THE BENEFITS OF STANDARDS-BASED GRADING IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

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Traditional letter grades have been used for decades to communicate learning and achievement in education. However, letter grades often underrepresent student mastery. This grading method can overemphasize assignment deadlines or participation metrics that favor certain learning styles. Letter grades may also provide a narrow view of student learning, often relying on easily graded tasks that assess recall rather than deeper understanding or higher-order thinking. Critics have questioned whether the traditional letter grade system truly serves the purpose of measuring and communicating learning outcomes (Guskey, 2019; Knight & Cooper, 2019; Peters et al., 2017; Scarlett, 2018; Townsley & Buckmiller, 2020).

Standards-based grading (SBG) may offer a more precise and student-centered approach to overcome the limitations of letter grades. SBG is a system of assessing student learning that focuses on what students actually know and can do in relation to specific learning goals, rather than just giving points for assignments or averaging scores. With SBG, students receive feedback that clearly shows their progress toward specific learning goals, highlighting what they have mastered and what skills or concepts they still need to develop. This type of feedback is more descriptive and actionable than a single letter grade, helping students understand their strengths and focus on areas for improvement.

Many secondary education schools have transitioned to using SBG in recent years, and there may be value in implementing this system in higher education online environments as well. By adopting SBG, colleges and universities like UAGC may more accurately represent student achievement, foster engagement in online learning, and prepare graduates with verifiable competencies that are meaningful to employers and graduate programs. The following six points illustrate how standards-based grading can strengthen online learning and may offer valuable benefits for UAGC and other institutions like it:

1. Focusing on Mastery Rather than Compliance

SBG emphasizes whether students have achieved specific learning outcomes, rather than simply completing tasks or earning points (Dempsey & Huber, 2020). In online courses, this allows faculty to assess understanding through multiple methods, including projects, simulations, open-ended assignments, or iterative submissions, without penalizing students for logistical challenges like time zone differences or temporary connectivity issues. This creates a fairer representation of actual learning.

2. Providing Multiple Opportunities to Demonstrate Learning

Unlike letter grades, which often aggregate performance into a single score, SBG allows students to demonstrate mastery across multiple attempts. Online platforms facilitate this well through resubmissions, interactive quizzes, and discussion reflections. For example, a student struggling on an early assignment can receive feedback and revise their work until they meet the learning standard, ensuring the final assessment accurately reflects their competency.

3. Facilitating Clear, Outcome-Oriented Feedback

SBG aligns assessments with clearly defined learning targets, making the standards that students must achieve transparent. Online learners can track their progress against each standard through dashboards or learning management system (LMS) tools, providing immediate insight into areas that need improvement. This approach supports self-regulated learning and metacognitive growth, which are critical for success in asynchronous or hybrid courses.

4. Reducing Anxiety and Improving Engagement

In online higher education, students may feel isolated and pressured by high-stakes exams or participation requirements. SBG shifts attention from point accumulation to skill acquisition, reducing anxiety (Dempsey & Huber, 2020). Students can engage more deeply with course content, knowing that mastery, rather than punctuality or frequency of posts, is the primary goal (Boesdorfer & Daugherty, 2020).

5. Enhancing Reporting for Stakeholders

For instructors, administrators, and employers, SBG provides a more nuanced picture of student abilities than a single letter grade (Arsyad Arrafii, 2020). In both traditional and online learning environments, mastery reports can indicate which competencies students have achieved, partially achieved, or not yet met. In professional programs such as nursing, engineering, or business, this level of detail aligns well with accreditation standards and workforce expectations, offering actionable insight into skill development.

6. Leveraging Online Tools for Implementation

Online learning platforms make it feasible to implement SBG at scale. LMS features allow tracking of individual standards, automated reminders for incomplete competencies, and integration of peer or instructor feedback. This digital infrastructure supports transparency and continuous assessment, making SBG both practical and effective for higher education settings.

Conclusion

In online higher education, letter grades sometimes fail to fully capture student learning due to logistical barriers, rigid assessment formats, and overemphasis on compliance. As an associate faculty member, I often struggle when, per the course rubrics, I have to deduct a significant number of points when students submit work slightly late or miss a minor discussion requirement, even though their work clearly demonstrates mastery of the content. SBG addresses these and other shortcomings by prioritizing mastery, offering multiple opportunities for assessment, providing clear feedback, and reducing anxiety (Guskey, 2019; Knight & Cooper, 2019). While I don't believe SBG is a cure-all for grading challenges, I do see merit in many of its principles and believe the system is worth thoughtful evaluation for potential implementation.

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