complexity of that evaluation that some expressed as inconsistent and difficult (Greenberg 1992: 276).

Urging a revisiting of College of the Holy Cross English Professor Patricia Bizzell's "What Can We Know, What Must We Do, What May We Hope: Writing Assessment" (1987) and reworking a number of arguments made in Bizzell's "Power, Authority and Critical Pedagogy" (1991), she encourages instructors and university administrators to acknowledge that everyone involved in instruction and evaluation—including students—need to think much more carefully about how ideologies of writing assessment force the dominant cultural forces that many in higher education seek to question if not resist (Greenberg 1997:282). Greenberg's final argument runs counter to Ed White's (White 1996) assertion that instructors must "learn to live" with assessment as the debates and contentions it raises are productive. Rather, Greenberg argues, assessment increases social stratification, as exemplified by the way in which in the CUNY system assessment is used to delegitimize non-traditional and low-income students of color and marginalize basic writing skills courses and the students who take them (Greenberg 1997:277).

Several of what Binghamton Professor of Philosophy Christopher Knapp (Knapp 2007) calls the "fundamental problems" with the grading practices at most colleges and universities across the US are reiterated in other contemporary literature (Schinske & Tanner 2014; Blum 2016, Blum 2017). Knapp argues that grading practices are unfair, contribute to the unjust distribution of desirable positions and harm our students, our institutions and our society at large (Knapp 2007:275). At many colleges and universities, little if any effort is made to decide upon a faculty-wide or even department-wide understanding of how particular grades correspond to a student's performance and new instructors rarely possess any extensive training about how to give grades (Knapp 2007: 276). Instructors often have extremely variable criteria for grading students: grading practices can thus vary widely between instructors. Practices also may differ across disciplines (Knapp 2007:277-278), citing the example of the 2006 grading statistics at SUNY-Binghamton: in the Humanities, half of the grades that instructors gave were in the "A" range and 7 percent of all grades were "B-"

or lower, while in science and math, 30 percent of the grades given were in the “A” range and 28 percent were “C+” or lower.

The inconsistency of grades and grading policies thus produces grades with ambiguous and imprecise meanings and also undermines the potential communicative power of the grade (Knapp 2007:281). This in turn, he argues, raises two moral problems: first, the unclear meanings of grades produce unnecessary harm, and it is the students who are likely to be the most harmed (Knapp 2007:281). A student may decide, for example, that because she received an “A” in a literature course and a “B” in an economics course, that she is better suited to study literature, thus potentially confusing where a student’s real talents and desires lie. Knapp also outlines social harms generated by grades: because they are ambiguous, they may also not be providing accurate information to scholarship and awards committees, graduate schools and employers and thus merit-based opportunities may be unfairly distributed (Knapp 2007:282). Knapp thus argues that the inconsistency of grades creates inequity as well as personal, institutional and social harm.

In his influential article, “The Case Against Grades,” Alfie Kohn also makes many similar arguments, adding that grades do not prepare students for the ‘real world’ (Kohn 2201/2013:152) and advocates narrative evaluation for its ability to be tailored to the student, the nature of the course, the subject matter and the instructor. Narrative evaluation has also been shown to reduce the anxiety that many scholars in the late 1990s and early 2000s explicated as having serious consequences for students’ physical and mental health and educational achievement (Campbell & Svensen 1992; Zeidner 2007) and that first-year students experience in particular (Allen & Heibert, 1991; Misra, McKean & West 2000; Aull 2015). Other recent scholarly responses to grading practices in the context of evaluating undergraduate student writing have also focused on how counterproductive grading practices can produce alienated students and alienated student writing and risk-averse, ego-oriented students (Pitt 2019). Risk and experimentation in writing, despite being encouraged by some instructors, also raises concerns on the part of students that an experimental work may jeopardize their grades and thus discourage risk-taking and experimentation (Inoue 2012, 2015, Kohn 2013, Elbow & Danielwicz 2008). Asao Inoue’s work, especially his *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future* (2015), is vital for thinking critically about how risk-aversion in students’ writing, thinking and personal and intellectual development can be affected by grading, and how its hegemonic effects can especially jeopardize multilingual, working class and students of color (Inoue 2012, 2015).

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^[1] For a brief overview of assessment and grading in the US since the 19th century, see Guskey, Thomas (2013). "The Case Against Percentage Grades" *Educational Leadership* September: 68-72.

From: “Making Pass/Fail Assessment Permanent in First-Year Experience” (2022)

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The primary benefits of evaluating student work through written feedback and without a letter grade are as follows:

Assessment without grades enables student-centered, nuanced, and substantive feedback from instructors. Evaluating without grades gives attention to the individual student in a way that assigning a letter grade simply cannot. In their study of first-year writing students, for example, Ketter & Hunter (1997) found that students primarily view grades as indicating whether their ideas agreed with those of the professor as a respected authority. They conclude that professors should consider whether grades are an effective means of encouraging students’ thinking or communicating information that students can use to improve their writing (Ketter & Hunter 1997). Their conclusion echoes Steven Tchudi’s argument that grading is reductive and does not communicate useful information to students (Tchudi 1997); other studies have shown, by contrast, that constructive feedback challenges and motivates students to learn (Jessup-Anger, 2011; Brophy, 2004; Simmons 1995; Chickering & Gamson, 1987, 1991). Because they are not limited by the letter grade to symbolize the success of student work, instructors are better able to evaluate the specific individual work *and* the development of the student across the semester. Feedback is tailored to the learning goals of the assignment and also to the learning goals of each student.

Assessment without grades is inclusive. Evaluation without letter grades offers the feedback students need without boxing them into a uniform system that ignores the varied academic backgrounds of our first-year students and that puts students from under-resourced backgrounds into a grade competition with students from hyper-resourced backgrounds. Such competition threatens the often-tenuous sense of belonging of students from under-resourced backgrounds and can also risk ignoring the skills and knowledge that first-generation and low-income students bring to the classroom (Anderson, Purcell-Gates, Gagné & Jang, 2009). Experts in antiracist and inclusive pedagogy urge faculty to move away from letter grades that have historically

equated excellence and professionalism with whiteness (Inoue, 2015), a call that is especially salient given recent Black Lives Matter protests, but also more substantively supports the increasing numbers of BIPOC, first-generation, and low-income students at Barnard.

Written assessment without grades also requires instructors to be clear and direct in the articulation of expectations for each assignment. Clarity of expectations is a bedrock inclusive pedagogy practice, in particular for first-year writing-intensive courses (Aull, 2015). If our goal is to give students high-quality feedback that is accountable to our own expectations, that is responsive to them as individuals, and that acknowledges not only where they begin in our classrooms but how they develop, then assessing without the negative and potentially demoralizing effects of grades is best practice for all students and particularly for multilingual, working class, and students of color (Butler and Nisan 1986; Butler 1988; Lipnevich & Smith 2009; Inoue 2012, 2015).

Assessment without grades is especially well-suited to the learning goals and assignments in FYE. Both FYS and FYW courses require written assignments with drafts, focusing on the process of revision. As Susan Blum argues of P/F assessment, when “revision is one of the primary techniques” of learning in a course, appropriate feedback is “formative, not summative” (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/02/professors-reflections-their-experiences-ungrading-spark-renewed-interest-student>). Comparing the impact of process-oriented feedback (defined as written feedback that uses an individual and criterion reference standards, provides elaborated feedback on individual strengths and provides supportive strategies on meeting learning goals), and grade-oriented feedback, Harks et al. (Harks, Rakoczy, Hattie, Besser & Kleime 2013) found that students perceived process-oriented feedback as more useful than grades; process-oriented feedback also had a greater positive effect on students’ achievement and interest in subject matter than grade-oriented feedback (Harks et al. 2013). Grades are inherently summative, and their summative finality overpowers the higher-quality, detailed formative feedback that FYE instructors offer students. In this way, letter grades undercut the work FYE instructors do when we spend copious amounts of time responding to student work, only to have students dismiss substantive comments in favor of the letter grade.

Assessment without grades gives students the freedom to take risks as they learn. Grade anxiety among Barnard students is at an all-time high. Feedback we have received from Well Woman, from Feel Well, Do Well, and from first-year students themselves in our First-Year Roundtables (held in September 2019) reinforces the psychological damage of grade anxiety. But grade anxiety is also intellectually

damaging (see, for example, “A Change to Pass/Fail Grading in the First Two Years at One Medical School Results in Improved Psychological Well-Being,” Bloodgood, Robert A. PhD; Short, Jerry G. PhD; Jackson, John M. MS; Martindale, James R. PhD). Recent studies of academic stress experienced by undergraduates have shown emotional, behavioral, and physiological reactions to stress to be the highest among first-year students, (Misra, McKean & West 2000) and first-year students also often lack the strong social support networks and coping mechanisms used by older students to deal with college stress (Allen & Heibert, 1991). Evaluation anxiety can have serious consequences for physical and mental health as well as one’s educational achievement and occupational career (Zeidner 2007) and when stress is perceived negatively or becomes excessive, it can affect both health and academic performance (Campbell & Svenson, 1992). The prevalence of writing anxiety amongst undergraduate students (Baez 2005) coupled with the fact that anxiety is the most common health concern for college students generally and is increasing (Center for Collegiate Mental Health 2019) makes it essential to consider how anxiety may be negatively affecting the health and intellectual development of our students. Especially in their first semesters at Barnard, students are acutely anxious about their own place in the classroom and whether or not they belong around the same table as their peers. Grades heighten and reinforce that anxiety, and even when written comments mark progress and praise aspects of an assignment that were successful, students skim over that feedback to focus only on the letter grade because it speaks to them much more powerfully than do the more substantive written comments.

Assessment without grades holds students accountable. Students are ultimately responsible for their own learning, but the uniform nature of grades leads students to experience righteous anger at an “unfair” and often opaque system. Responding to and incorporating quality individualized feedback requires a level of maturity and accountability that letter grades do not solicit. In their lives after Barnard, students will be asked to respond to feedback that is not symbolized by a simple letter grade; in this way, P/F FYE courses can help students gain important transferable skills and habits of mind. The cultivation of these skills is particularly meaningful in the context of a first-year seminar, as studies have correlated the first-year seminar experience to academic performance, student engagement and student retention, as well as to a potential range of positive academic experiences, including informal student-faculty engagement, and academic collaboration with peers and friendships on campus (Barefoot, Warnock, Dickinson, Richardson, & Roberts, 1998; Fidler & Godwin, 1994; Fidler & Moore, 1996; Simmons, 1995; Keup & Barefoot, 2005).

Assessment without grades puts the emphasis on intellectual engagement and faculty-student relationships. One of the most valuable benefits of FYE courses is

that students are in small seminars with full-time faculty members, intended to model the world of ideas and scholarship at Barnard and to invite the student into that world. As faculty, we want students to brainstorm, build on one another's ideas, try out ideas, and challenge one another and themselves. With the weight of grades hanging over the First-Year classroom, where students are learning what it means to be a college student, students often feel inhibited and afraid of doing the work of intellectual engagement in the "wrong way"—in a way that will reflect negatively on their graded performance in the class. Assessment without grades more accurately reflects the real world of scholarship. The exchange of ideas that characterizes scholarship is not graded, and the feedback we as scholars receive is not graded. As scholars, we are invited to respond thoughtfully to meaningful feedback, understanding that our ideas, research and publications develop as we enter scholarly conversations with others. We are not given poor grades for less fully-developed iterations of our ideas—rather, we are given the opportunity to progress, to better explain and defend our claims, or to adapt them in response to those of others. A P/F first-year classroom more accurately reflects this cultivation of intellectual community and gives students the freedom to develop their ideas and their critical thinking abilities without being penalized by a standard, uniform evaluative system.