



Opinion  
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(Michelle Kondrich/The Washington Post; iStock)

If you're looking for continued signs of inflation, bypass your local supermarket and head to Harvard Yard. Twenty years ago, the mean grade-point average for Harvard University undergraduates was 3.41. Today, Harvard's average GPA has ballooned to 3.8. At America's oldest university, 79 percent of the grades are now A's and A-minuses — a 32 percent increase from 10 years earlier.

Down the road in New Haven, Connecticut, grade inflation is equally rampant. In the 2022-2023 academic year, nearly 60 percent of the grades Yale University professors awarded undergraduates were an outright A, not even an A-minus. Only 20 percent of grades in the entire college were a B+ or below.

And so it goes on campuses across America: Last century's Gentleman's C has become this century's Everykid's A.

When nations face hyperinflation, they sometimes resort to what's called "redenomination." They change the face value of the currency, often by lopping off zeros, or even assign the currency a new name.

Why not consider something similar in higher ed and replace letter grades in college?

## From Mount Holyoke to Mount Rushmore

**G**rades are so pervasive at all ages and stages of American education that we assume they are a natural component of learning. In fact, they are a recent invention. For most of human civilization, people learned perfectly well without letter grades. It was only when education became more democratized (a good thing) that it became simultaneously more systematized (sometimes a less good thing).

Grades and rankings emerged gradually through the 18th and 19th centuries, with Mount Holyoke College introducing the first modern letter grades in 1897. Other institutions — including Harvard and Yale, which had experimented with their own grading schemes — followed suit. And by the 1940s, the A-to-F scale became the standard: five letters carved into our schooling edifice the way four presidents are chiseled onto Mount Rushmore.

From their inception, grades were designed more for the efficiency of institutions than for the education of individuals. As student populations increased, grades were simple to calculate, easy to administer and convenient to communicate across an expanding education infrastructure. As [Jeffrey Schinske](#) and [Kimberly Tanner](#) write in their [2017 history of higher education grading](#), grades have always reflected “the constraints of institutional systems rather than the needs of learners.”

The notion that letter grades enhance learning was something that teachers, administrators and parents merely *presumed*. If every classroom from elementary schools to public universities was assigning grades, they must be a meaningful measure of learning. Besides, rewarding students with an A for doing schoolwork, while threatening them with an F for not doing it, seems like a smart way to motivate youngsters to master algebra or English.

But using grades as both a measure and a motivator was an inherently flawed pursuit. For starters, grades are far less consistent and reliable than their simplicity implies. A blood pressure reading will be the same in Austin as in Durham, North Carolina. But a Python coding assignment or an essay on the causes of the Spanish Civil War might receive different grades at the University of Texas than at Duke University. [Ample evidence](#) shows that grading can vary considerably from professor to professor even within a university; that some instructors aren't even consistent with themselves, [assigning different marks for identical work](#); and that extraneous factors like [penmanship and a student's attractiveness](#) can affect grades.

## Le problème, c'est moi

More important, the letter system ran smack into [Goodhart's Law](#), an adage named for British economist [Charles Goodhart](#), which holds that when a measure becomes a target, it ceases being a [good measure](#). Grades began as a tool for assessing learning but quickly became the point of the exercise. For many students, the goal of school isn't to learn. It's to get an A.

Decades of research, at all levels of education, has demonstrated that grades can promote [short-term performance](#) rather than [long-term understanding](#), encourage both [superficial studying](#) and [outright cheating](#), and can [undermine a student's intrinsic interest](#) in the material.

Stanford University's [Carol Dweck](#) and [other researchers](#) have shown that “performance goals” (earning a high grade) and “learning goals” (mastering material) run on separate tracks. Meeting a performance goal doesn't necessarily signal that someone has achieved a learning goal.

And if piles of peer-reviewed studies don't convince you, there's someone you should meet: Moi. I took French for six years in both high school and college. I received straight A's in every class, every semester.

I can't speak French.

The reason: I was laser-locked on performance goals (getting an A on Friday's quiz) rather than on learning goals (speaking French). I could cough up the third person singular subjunctive of irregular verbs on command. But if I ever found myself in Toulouse with a flat tire, I'd remain stuck on the side of the rue.

Goodhart's Law also helps explain the relentless rise in A's. Grade inflation first appeared in the 1960s, when professors awarded high grades to keep students in school and out of the Vietnam War. Today, the measure has become the target for other reasons. For example, a large portion of undergraduate courses are now taught by part-time temporary lecturers. Those instructors often dole out high grades because their continued employment depends in part on students' course evaluations, and students give high ratings to lenient graders. Meantime, as tuition has soared, and colleges compete ferociously for parent dollars and student enrollment, high grades have become like swank dorms, gleaming gyms and gourmet dining halls: another amenity to keep customers happy.

## Replacing rigor mortis with rigor

**T**he flaws with grades are not some recent revelation. Thinkers like Alfie Kohn have been critiquing the A-F industrial complex for decades. And in elementary and secondary education, Montessori schools, Big Picture schools, schools in the Mastery Transcript Consortium, and others have abandoned traditional grades.

But higher education offers promising territory for reform. For well over half of America's young people, college operates as the gateway to adulthood. Yet large studies have consistently found that the correlation between college grades and job performance is minuscule. In the world that college students are about to enter, a 19th-century lettering scheme is about as useful in promoting excellence as a quill pen.

So, what's the alternative?

At Hampshire College and Evergreen State College, professors provide narrative evaluations of student work rather than letter grades. Sarah Lawrence College assigns grades but places greater emphasis on written descriptions of how well students have mastered six critical abilities. Reed College records grades but doesn't distribute them directly to students (provided they maintain a strong performance), instead promoting intellectual growth through detailed instructor evaluations and conferences. At Brown University, students can elect to take courses for satisfactory/no credit instead of a grade and can request written "course performance reports" on their work.

These reforms undo the current regime's two main defects. They are measures, not targets. And they prioritize the growth of individuals over the convenience of institutions. They demand vastly more time and money than multiple choice tests and letter-studded transcripts because they regard students as complex individuals, not interchangeable parts. They treat college students the way we treat artists, athletes and scientists: by setting high expectations, demanding rigor, and offering detailed individualized feedback and opportunities to improve.

Some might say that these grade-eliminating methods are appropriate only for certain kinds of colleges: those that, shall we say, have a high granola-to-student ratio.

Nonsense.

Many innovations that began on what seemed like the hippie fringe have gone mainstream. Think yoga, vegetarianism and solar power. Other critics might deride these methods as "soft." Nonsense again. What's soft is letting some students fall through the cracks and giving others empty accolades for meager accomplishments.

In education, perhaps more than any realm of American life, the status quo is difficult to dislodge. But this is a starting point because once we pull on the thread of grades, the fabric of college education starts unraveling. Why does college last four years for just about every student in every major at every university? Why do courses run in rigid 15-week segments rather than allowing students to move at their own pace? Why do we segregate learning into discrete subjects when real-world problems span disciplines?

If we're serious about preparing young people for the complexities of the 21st century, a radical shake-up of higher ed is in order. And what better place to begin than with A, B, C?

### **What readers are saying**

The comments reflect a range of opinions on the idea of eliminating grades. Many educators express skepticism, citing practical challenges such as large class sizes and the need for objective measures to assess student performance, especially in fields like STEM and medicine.... [Show more](#)

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