

Letter grading gets an F



By Beau Dure
■ The Chronicle
Duke U.

Every term they come in the mail. No student is immune, as their university's grand farce visits the mailbox and makes an indelible mark on each student's permanent record.

The "grand farce" is, of course, the awarding of letter grades.

Letter grades have dominated American education for many years, rendering it nearly impossible to imagine life without them. Students literally grow up with grading, and those five magic letters become an unholy obsession in college.

Yet, some colleges have taken a bold step forward.

Several colleges, such as Hampshire in Massachusetts and Evergreen State in Washington, do not offer grades. The schools instead give written evaluations of students' work. Unfortunately, these schools are the exception and not the rule.

Proponents of letter grading say the system challenges students to learn the material or suffer the consequences. It also indicates ability, so future employers or institutions may compare students, they say.

But using grades to motivate students is simply a means of patronizing them. Why should students need an artificial incentive? By the time they reach university level, the need to crack the whip should be gone. Teachers or personal goals — not letter grades — should provide the motivation to succeed.

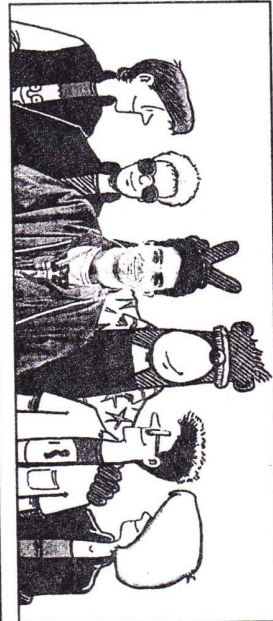
Hampshire College avoids this problem by using written evaluations. If a student tries something new and does not succeed, his effort is explained in words, not as a D-. Teachers may assess students by describing not only class performance, but also the factors that made that achievement satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

The difference between letter grading and written assessments should mean little to students who go to college to learn, explore and enjoy. But to many, it means all too much.

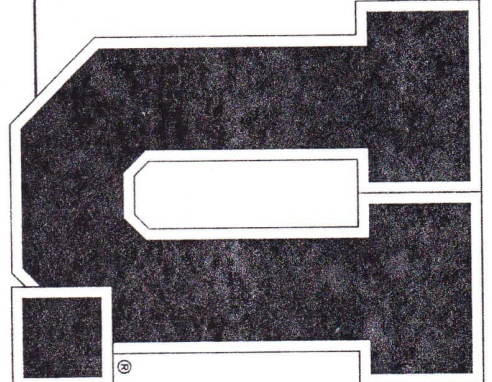
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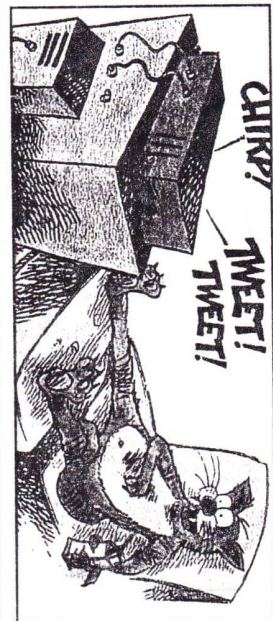
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