HOW ARE GRADING AND ASSESSMENT DIFFERENT?

Assessment is similar to but different from grading. In both, faculty members render a professional judgement of student performance using a numeric scale.[1] What is different, however, is that assessment requires instructors to systematically evaluate student performance on individual learning outcomes. By contrast, grading does not obligate instructors to articulate learning outcomes, nor does it necessitate that they evaluate individual learning outcomes separately. And, indeed, faculty members rarely specify assessible student learning outcomes nor base students' grades on them.

Because course grades are based on a simple or weighted average of the number of points students earn on each of a course's graded activities, "weak performance in some areas can be compensated for by superior performance elsewhere. . . . [Therefore,] once the aggregate is calculated, the actual pattern of strengths and weaknesses is lost entirely" (Sadler, 2005, p. 183). In other words, course grades obscure which skills and knowledge students have or have not systematically acquired, as shown in the tables below. As such, grades, when not based on SLOs, do not provide information faculty can use to make thoughtful decisions about how to improve their educational effectiveness. Assessment, by contrast, generates *actionable* information.

Notice, for example, that although students' grades are nearly identical in the two worksheets below that most students did well in the class, the former table, which reflects typical grading practices, obscures that the course was not successful in helping students achieve the second learning outcome. By contrast, the second table, which reflects student learning outcome assessment, reveals that students are struggling with course learning outcome #2. The course professor will likely decide that he or she wants to teach and/or assess CLO 2 differently in the future.

Table 1
Comparison of a Grading and Assessment Worksheet for the Same Course

Course 101 Grading Worksheet						
	Mid-term (%)	Course Paper (%)	Presentation (%)	Final Exam (%)	Course Grade	
					Average (%)	Letter
Clayton Thomas	94	92	95	97	95	A
Katie Britton	85	92	65	81	81	B-
Christopher Stewart	92	88	94	96	92.5	A-
Keesha Coleman	100	93	90	98	95	A
Jo Ann Johnston	51	62	68	55	59	F
Katie Chang	74	81	77	75	77	C
Louise Hernandez	94	84	82	87	87	B+
Average Score per Grading Method (avg. of columns)	**84**	**85**	**82**	**84**	**84**	**B**

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[1] Grades, even when they appear in letter form, represent a quantitative measure, whether that be a percentage of 100 or of 4 points.

Course 101 Assessment Worksheet						
	CLO 1* **(%)**	**CLO 2**** (# pts. out of 5 pts.)	**CLO 3**** (# pts. out of 5 pts.)	**CLO 4**** (# pts. out of 5 pts.)	**Course Grade**	
					Average** **(%)**	**Letter**
Clayton Thomas	100	3.9	5	4.6	93	A
Katie Britton	100	2.3	5	3.75	80	B-
Christopher Stewart	100	3.9	5	4.75	93	A-
Keesha Coleman	100	3.5	5	5	93	A-
Jo Ann Johnston	75	1.25	3.75	3	59	F
Katie Chang	90	1.75	4.75	4.25	76	C
Louise Hernandez	100	3	5	4.25	86	B+
Avg Score per CLO (converted to a 100% Scale)	**95**	**56**	**96**	**85**	**83**	**B-**

*Course Learning Outcome (CLO) measured on a 100% scale with four test items (three of which were either right or wrong and one of which allowed for partial credit)

** CLO measured on a 5-point rubric scale

***Average converted to a 100-point scale