

# **The Need for Grades in Terminal Degree Programs?**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines the issue of grading in terminal degree programs as well as exploring the history and utility of grading. Through personal reflection, the author reveals how grading is a coercive management tool which conditions people to act, speak, and participate in ways which they would not otherwise if grading were not present. Finally, the author urges for reform in grading practices whereby educational settings deemphasized grading altogether – creating fruitful learning experiences that encourage learners to take risks, talk freely, and explore topics and readings beyond the course expectations.

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## **Introduction**

As the name implies, a terminal degree program is the highest and last credential awarded for the mastery of a particular field of study. Terminal degree programs exist in practically every discipline (e.g., Law – LLD, Theology – ThD, Medicine – MD). In the field of Education, terminal degrees come in the form of a Doctor of Education (EdD) or Doctor of Philosophy (PhD).

As I begin to embark on my journey towards attaining my EdD, I find myself asking many questions to clarify my preconceptions and flesh out the expectations of the program. Thankfully, in my EdD program, one of the compulsory courses was an introduction to the expectations, requirements, and progression of the program. This course allowed the new cohort of EdD students to “learn the ropes” through the experiences of administrators, professors, and graduates of the program. The discussions with alumni and professors proved to be valuable, as

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they captured a candid and deeply personal reflection of how they grew as individuals throughout the program. These talks also provided motivation, support and tangible evidence that success in the program was attainable.

While such talks helped answer many of my initial questions about what it will be like to be an EdD student, some information did not align with my preconceptions. One preconception that I had was that all courses in a terminal degree program were ungraded, or pass/fail. It seemed reasonable and logical to me that given how personal and narrowly focused an individual's research at this level is, it would be impossible for a professor to understand the complexity of an individual's level of achievement and then quantify that with a letter/number grade. Much to my dismay, my grading preconception was negated, when as a class, we read page six of the course outline – an exercise that reminded me of my years as a student in high school and going through the course syllabus on the first day of school. As the professor went over the grading scale, I watched as fellow students feverishly wrote down anecdotes that the professor used to supplement the discussion.

Let me make something clear, it is not that I am surprised that there are assignments with due dates and specific expectations – I am surprised at the fact that at this high level of academic research and inquiry, we turned a blind eye to the utility and legitimacy of grades. This observation has led me to investigate what the purpose of grading is and its place in terminal degree programs.

### **History of Grading**

In an effort to understand the purpose of grading, it is necessary to trace grading back to its roots and investigate why it was established. In Lester Hunt's (2008) book titled *Grade Inflation*, Mary Biggs provides a thorough meta-analysis of the history of grading and traces the

ancestry of grading to the seventeenth century, where grades in schools replaced narrative comments to act as way to inform students of their performance and determine their eligibility for promotion and graduation.

Through the analysis of the grading practices of the early and most influential American universities and colleges, one can see the foundation of our current grading system emerge. The earliest record of examination dates back to 1646, where at Harvard students performed oral exams in Latin, similar to the oral exams which remain a requirement for most doctoral programs around the world today (Biggs, 2008). In the late 1700s Yale ranked students in four categories *Optimi, second Optimi, Inferiores, and Pejores*, and in 1813 they instituted a four-point numeric grading scale (Biggs, 2008). Soon after, other institutions responded with their own flavor of alphabetic and/or numeric grading systems (e.g., in 1830 Harvard implemented a 20-point grading scale).

These grading systems did not come without controversy and change. Change was demanded by a progressive shift in the mid to late 1800s which supported arguments similar to Wisheart (2005) who stated the following:

Numbers and letters in our grading systems get in the way of what is important in classrooms. When we reduce learning in our students' eyes to numbers and letters, we lose passion, we lose complexity, we lose fun, we lose depth, we lose the essence of learning. (p. 146)

In 1895, as a response to these movements, Harvard removed the divisional rating system and invented a three-category "scale of merit" which included: *Fail, Pass, or Pass with Distinction* (Biggs, 2008, p. 126). In fact, so much controversy surrounded the legitimacy of grades that some institutions (i.e., University of Michigan, and Stanford) completely abolished grading all

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together. However, political shifts and industrialism of the 1900s caused these progressive grading systems to become reshaped and form the grading systems that we know today.

As an interesting end to her paper, Biggs (2008) re-asks the questions which faced the academic community in the late 1800s with a wonderful rhetoric:

Should a student be measured against any absolute *or* against other students or only against his own potential? And what should a grade measure? What indeed was its purpose? ... Should all grades be abolished? Or should letters be replaced by some other system (for example, pass/fail or narrative evaluations)? ... More fundamentally, what [are] the most precious values, purposes, and goals of higher education itself? (p. 141)

The dialogue presented provides the basis on which further investigation must begin. Therefore, it is important to understand the fundamental purpose of grading and see if that aligns with the values, purposes and goals of higher education itself.

### **The Purpose of Grading**

It is generally agreed (Kohn, 1993; Marzano, 2000; Brighthouse, 2008) that school grades have been established to serve three main functions:

1. Grades inform students of their performance.
2. Grades inform future employers and schools of the quality of an applicant.
3. Grades are a pedagogical tool to improve student performance.

I feel it important to look at each of these categories and discuss how the values, purposes and goals of a terminal degree program do not support these necessities for assigning grades outlined above.

### **Grades inform students of their performance**

As noted earlier, the introduction of grades to inform students of their performance began as a replacement for narrative reports and “the link between grading and communication of the quality of student performance has been greatly weakened, perhaps ruptured all together” (Biggs, 2008, p. 126). Like Silberman (1970), I contend that the only thing that grading has provided is a way to “enable administrators to rate and sort children” (p. 138), and perform quantitative analysis on. I feel this is also true in terminal degree programs where grades provide no value or significance except for arbitrarily sorting and ranking individuals.

Since it has been acknowledged by multiple sources that grades do not provide value to either the students that receive the grade, or the academy that labels students with the grade, we must ask ourselves for how long should we hold on to this exercise that is riddled with flaws? As a student in a terminal degree program I am certain that I will not be “informed about my performance” based on the grade which I am given.

### **Grades inform future employers and schools of the quality of an applicant**

It is easy to understand that the purpose of grading in this context does not apply to terminal degree programs. Firstly, as the name implies, a terminal degree is the last and highest degree sought in a given field of study. With that being said, it is clear that grading for the purpose of providing feedback on the quality of an applicant would be futile given the rigor in terminal degree programs, and the fact that there are no opportunities beyond the program itself which would rely on grades as a basis for selection criteria.

Secondly, people who are enrolled in terminal degree programs are often gainfully employed or are enrolled because the terminal degree is a requirement to enter their desired profession (e.g., family medicine). A quick survey of my EdD cohort revealed that over half of my peers were receiving some form of financial support from their employer with no

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commitment to service. This is interesting as it illustrates that employers recognize the value of human capital and see the importance of investing in their employees academic pursuits.

Furthermore, many of these same employers provide additional incentives (e.g., raise, promotion, tenure) to employees that complete terminal degree program – regardless of grades.

#### **Grades are a pedagogical tool to improve student performance**

Alfie Kohn has dedicated much of his publications to arguing the fact that grades have a negative impact on student performance. In his 1993 book titled *Punished by Rewards* Kohn writes:

The carrot-and-stick approach in general is unsuccessful; grades in particular undermine intrinsic motivation and learning, which only serves to increase our reliance on them. The significance of these effects is underscored by the fact that, in practice, grades are routinely used not merely to evaluate but also to motivate. In fact, they are powerful demotivators regardless of the reason given for their use. (p. 201)

I would like to think that the coordinators of terminal degree programs do not include grading in the design of their programs as a form of “bait”. Through my own personal observations, I do feel that the inclusion of grades in the program has caused both me and my peers undue stress and anxiety.

Kohn (1999) supports this argument and infers that stress and anxiety is to be expected once grades are introduced into any setting. Other effects of grading include: reduction in students’ preference for challenging tasks, spoiling of teachers’ relationships with students, and spoiling of students’ relationships with each other (Kohn, 1999, p. 41). These three statements act as a hard pill for educators to swallow as it challenges the very constructs of what they know

of mainstream education and its 300 year reliance on grades. Even more harrowing is how these three statements also resonate in my own experience in the doctoral program.

For example, I know that there have been times in my classes where my peers have felt obliged to be part of a discussion, one which they otherwise would not, but have been coerced to do so because they are being graded based on class participation. By introducing grades we have overshadowed the importance of quality dialogue with a competition to be heard and be graded. Furthermore, grades instill fear and compliance. I know that as a student I fear expressing my opinions that may conflict with those of whom is assigning me the grade, so I opt for compliance.

Why this is particularly bothersome to me, and why I struggle with the issue of grading in general, is because I have had the opportunity to participate in graduate work in which grades were not connected to my work. In this environment grading was deemphasized and what was made clear to me was that the purpose was about educating and acting in the world – not about grades. This was a fruitful experience for me because for once I was free of the restrictions that grading imposes on learners. I felt free to take risks, talk freely, and explore topics and readings beyond the course expectations because it was of genuine interest to me.

## **Conclusion**

The arguments presented reveal how disturbing and damaging grades are in education in general, not to mention in higher education. By reflection on my personal experiences, I have had a chance to explore how grading in a terminal degree program has already conditioned me to act, speak, and participate in ways which I would not if grading didn't exist. Through my reflection and with the support of relevant literature, I have come to conclude that grades serve no purpose in terminal degree programs whatsoever.

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Obviously it is within the power and jurisdiction of the university to transform (de-grade) the traditional grading system. For instance, there is one course in my EdD program which is simply pass/fail. What interests me is that no other courses in my program are pass/fail. Since de-grading is an active process, the University has made a conscious decision to grade students – at this level of academic study it is important to ask why? This is not a question I can answer, but one that I hope academics around the world will answer.

I think that the most fitting end to this discussion is to read the words of Paul Dressel who elegantly reveals the utility of grades:

A grade can be regarded only as an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite amount of material. (Dressel, 1957, p. 6)

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