

Should colleges shield freshmen from themselves by hiding first-term grades on their transcripts?

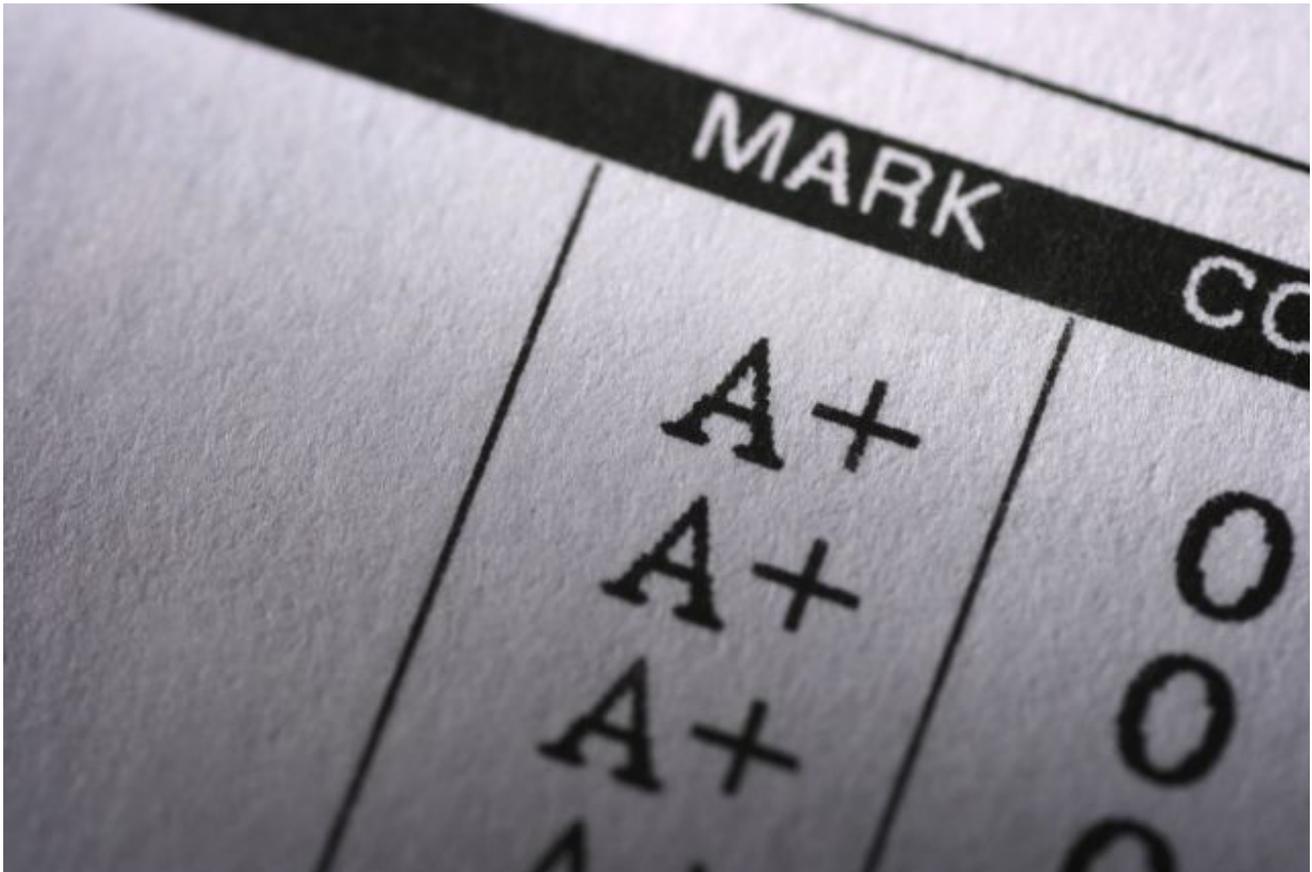
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The Great Shadow Grade Debate

Faculty members at various institutions debate the pros and cons of shielding freshmen from themselves (or least their performance) in the form of "covered" or "shadow" grades on transcripts.

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By

College is designed to be more rigorous than high school, but first-semester grades can still be a rude awakening for freshmen at competitive colleges -- many of whom are accustomed to high marks. And some faculty members and administrators argue that worrying about grades can prevent these students from taking the kinds of intellectual risks they're supposed to in college -- or at least from focusing on real understanding over rote learning.

In response to such concerns, some colleges have adopted "shadow" or "covered" grades for freshmen, in which their first-semester grades are privately shared with students but don't appear on their transcripts. At the same time -- and much to the chagrin of undergraduate activists -- one institution is moving away from this model, saying that more shared information is better when it comes to student success.

Uncovering Grades at Johns Hopkins

Johns Hopkins University adopted a covered grade policy in 1971 to help undergraduates transition into its rigorous academic environment, which at the time lacked many of the student services now available. The Academic Council, a faculty governance body for the faculties of arts and sciences and engineering, reassessed the policy in 2011 and voted to repeal it; the change was just recently announced as taking effect in the fall of 2017. Current undergraduates and those beginning in the fall will still receive covered grades for their first terms.

Professors "say that too often covered grades merely delay development of study skills and adaptation to college-level work," Beverly J. Wendland, dean of the Krieger School of Arts and Sciences, and Ed Schlesinger, dean of the Whiting School of Engineering, wrote in an email to students, explaining the change. "At the same time, covered grades negatively impact students who perform well as first-semester freshmen."

The announcement sparked concern from various student groups who said they should have been consulted about the change, since they were not on campus in 2011. Others said that uncovering grades could have an outside, negative effect on first-generation and other students who may arrive on campus less college ready than their peers.

Some of those students spoke before the Academic Council this month. Benjamin Ginsberg, the David Bernstein Professor of Political Science and chair of the Academic Council's Academic Affairs Committee, said in an interview that Johns Hopkins has made efforts to diversify its student body in recent years, including through its Baltimore Scholars Program. So he said he was struck by one student activist's argument that if the university is going to recruit first-generation, low-income and other students, it's got to make sure they succeed.

"The student view here is that at a school like Hopkins, which is notoriously difficult, and which in recent years has broadened its outreach and made strong efforts to recruit students whose secondary school backgrounds might not be as strong as those of other students, is that this has helped students adjust," he said.

At the same time, Ginsberg said he didn't feel covered grades -- however one feels about them -- were the most pressing issue on campus or off. He said most of the support for uncovering grades came from science faculty members, who argued that transparency about first-term marks was especially important in sequenced science courses over the first and second term, lest students have a "false sense of achievement." (Ginsberg also said the opposite argument could be made in favor of covered grades, in that more students might choose to stick with the sciences if they're shielded from an early sense of failure.) But humanities and social sciences faculty members tend to be more neutral and less engaged in the issue, he added.

"It's a bit of a tempest in a teapot," Ginsberg said of the debate.

Wendland, the arts and sciences dean, addressed student concerns in an email interview, saying some "feel that the policy still provides them with a transition period as they gear up from high school to college-level work." Yet the faculty, "after long and serious consideration, decided that covered grades are no longer the most effective means

for the university to assist freshmen in that transition.”

She noted that the university now offers many more transitional services for incoming freshmen than it did in the 1970s, including enhanced advising and counseling. Moreover, she said, “it was observed that a number of students were not only not helped by the policy, but in fact were harmed by it. In some cases, the policy led to a delay in students facing the realities of the transition to college-level work.”

Perhaps most important, Wendland noted, students who do well in their first semester courses don’t currently benefit from having that on their transcripts. Grades of A+ to C- appear on these documents as S, while a D+ to F appears as a U. And while covered grades are entered into the registrar’s system, they are not factored into students’ grade point averages.

Pass/Fail for Core Courses at Goucher

A parallel debate is taking place elsewhere in Baltimore, at Goucher College, where the faculty recently voted to adopt a version of a covered grade system. As part of a new general education curriculum, Goucher will offer certain foundational courses -- academic writing, foreign language and a new requirement in data analytics -- as pass/fail only. The policy is already in place within the liberal arts college’s academic writing program as of this year, and the grouping will be expanded by fall 2017. Details are still under discussion, but it’s important to note that foundational courses aren’t restricted to freshmen.

Pass/fail initiatives -- as evidenced by [Harvard’s recent decision](#) to allow undergraduates to take one general education course pass/fail, at the discretion of the instructor -- are usually controversial, since they have the potential to encourage academic risk taking as well as intellectual laziness. But Juliette Wells, chair of English at Goucher, said she was “very much in favor” of its goals. “We want to encourage students to take risks in their learning and, we hope, to move beyond existing perceptions of their abilities in certain key areas,” she said via email.

Goucher’s grading policy is governed by the faculty, but professors in their discussions have the support of their president, José Antonio Bowen. A well-known jazz scholar and author of *Teaching Naked: How Moving Technology Out of Your College Classroom Will Improve Student Learning*, Bowen has suggested doing away with grades entirely, in favor of “learning-based pricing” (which values mastery over seat time) or otherwise more meaningful assessment.

“Grades don’t typically measure learning -- we use grades to sort students,” Bowen said in an interview. “And this is an important policy interest since grades are also gateways for college and other academic opportunities and jobs later on.”

Asked if the freshman pass/fail or other covering options were moot if they’re for a single term or year, and if the entire college assessment scheme is out of whack, Bowen said such conversations are part of bigger talks about how to move forward at Goucher.

“There are no more sacred cows,” he said. Should freshmen classes be pass/fail, for example? How long should classes be and how often should they meet? “We’re asking a series of questions about how we design an environment for learning, and first-year anxiety in relation to grades is a big one.”

Hopkins in its announcement about uncovering grades said it was virtually alone in its peer group to shield students in this way. But a handful of other selective to very selective colleges and universities have covered or shadow policies. Swarthmore College’s decades-old policy of leaving freshman first-time grades off transcripts is one of the longer standing ones. And while there’s sometimes casual talk of changing it, said Amy Vollmer, chair and longtime professor of microbiology, it still has value. Primarily, it offers students a short respite from grades so that they can focus on what Swarthmore wants them to do: learn.

‘Learning Is Different From Grades’

“Students have been focused on grades since they were in the womb, and it’s not so much their fault as the way the school systems are now,” Vollmer said. “So when they come through the door, we want them to focus on learning, and that learning is different from grades.”

Vollmer said that students aren’t intellectually lazy, but growing up with No Child Left Behind and its attendant standardized tests, on top of being able to google everything on demand, has created a false equivalency in the minds of some students that information is real knowledge. But Vollmer said she tells students that they have to own and be able to apply the information -- not just rent it. (She said she also tells her pre-med students that they can’t leave the operating room one day to inform a patient’s family that they’re sorry, but the procedure can’t be done because their loved one’s body doesn’t look like the picture in the textbook.)

“We feel like taking the pressure off of grades helps turns the focus on the process of learning,” Vollmer said.

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