Words in This Story

brag - v. to talk about yourself, your achievements, your family and other things in a way that shows too much pride

tutor - v. to work with a student to help him/her learn

campus - n. the area and buildings around a university, college, school

adjust - v. to make necessary changes

evaluation - n. to judge the value or condition of someone in a careful and thoughtful way

academic - adj. relating to schools and education

anxiety - n. fear or nervousness about what might happen

You Won’t Get Grades at These Colleges

At most American colleges, teachers give students grades that evaluate their performance in class. The grades range from A to F – with A the highest and F signaling failure.

But some colleges do not use grades. Instead, teachers write reports on what the students did well and what they did not do well. The reports also include suggestions on how students can do better.

Students and teachers say the written reports provide much more information than letter grades on how students are doing. But some students admit that their parents complain they cannot brag to family and friends that their child is an "A student."

Jessica Wewers, 21, is an early education major at Alverno College in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Alverno is a small Catholic college serving female students.

Wewers said when she returns to her home in Illinois, some friends tell her they think it is strange she does not receive letter grades.

But Wewers likes the detailed information her teachers provide. It has already helped her prepare teaching plans simple enough for young children to understand.

"I was asking a little too much of younger children," Wewers said.

Her classmate, Angelina Nuno, transferred from a large state college, where she struggled with her writing. Detailed suggestions from her Alverno teachers helped her write clearly. Soon, Nuno expects to begin tutoring fellow students to help with their writing problems.

Student willing to take difficult classes

Ben Stumps is a senior at Hampshire College in Massachusetts.

He said that he received traditional A through F grades at high school. But in many cases, he could not explain why he received the grades he did.

Stumps said students at Hampshire and other colleges without letter grades are more willing to take difficult classes. For example, Stumps said he struggled in high school with science. But he was willing to take a science class in college because he did not risk getting a bad grade that could hurt his grade point average.

And, he found that he not only enjoyed the science class, but had the skills to successfully complete scientific research.

Other schools that provide written reports instead of letter grades include Antioch University with campuses in Los Angles, California and four other locations; New College of Florida; Prescott College in Arizona; Goddard College in Vermont and Washington; and Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies and Evergreen State College, both in Washington State.

Indiana University did a report on the history of grading in America. It said Yale University in Connecticut was the first college to give out grades to "differentiate" student performance. In other words, it wanted to show how students compared to each other. Yale started in the late 1700s with a top grade of "optimi" and a grade of "inferiores" for students not doing very well.

International students

Mark Hower is interim provost at Antioch University in Los Angeles.

He said international students often must adjust to college life in America. Written evaluations can help them understand what is expected of them better than a letter grade that "tells them very little," Hower said.

Nevertheless, some people worry what will happen to Antioch students when they apply for graduate school and jobs. Will they be able to compete with students who have traditional grades?

Hower says yes. Most admissions officers and employers welcome the more detailed information Antioch provides, he added.

Rachel Rubinstein is dean of academic support at Hampshire College. She said people running companies do not use letter grades to evaluate their workers. They value employees based on whether they can do their jobs well.

Rubinstein said colleges should do the same. "Letter grades do not tell you nearly enough about how students are doing."

Do students need the reward of good grades to work hard?

William Coplin is director of the Public Affairs Program of the Maxwell School at Syracuse University in New York.

He said most colleges do not give students enough information about how grades are determined.

But he questions if students will work hard if they are not worrying about getting good grades. "Kids are motivated by grades," Coplin said. "There are very few kids who are self-motivated."

Vanessa Rios, 32, earned an undergraduate degree from Antioch University in Los Angeles. She is now working toward her master's degree at Antioch.

Rios said just because students are not getting letter grades does not mean students can get away without working hard. The detailed reviews by teachers mean they need to understand what is being taught, she said.

"What it (not having grades) does do is reduce the anxiety level," Rios said.

Students expecting less work will be disappointed

Kathy Lake is vice president for academic affairs at Alverno.

She said students will be disappointed if they think "no grades" means less work. At many colleges, students stay up all night before big exams to try to learn information they were supposed to learn over months in the classroom.

"That just doesn't work at Alverno," Lake said. At Alverno, teachers evaluate students at each class -- meaning one night of studying will not be nearly enough, she said.

I'm Bruce Alpert.

And I'm Jill Robbins.

Bruce Alpert reported on this story for VOA Learning English. Kelly Jean Kelly was the editor.