

# DISSENT

#22

30 April 1970

A Semi-Publication for the live Faculty of San Diego State College

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NOTES FOR A HANDBOOK ON THE MEGALOMANIACAL QUEST FOR MEDIOCRITY (with apology to Nietzsche)

211. The university is a precious fragment, a fragile instrument, where is provided a refuge for creativity, for in-depth thinking. Teaching and the pursuit of knowledge will only be served when there is an academy of eccentrics. University faculties should be the sole owners of the world's oil.
212. The teaching mill (Doctor of Arts program) is far worse than the diploma factory (Doctor of Philosophy program). The Ph.D. as a problem = what is required is solitude, opportunity and imagination unstifled, then, perhaps, a very few might have the gift for conveying some of this accumulated knowledge to others. The D.A. as a solution = to teach the art of establishing transference without anything to transfer is absurd.
213. Blue-collar academicians, unable even to imagine aspirations of greatness, now join students and community to destroy higher education. Most students and most faculty should be deprived of the use of 'faculty' toilets.
214. Is the teacher a mere caterer to current fashion? Can there be 'resource personnel' without diligent research? A general scholastic inferiority is based on a doubt that scholastic superiority can exist. Doing one's thing is limited originality. Those in quest of freedom want entertainment as a substitute for their own inadequacy. I see the present climate of intellectual guilt and fear being disguised as a young, 'with-it', 'on-going' outlook; activists, petty rebels, trying to appear avant garde when they have no grasp of the problems of society. What the student wants is accepted as that which he needs. Most faculty and students today would not recognize an original idea if they had one.
215. What is needed is more discipline, not less; academic discipline, imposed training, rote learning. . . the need to sift innumerable students to find that one-in-a-thousand capable of creative work. The Rousseau-like new left, the college anarchists, are demanding just that which they say (feel?) they oppose, that is, an institution geared to turn out stereotypes, not now business-oriented, middle-class faceless men, but rather non-think, unstructured mediocrities. In the name of individualism they are fostering conformity. The new well-adjusted citizen of freedom is the end-product of mass education demanded by all, be they cast in the mold of an industrial-military complex or that of neo-romantic irresponsibility.
216. We are faced with a leveling down from a base level: the goal--the common denominator as gauge. Any student is as good as any teacher in any way, form without content, ignorance desiring leadership that will reflect their most blatant bigotries. Any student can teach. But what? Students and dogs needs grass and trees. Teachers and students are failures, the student does not realize it, while faculty 'scholars' continue to measure their own value in the accumulation of rejection slips.
217. etc. . . .

--Robert Munter (History)



# PROPOSAL FOR CHANGE IN GRADING SYSTEM

For the purposes of discussion and debate, I would like to call my colleagues' attention to a grading-change proposal which is currently before the Academic Policy and Planning Committee and which, in some form, is due to come up in a special meeting of the Senate sometime in May. As chairman of the faculty-student subcommittee that drew up this proposal, I am of course fully behind it, and I present it now with the hope of achieving broad faculty support.

The full report of the Subcommittee on Grading is divided into three sections. The first section is a proposal for a two-phased plan, the initial phase being a system of student options and the second phase, to take effect two years later, being an evaluation of the first phase with a view toward either keeping the option plan, reverting to the old grading system, or perhaps converting to some kind of "no-grade" system such as credit/no credit. Under the option plan every student would have, in practically every course, a choice of the following three grading systems: (1) ABCDF; (2) ABC/no credit, or (3) credit/no credit. I do not intend to go into the details of this plan except to point out that the "grades" of credit (Cr) and no credit (NC) would not affect the student's grade average. A grade of Cr would simply mean (as it does now) that the student received units of credit, and the NC would indicate that he did not receive units of credit. Moreover, so as not to be interpreted as equivalent to the present grade of F, the NC would not be recorded on the student's permanent record. The second section of the subcommittee's report is a proposal for modifying the present system by liberalizing the procedures for such things as withdrawals and incompletes. The most important feature of this proposal, however, is the provision it makes for experimental courses and programs that could, provided they were approved by the respective college or school, be conducted entirely on a credit/no credit basis. The third and final section of the report is simply the subcommittee's attempt to justify the proposals that I have outlined here. There are copies of this report in the Senate office for those who wish to analyze these proposals and justifications in detail; however, I shall quote below the section of justifications that I think may be most pertinent to members of the faculty. It is the section entitled "Detrimental Effect of Letter Grades on Learning Process (pp. 11-13):

The focus here will not be the effect of grades upon the student as he passes through college but the possible damaging effects of grades on the actual learning that takes place in the classroom. Without citing it in detail, we wish to call attention to the evidence in both the Miller Report (University of Michigan) and the New University Conference Report (University of Indiana) to the effect that grades are unreliable devices for measuring learning (Miller, pp. 4-7, and NUC, pp. 6-7). The latter report, *Degrading Education*, sums up as follows:

"Grading methods and standards are much too crude, variable, and dependent on subjective factors to make fine distinctions like that between a B+ and an A- meaningful. Respectable scholarly opinion supports widespread student opinion on this--professors have different criteria of excellence, or weight criteria differently; not only do different professors give widely varying grades to the same paper, but the same professor, unaware that he is reading a paper he has graded before, is likely to give it a different grade." (NUC Report, p. 6)

The point we wish to make here, however, is that not only do grades appear to be unreliable in evaluating learning, they may actually interfere with learning, just as in some highly refined scientific experiments, the devices that are supposed merely to observe and measure the experiment will actually affect its outcome. We state this premise tentatively here, for it is by no means a view accepted by everyone. Nevertheless, it is a view strongly put forth by many of our consultants and by the Miller and NUC reports. For example, one researcher, Joseph J. Schwab, is quoted by Miller as follows:

"The work cannot, by the farthest stretch of the word, be called willing when it is done perforce under the whip of an imminent inquisition. It cannot be called independent when it must meet a test arbitrarily set by the same man who sets the work. . . . It is fair to say that ingenuity could not combine the inimical effects of bread-and-butter love and submission to the taskmaster and inquisitor more effectively than does the institution of the teacher-set examination. Without its removal, the possibility of establishing a sound teaching relation with the vast majority of students is well-nigh nil." (Quoted by Miller, p. 7)

Although this statement speaks more directly to examinations than to grades, the point is the same. Many faculty and students feel strongly that grades have the same kind of intimidating and coercive effect on learning as do examinations. Indeed, they could point out that the "whip" Mr. Schwab speaks of lies not so much in the examination itself as in the grade that will be assigned to it. Most professors would like to believe that the grade is of secondary importance, that it takes a back seat to the actual education that is being imparted to the students, and many professors generally make a point of informing their students that grades are not as important as the subject matter. But as Miller points out:



"Even the best of our teachers, while admitting that it is possible to get the students to care about the subject rather than the grade and that one can overcome the alienation of student from teacher which the grading system generates, yet complain that to create a sound teaching relationship with this much working against them is at best very difficult and at worst only occasionally possible. They claim that too much energy is wasted in winning the student over, energy that could profitably be better directed in the classroom. They see the present system of teacher-set examinations and teacher-administered grades as a hindrance to teaching." (Miller, p.8)

It will be objected that if it were not for "teacher-set examinations" and "teacher-administered grades" the students would not be motivated to learn anything. Undoubtedly, this is true for some students, but two questions need to be asked. First of all, what guarantee do we have that students are really learning anything when they receive grades, even good grades? Secondly, is it not possible that even when the external rewards and punishments inherent in grades are removed many students will find that they actually to learn? The various experiences with non-graded classes cited by faculty and students who appeared before our committee would suggest that the latter is often the case. Many students today are vitally concerned about the course of their own education. They want to learn, but they want to learn freely. They want their education to be an active rather than a passive process; they are interested in the how of their education as well as the final goal. They believe, more and more, that if they are to accomplish this kind of participatory learning, they must be free of the coercive educational atmosphere which they feel is generated by letter grades. And more and more faculty today would like the opportunity to provide the kind of free educational atmosphere that these students are seeking.

According to the various studies that have been made and the various experiments that have been tried, it would seem that the credit-no credit system may be the most effective way to accomplish the elimination of letter grades. Perhaps the best explanation of how converting to credit/no credit might contribute to the type of education we have described is given in the NUC Report:

"The student receives credit for a course when he satisfies the instructor that he has completed the course work. The student's transcript will simply list the courses he has taken for credit. There will be no record of courses enrolled for but not completed. No grades of any kind will be recorded anywhere. The grades I and W will be unnecessary. Not completing the work for a course will lead eventually to withdrawal in fact, for which the student should in no way be punished. Abolition of the grading system is not the abolition of evaluation. We will be left with the basic evaluation that grades are a misguided attempt to refine--the instructor's decision that a student has fulfilled the basic requirements of the course. Beyond this minimal requirement the student will be free for self-motivated, self-directed, self-evaluated learning; for self-development, creativity, and intellectual independence. Students and instructors will be relatively free from the systematic threat and fear so that they can participate in serious dialogue with each other. We do not think that the abolition of grading is a panacea. Self-developmental education and real dialogue will not automatically follow, but an environment will tend to be created which makes possible and encourages the kind of learning and teaching that we all would like to be a part of." (NUC Report, p.13)

We are aware that even if the above were acknowledged as the ideal, it would be impractical to try to institute it now as a campus-wide policy. However, we consider it important that the validity of this alternative be tested. This should be done in addition to allowing a credit/no credit option, for under the option plan the average class will still include many students, perhaps most, who are receiving grades, and thus the educational atmosphere of the class as a whole will remain substantially unchanged. What is needed is an arrangement whereby entire courses may be taught on a credit/no credit, or other variant in grading, basis. This particular feature of our grading policy proposal would allow those professors who wish to conduct their classes on a non-graded basis to do so, provided they have the necessary approval, and it would provide those students who desire it a second kind of option--the opportunity to participate in a non-graded course. All in all, it has the advantage of allowing those faculty and students who want to try this kind of approach to learning to do so while at the same time it does not impose on those others who want to continue with letter grades.

--Prescott Nichols (English)