

# Less Work, Better Learning, More Fun!

Effective Strategies for Teaching Without Grades

JMU CFI May Symposium 2013  
Monday, May 6<sup>th</sup>

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# “Planning is essential...”

- Our plan for today:
  - Centering and balancing (~5 min)
  - Who we are and why we’re here (~15 min)
  - Guided reflection on how we grade (~30 min)
  - *Brief* intro to some provocative ideas (~20 min)
  - What JMU allows/requires vis-à-vis grading (~5 min)
  - What Nicole and Morgan are doing now (~10 min)
  - Brainstorming/discussion of what we can do (~35 min)

Who are you?  
Why are you here?

...in about a minute, maybe two

now let's reflect...

now for the provocative  
ideas...

## My Thoughts on Grading

Statistics

Technology

Motivation

Education

Philosophy

History

Neuroscience

Psychometrics

# The History of Grades

- Finkelstein (1913), Smallwood (1935), Cureton (1971), and Laska and Juarez (1992) have all written histories of grading practices
- President of Yale expressed in 1786 that fear of exams leads to poor scholarship
- President of Harvard expressed in 1841 skepticism about the ability of exams to capture students' accomplishments
- “Cramming” appears as a term as early as 1871
- “Grade inflation” has been decried by faculty since at least the 19<sup>th</sup> century
- In short: fundamental flaws with grades have always been recognized and these issues have *never* been resolved

# Statistics

- Since grades are not quantitative data (even though we represent them with numbers), the arithmetic mean (aka the average) is NOT an available statistic
- Vickers (2000) demonstrates convincingly that the GPA is the very antithesis of a robust measure
- In short, an honest look at the statistical properties of grades leads one to the conclusion that they have no reliably meaningful interpretation

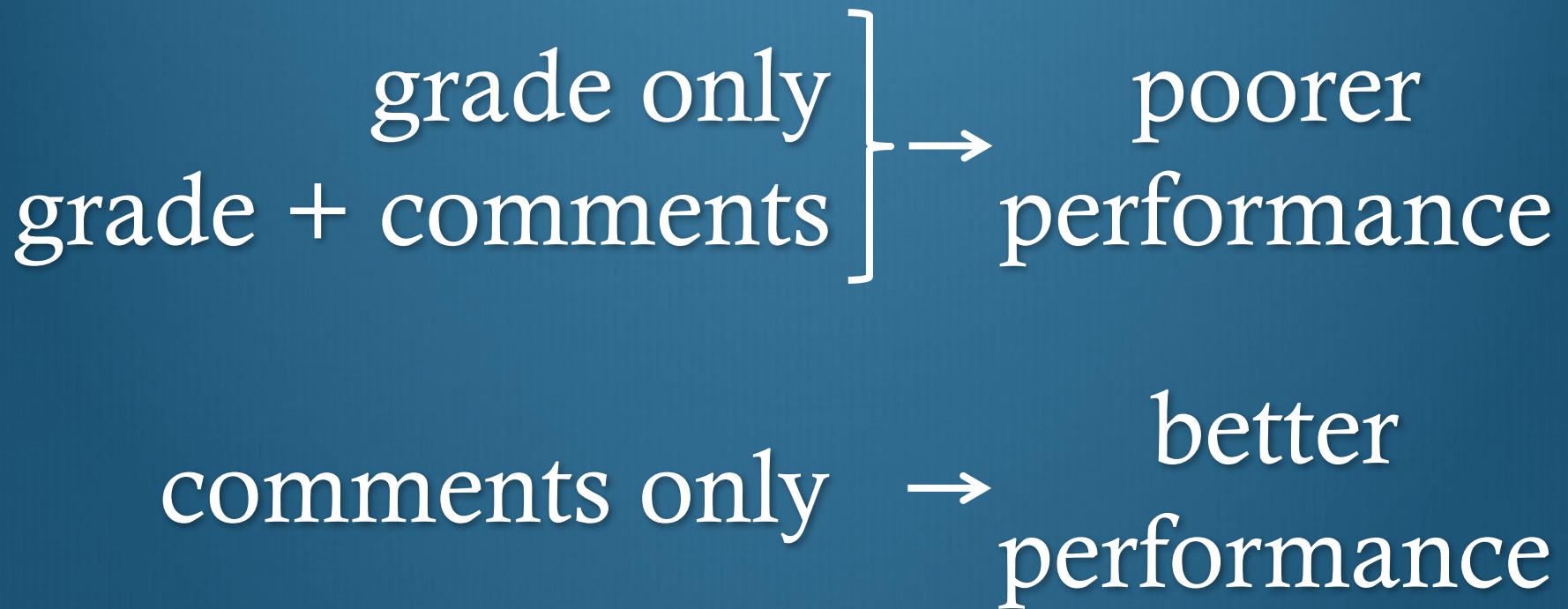
# Psychometrics

- Diederich (1974) had 53 faculty read and rate 300 college student essays on a scale of 1 to 9
- 101 out of 300 essays received *every* grade from 1 to 9
- 94% received either 7, 8, or 9 different grades
- In short, faculty appraisals of quality are likely to be idiosyncratic and vary widely
- We don't employ multiple raters or calibration as we would if using expert judging in a research context

# Motivation

- Not a matter of *if*, but *how*
- Deci, et al (2001) found grades negatively correlated with intrinsic motivation:
  - < max grade → -0.88,  $p < 0.05$
  - max grade → -0.15,  $p < 0.05$
- A paraphrase of Kohn (1997):
  - Grades Punish
  - Graded Rupture Relationships
  - Grades Ignore Reasons
  - Grades Discourage Risk-Taking
  - Grades Undermine Intrinsic Motivation

# Ego-involving Evaluation Hurts Performance



Butler, R. (1998) Enhancing and undermining intrinsic motivation; the effects of task-involving and ego-involving evaluation on interest and performance, *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 58, p1-14

grades cause stress

shirtwoot!



stress impairs cognition

test anxiety anyone?

# grades hinder learning

(the take home message)

# JMU Policy

# JMU Faculty Handbook

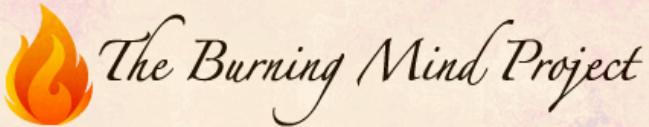
- III.A.2.b.(14) A faculty member shall evaluate student and colleague performance on a fair and scholarly basis in accordance with university policy.
- III.A.2.b.(15) A faculty member engaged in instruction ... is expected to give students useful feedback on the performance of course-related tasks in a timely manner and on a regular basis during the semester in order to allow students the opportunity to take full advantage of the learning experience.
- III.A.2.b.(16) A faculty member engaged in instruction shall report grades to the registrar by the published deadline each semester.

# Grade Review Process

- <http://www.jmu.edu/catalog/12/general/policies.html#review>
- If a student believes that a final course grade was unfairly awarded, that student may initiate the grade review process.
- Evaluation of student work and assignment of grades on the basis of academic criteria are the responsibilities and prerogative exercised by the faculty member teaching that particular course. Grades should be assigned on a fair and scholarly basis. Grounds for grade review are limited to two categories:
  - The grade was assigned in a manner other than that listed in the course syllabus or as amended by the faculty member with appropriate notice.
  - The grade was assigned in a manner other than that used for other students in the class.

# In short...

- Faculty grading practices *should* be:
  - Fair
  - Scholarly
  - Announced ahead of time
  - Consistently applied
  - Timely, both to students and to the registrar



For the mind does not need filling like a bottle, but rather, like wood, it only needs kindling to create in it an impulse to think independently and an ardent desire for the truth.

-Plutarch

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## Students as “Free Range” Chickens

By Morgan Benton On March 28, 2013 · 1 Comment [Edit]

“Our students are kind of like ‘free range’ chickens,” I found myself saying earlier this week, when Nicole and I were being interviewed about the Burning Mind Project. It was the first time I’d ever used that metaphor, and over the past couple of days, I’m more and more coming to see how apt it [...]

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## Your Gifts: The Path of the Innovator

By Nicole Radziwill On March 25, 2013 · 1 Comment [Edit]

(Image Credit: Doug Buckley of <http://hyperactive.to>) One of the topics that comes up often in the classes I teach is the difference between invention and innovation. The way I explain it, invention is a state of potential. You have a novel idea, or process, or technology, and it is complete in and of itself. But that [...]

[Read Full Article →](#)

### Our Vision

Inspire people to share their gifts!

### Our Mission

The mission of the Burning Mind Project is to operationalize the gift economy in higher education through the systematic application of the Ten Principles.

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[Your Gifts: The Path of the Innovator](#)

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### Contribute

Do you have insights about how to integrate the value system expressed by the 10 Principles into higher education? Start a discussion at

<http://www.facebook.com/BurningMindProject> or write a guest post for us. Please contact us if you’re interested!

# Things We're Doing

Morgan

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- Completely no grades approach
- E-portfolios
- Journals
- Meditation
- Student-led classrooms

Nicole

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- Point accumulation with broad menu of objectives
- Unlimited redo
- Deputy system
- Students develop labs for the next cohort

# Challenges

- Grades are a crutch for both students and instructors
- Students have trouble with persistence and self-motivation
- Students are hampered by the way they have been socialized to approach their education

# What can we do?

Time for brainstorming and discussion

*We are community committed to  
preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens  
who lead meaningful and productive lives.*