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Grades are everything in academia. They delineate achievement and motivate students to study hard and perform well. Or at least, that's one theory. The debate about whether grades help or hinder student learning is as old as the U.S. grading system itself, dating back to the late 1800s. Surprising as it may seem, some teachers don't think grades are a useful tool. Many educators, especially those involved with the U.S. grading system, bemoan the A-F grading scale because they feel it inhibits learning. —Supporters argue that grades hold students accountable for their work, and provide a simple frame of reference for their standing in class. That approach can cause problems. Students often see grades as the major obstacle to getting into college, earning their degree, or landing their dream job. For many students, this pressure sparks anxiety and stress. Of course, many educators and most universities still favor the traditional grading system. Supporters argue that grades hold students accountable for their work, and provide a simple frame of reference for their standing in class. Most schools rely on grades to assess student performance, though some colleges and universities have banished them entirely. Alverno College, Bennington College, and Brown University are just three of many institutions that favor methods like a pass-fail grading system, self-assessment, and professor assessments instead of letter grades. To help make sense of the ongoing discourse around grading, we collected a few of the common arguments for and against grading. In a 2018 survey by Pew Research Center survey, academic pressure topped the list of stressors for teenagers. Even the fear of a bad grade — to say nothing of a bad grade itself — can be a source of anxiety and stress, and that fear can inhibit learning and harm academic performance. In a 1996 paper titled, "Giving up the Grade Chase for a Competency-Based Education," Donald Mowrer wrote: "...requiring students to focus on their performance can interfere with their ability to apply scientific principles to new situations, frequently reduce their creativity, and suppress self-esteem." The grading system has at least one clear advantage over other models: It's easy to understand. According to researcher Robert Feldmesser, the simplicity of a letter grading scale makes it effective. "There is...an important role to be played by the 'summative evaluation' we call a grade," Feldmesser wrote in a 1971 research paper. "It gives the student some sense of how good his performance has been on the whole ... whether, all things considered, he did 'well' or 'poorly.'" Everyone knows what grades mean. Receiving an A is a success; an F is a failure. Grades make it easy for students to understand where they stand in a class or on a particular subject. A bad grade on a test gives students a clear idea about their weaknesses and what areas need improvement. Conversely, a string of good grades demonstrates where they excel. Cheating to get good grades is another negative consequence of the grading system. The International Center for Academic Integrity surveyed 70,000 high school students nationwide between 2002-2015 and found that 58% had plagiarized papers, while 95% admitted to cheating in some way. In 2012, 125 students at Harvard University got caught collaborating on a final exam. (Harvard forced about 70% of them to withdraw.) —ICAI survey of 70,000 high school students between 2002-2015 According to Carnegie Mellon University, students cheat for different reasons, many of which reflect badly on the grading system. Some students cheat because they're "highly motivated by grades and might not see a relationship between learning and grades." Others do it to prevent a bad test score from sabotaging their GPA. While scary for students, low grades serve an important purpose: They make students feel responsible for their work. Some experts believe low grades are a good thing because they promote effort and diligence. Without the risk of getting a low grade, the level of effort and responsibility can drop. Feldmesser argues that while grades can be a source of anxiety, they also help students become better learners. In this way, grades become an opportunity for achievement rather than a negative obstacle. Grade inflation has become a salient issue at colleges and universities in recent decades. From 1963-2016, grade point averages steadily increased, rising at the rate of 0.1 points per decade. Before the Vietnam War, C was the most common grade on college campuses. Now it's A. —Before the Vietnam War, C was the most common grade on college campuses. Now it's A. According to researchers Stuart Rojstaczer, a former Duke University professor, and Christopher Healy, a Furman University professor, there are two major reasons for this trend: Treating students as "consumers" who are entitled to better grades due to the high cost of education. Faculty members facing pressure to award high grades to ensure tenure and promotion. Why is grade inflation bad? Rojstaczer and Healy argue that it weakens intellectual rigor and grading standards, leading students to disengage from learning at a high level. In more practical terms: Grade inflation defeats the purpose of the grading system itself. You can't eliminate the grading system without causing a few cultural disruptions. Grades are ingrained in our educational system and many other systems with ties to education. —The widespread use of the grading system leaves employers with few other reliable metrics for academic aptitude and policymakers with few illustrative indicators of school performance. Colleges often pay attention to a student's GPA when considering an admissions offer. Grades are also typically the main consideration for competitive evaluation, such as scholarships and entrance into degree and graduate programs. In the professional world, grades carry significant weight, too. Large corporate employers still rely heavily on GPAs as they evaluate applications. The widespread use of the grading system leaves employers with few other reliable metrics for academic aptitude and policymakers with few illustrative indicators of school performance. For all of its flaws, a GPA provides a simple, easily understood way to measure achievement, both for individuals and for student bodies. Final Word The grading system remains one of the most debated subjects in all of education. There is no simple right or wrong answer to the question of whether schools should eliminate grades; that's a choice each institution must make for itself. As schools evaluate the future of grading, students stand to benefit: A variety of assessment models give students more of a choice in finding the right academic environment for their needs and learning goals. Header Image Credit: Alyson Aliano | Getty Images Learn more, do more. More topic-relevant resources to expand your knowledge. Being in college means you've already aced your SATs, taken all the college prep classes and filled out myriad applications to secure your place. Armed with all that experience, you can help current high school students achieve their college dreams.It was just after graduating from Mas-sachusetts Institute of Technology with a bachelor's degree that Christine Ortiz, now 25, moved back home and started tutoring high school students in her neighborhood. After starting a graduate program at the University of Central Florida, where she is earning a master's in education, she envisioned a whole space devoted to learning. In fall 2007, she started The Knowledge Lab, a tutoring center in Longwood, Florida. Ortiz created a space with comfortable couches, custom murals and a refrigerator full of snacks to welcome students who come to her after-school SAT prep classes and help sessions on subjects like calculus and chemistry. Set to graduate herself next month, Ortiz knows how to navigate the college prep and application process—and shares with students what she wishes someone had shared with her. Positive testimonials from happy students and parents are now one of Ortiz's best marketing tools. She created a street team to talk up her business to high school kids at sporting events and the like. She also markets her business to guidance counselors as a way to get referrals. The K-Lab projects revenue of about \$75,000 for its first full year in business. "I'm trying to create the kind of environment where kids want to come, they love the people who work there and they get along with the other kids," she says. "It feels like they're just hanging out and they happen to get their work done while they're [here]." Word-of-mouth marketing and networking within your community is key to getting student clients for your college prep and tutoring business, says William H. Crookston, professor of entrepreneurship at the University of Southern California's Lloyd Greif Center for Entrepreneurial Studies. Go to PTA events or counselor events to get your business's name out there. And know what your services are worth. "Write a price list schedule," says Crookston. "And ask for [payment] before you perform the services." If you plan to grow your college prep and tutoring business, you'll want to hire a fleet of tutors. Depending on your needs, you may want to search for employees or independent contractors—but make sure you get a federal tax ID number so you can send out official 1099 or W-9 forms come tax time.Building out a huge network of tutors—more than 700—has helped Greg Zumas, 31, and Richard Enos, 32, grow their tutoring service, StudyPoint Inc., to 10 cities. Starting in Boston in 1999, Zumas, then a Cornell University student, and Enos, a Cornell graduate, quickly brought in nearly 20 tutors their first fall season. "Ninety-nine percent [of our success] is based on who's going out and working with the kids. We still spend a lot of time and money [on recruiting and training] and are very selective on instructors," says Zumas, who projects company sales to hit more than \$6 million this year.

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