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## Are Non-Graded Options "Making the Grade?" — Another Look

Sheldon L. Schmidt

In a recent article in this journal Alice Clark raised a number of questions regarding non-letter graded options for undergraduate students. The study attempted (Clark, 1975, p. 30) ". . . to compare the academic performance and motivation of education majors . . ." Clark compares non-letter graded students (N=27) to letter graded students (N=343) enrolled in a sophomore-level course in educational psychology on the basis of (1) academic achievement, (2) number of out-of-class activities participated in, and (3) on expected final class grades projected from overall, cumulative grade point average.

Clark reports a cause-effect relationship existing between a student's choice to enroll in a course under the non-letter graded option and lower academic performance and motivation. Clark states (p. 36):

The implications of this study should be a cause for genuine concern . . . especially as the non-letter grade option becomes used more frequently by students. If non-graded students perform below expectation, choose fewer out-of-class activities, and achieve at a lower level than graded students, then the quality of the learning experience needs to be carefully evaluated.

Before examining the details of the reported findings it is important to comment on two general points that are significant in understanding the implications of the study.

The first point relates to the lumping together of CR-CD-CW and SU non-letter graded students. Although Clark can legitimately lump them because they are non-letter graded options, she ignores the vast differences in the type of students who elect the various options and the vast difference in the intent of the options themselves. The only commonality

between the two is the movement away from the A-F grading system.

The SU system is available to all undergraduates at UND and little, if any, effort is made to provide advisement as to goals and purposes for using the option. The option was initiated to encourage students to broaden their choices in terms of the elective hours in their programs of study. The SU option is clearly used by students to protect GPA's when either electing to take an overload, when enrolling in an elective in a field that is new to them or when exploring a field of study as a possible major. Clearly, the education student who elects to enroll in Educational Psychology under the SU system is an atypical student. Finally, the SU option differs from the CR-CD-CW option in that it can be used in conjunction with the A-F system during the same semester. The motivation to slight the course taken from SU grading is tremendous.

The CR-CD-CW option is open only to elementary education majors in their junior and senior years. When electing the option the student must elect to take his entire enrollment under the option. The option does not encourage students who enter elementary education with low GPA's to use the non-letter graded option, because it would be impossible to raise one's GPA using the option. Most students expect to raise their GPA during their junior/senior year when most of their course work is in their major field. Finally, although Clark (p. 33) reports the average cumulated credit hours of the non-letter graded students as 91 hours, suggesting that they were students finishing their junior year, she reports that (p. 31):

Elementary education students taking the course would typically have been sophomores and not yet deeply involved in the Center and its CR-CD-CW option\*; hence, the majority opted for a letter graded pattern.

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\*It is important to note that junior and senior elementary education majors enroll in a Center Seminar

The reader is clearly left with the question as to who the non-letter graded students were, whether they were typical students and if they were, in fact, CTL (education) majors.

The second point relates to the problems created by an instructor who encourages students to set their own grade-level goals for a course, when traditionally instructors have simply expected and encouraged students to do their very best. Clark, after encouraging students to set their own grade-level goals, uses the students' cumulative GPA's to predict the grade level which they would be expected to attain and uses this predicted final grade to make a judgment as to whether or not students performed above, below or as expected in the course. The students' own grade-level goal (prediction), encouraged by the instructor and stated at the beginning of the course, would seem to have been a more appropriate basis for determining above, below or expected achievement. Certainly the conclusions drawn, simply on the basis of the instructor's predicted final grade, are suspect until such time as it is determined if students' goals and instructor's expectations differed at the outset and, if they did, an effort is made to determine why, and what such differences would make in terms of interpreting the data.

### Research Question I

Clark's first research question concerns differences between students enrolled in letter graded or non-letter graded notation systems in terms of (p. 31)  
" . . . academic achievement."

Academic achievement is measured by (p. 32):  
" . . . examination scores, reading and observation points, and final grades." Clark refers to

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under the guidance of a faculty person. The Seminar group, meeting two hours per week, encourages significant goal setting, self evaluation, individualization of instruction and responsibility taking by students.

examination scores as the (p. 33) ". . . traditional measure of skill and knowledge" and refers to reading beyond class requirements and observation in public schools as (p. 35) "activity." The distinction made here by Clark, knowledge/skills versus activity as it relates to academic achievement, will become increasingly important as the study is examined more thoroughly.

### Reading Beyond Class Requirements and Observing in Public Schools

Clark reports that (p. 34-5):

" . . . there is a difference in the level of achievement in several of the activities. For example, equivalent percentages of students engaged in reading beyond the class requirements, but students selecting letter grades read more books, and accumulated a significantly larger number of reading points." (emphasis added)

An identical statement is made as regards observing in public schools. The difference in the mean number of points for reading (Table I, p. 34) is 11.8 points. Twenty points are given for reading a book and attending a group discussion on the book. To make the "significant difference" concrete this means that the letter graded group read one-half book more than did the non-letter graded group. The difference in the mean for observation points collected can be made concrete by noting that it relates to 1.4 more points earned for each observation and contract completed  $[(119.79 - 105.44) \div 11]$ . The significance is statistically real, but it is legitimate to question what significance this has as regards "academic" achievement as traditionally measured in terms of knowledge and skills.

### Examinations

The other component in the "academic achievement" research question is related to the five examinations given. Clark states (p. 33):

It is important to note that on examination scores there is no significant difference in achievement between the two groups. On this traditional measure of skill and knowledge, the grading option did not differentiate the groups." (emphasis added)

If the students were equal in terms of ACT scores, cumulative GPA, purpose for taking the course, etc., as reported, and if these activities (extra reading and observing) are truly academic, why is it that students who earned significantly more points for the activities did not score higher on the examinations? What, in academic terms, was achieved by the statistically significant extra reading and observing done by the letter graded group? Clark's previous distinction between examinations (knowledge/skills) versus activity (extra reading and observing) takes on added significance here. Students in the letter graded group were given higher final grades, but does that reflect higher academic achievement or a "participation" factor added to the academic achievement? Clark seems to have "muddied the waters" by including the activity component under academic achievement. Would not the activity/participation component be more realistically and meaningfully a part of Research Question II, the class motivation question?

The possibility of the point system being weighted too heavily for each book or each observation has already been suggested. It might also be asked if there is a saturation point at which more reading and more observing on the same subject matter is simply "water running out of a saturated sponge?" Is it possible that the non-letter graded students knew when "enough was enough" regarding out of class activities and were free to stop participating because they had chosen the non-letter graded option?

Warren states (1971, p. 4):

The tendency of students to slight courses graded Pass-Fail in order to concentrate on other courses has been offered as a defect in Pass-Fail options. Yet the view that student control over their

distribution of effort is desirable seems more defensible (Milton, 1967). A course may have a particular interest or be particularly important to a student's major field or be more difficult for him than others. These all seem good reasons for students to adjust their effort unevenly across different courses. Elton (1968) and Feldmesser (1969) have used similar arguments to propose schemes for variable weightings of course grades with the students choosing the weights to be assigned.

It would seem tenable, because of the equivalent achievement on the examinations and the equivalent percentages of student participation in the outside reading and observations (even though they did not earn as many points) to conclude that the two groups did, in fact, achieve in the course at academically equal levels.

#### Research Question II

Clark's second research question concerns differences between students enrolled in a letter graded or non-letter graded notation system in terms of (p. 31) ". . . the number of out-of-class activities."

This research question was designed to measure the student's class motivation (p. 32): "Class motivation was measured by the number of activities voluntarily participated in outside of but related to the course." Out-of-class activities include one hour-long conference with the recitation leader, participating in research carried on in the psychology department, etc.

Some problems are raised in terms of how the data is presented in Research Question II: (1) Clark inadvertently reports the data in terms of total group compared to non-letter graded group (p. 34), but Table 2 represents a comparison between the graded group and the non-letter graded group. Also, the Table 2 heading reports the use of the K-S One-Sample Test (which is inappropriate) but the numbers suggest that she actually used a K-S Two-Sample Test (which is

appropriate). Curiously, Clark treats the non-significance reported in Table 2 as if it were significant, or at least approaching significance. Table 2 clearly supports a conclusion (or at least a hypothesis) contrary to that inferred by Clark in the Summary and Discussion (p. 36): "The implications of this study should be a cause for genuine concern. . . . If non-graded students . . . choose fewer out-of-class activities. . ." This writer does not understand, nor can he explain, the contradiction in the reported findings and the implication stated in Clark's Summary and Discussion.

### Research Question III

Clark's third research question concerns the differences in (p. 31) ". . . final class grade(s) projected from an overall grade point average."

The supporting data was reported in percentages and the weight of the data clearly suggests that the letter-graded students overachieved more and underachieved less. But, the reported final point totals, which were the basis for determining the percentages of over and underachievers, are clearly suspect: (1) Over and underachievement was based on cumulative GPA predicted grade-level expectations instead of the students' own stated goals; (2) the statistically significant component of the achievement score is, in fact, simply "activity" and, although it probably has a legitimate place in the final grade, it can hardly be termed "academic" achievement. One cannot argue that there is a significant difference in the final grades given to the two groups of students; one has legitimate grounds for questioning what that difference really means.

Warren states (p. 5):

One might speculate that what some faculty members object to is not the differential allocation of effort to different courses as much as the possibility that students may go through college, or at least through some courses, without expending an



acceptable amount of effort. Instructors who use grades as a device for coercing students into kinds of behavior the instructor considers desirable (Mayhew, 1969) or who adjust their grades according to the amount of effort the students are believed to have expended (Axelrod, 1964) might be expected to feel chagrined when students manage to learn without going through the tasks set by the instructor.

### Summary

In her summary Clark states that there should be genuine concern as regards the non-letter graded option because the quality of learning will go down if non-letter graded students (p. 36) ". . . choose fewer out-of-class activities. . ." (But Clark's own data clearly shows that this is not likely to occur); ". . . perform below expectation. . ." (Non-letter graded students, as measured by five examinations, equaled the academic achievement of the letter graded students); and, ". . . achieve at a lower level (final grade) than graded students. . ." (Letter graded students did receive higher final grades, but it is difficult to determine exactly what significance that has in terms of "academic" achievement and motivation).

Clark's suggestion that CTL faculty evaluate its grading practices is valid and this writer appreciates her concern for the quality of CTL programs. Her suggestion that letter graded programs need to evaluate their grading practices is also valid. It does not seem appropriate, however, to imply that CTL has cause for "genuine concern" or that her research pointed out serious problems in the non-letter graded option, or that the quality of CTL programs is in jeopardy.

The data reported, in this writer's opinion, do not support the conclusions suggested by Clark. What the data has shown is that there need not have been a cause for concern among faculty as regards (1) the cognitive growth and (2) the class motivation of students who opt for non-letter graded grading systems.

The data suggest that students in non-letter graded systems may use the system to exercise more control over the distribution of their effort as it relates to personal goals. The system seems to encourage students to become more responsible for their own education. If students become more responsible and more independent and, if cognitive achievement and class motivation remain constant, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that non-letter graded options have, indeed, "made the grade."

#### Postscript

Although I disagree with the conclusions drawn in Clark's study, I do agree wholeheartedly with her final statement. The non-letter graded philosophy, especially the CTL CR-CD-CW system, involves an entirely new approach to motivation, learning, evaluation and grading. Proponents of non-letter graded systems must become more involved in evaluating its strengths and weakness and in making the results of the evaluations known to others.

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