



USING COURSE OR TEST GRADES FOR PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

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When discussing outcomes assessment, one of the most common questions that faculty members have is, “We are already giving students grades in courses, so why can’t we just use grades as a measure of student learning?”

Grades represent the extent to which a student has successfully met an individual faculty member’s requirements and expectations for a unit or course. Because many factors contribute to an assigned grade, it is almost impossible to make specific inferences about what a student knows or can do solely by looking at that grade as it does not indicate specific areas of strength or weakness in the student’s performance.

In outcomes assessment at the program level, the primary question that needs to be answered is, “To what extent do students demonstrate the anticipated learning outcomes?” The focus of program assessment is on providing evidence that students can demonstrate knowledge or a skill that is directly linked to specific performance indicators that define the program outcomes. Grades per se are relative measures and generally do not represent specific aspects of learning. More often, they reflect performance on multiple concepts.

Course content and emphasis varies with each individual faculty member’s beliefs about what is important (topics, concepts and levels of performance students must meet for each concept) and the faculty member’s expertise and interests. The grading policy in any course is dependent on the individual faculty member. This is generally true even when there are multiple sections of the same course with common exams and syllabi. Some faculty choose to give (or take away) “points” or award “partial credit” for things that are not related to student learning (e.g., attendance, class participation and filling out the course evaluation). Some faculty grade on a curve, while others have a fixed standard. This confounds the relationship between grades and student learning even further.

Letter grades or numeric scores reflect the relative standing the student has in the class or on a test — relative to a set scale or relative to other students. All of these variables confound the ability to interpret the meaning of the grade related to specific student knowledge or abilities. An assigned grade does not tell the person interpreting it what a student knows or can do, nor does it provide information about which topics or concepts a student did not understand or how student learning could be improved.

For program assessment, a score that is directly linked to students’ performance on a specific performance indicator can be used as evidence of program learning outcomes. For example, for the outcome “students have an understanding of ethical responsibility,” one of the performance indicators could be “students will demonstrate the ability to evaluate the ethical dimensions of a problem in their discipline.”

The faculty could develop a rubric that describes to the student the expected performance and uses a graduated scale to score the student work. Each performance level is **described** and assigned a numeric score (e.g., 1=no evidence, 2=developing, 3=good and 4=exemplary). The student work related to the specific outcome can be scored as a part of the course work and may even contribute to the course grade. Then, reporting the percentage of students who score at each of the performance levels provides meaningful data that are linked directly to strengths and weaknesses in the anticipated performance and enables faculty to focus the evaluation and actions taken for improvement.

Grades will continue to be an important part of the higher education culture and should be understood for what they represent. However, the methods and measures used to assess student outcomes should be used consistently among faculty, reflect specific student knowledge or skills and be directly linked to specific performance indicators. It is important to remember that the focus is not a score but the specific student knowledge or skill that the score represents.