Letters

Do Grades Make the Student?

Wolfle's editorial, "Are grades necessary?" (20 Sept., p. 1203), brings to mind the late poet Robert Frost's remark when he was asked what he thought of free verse: "It seems to me to be like playing tennis without the net."

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Wolfle has neatly touched upon the major difficulties and dilemmas of grading. A solution to all these problems exists. Colleges will continue to grade students just as they now do, but the student's grades will not be a part of the transcript sent on after graduation. (This can easily be accomplished with colored ink and filters.) In this way, grades can be used as they were intended: to keep the student and his local advisers informed concerning his progress at the local institution. Grades will not become tokens to purchase favors for graduates. Admission to graduate programs will have to be based on letters of recommendation or perhaps evaluation forms provided by the graduate school. Other institutions such as business, government, or the military will have to devise other criteria for selection — criteria, incidentally, that correlate better with subsequent performance.

I would appreciate learning about any objections to this plan. At the present time, I am attempting to present this solution to the Great Lakes Colleges Association for concerted action, since I believe it would be suicidal for one college to follow this course unilaterally. If any other colleges would like to adopt this procedure, they might wish to coordinate their plans with us.

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Having advanced through the British college grading system at Cambridge, the German university system at Kiel, and the American system at the University of Illinois, I have been exposed to the advantages and disadvantages of all three. Wolfle's editorial strikes very close to the ultimate best system, one that changes in character with the status of the advancing student.

While the German university system may be, on balance, too liberal for the average beginning student, it is very appropriate for the third-year and older student. At the same time, the British tutorial system is unbeatable, as has been recognized in the United States by the attempt of several newer universities to decentralize into colleges. In the United States, a grading system is necessary, if only from an administrative need to evaluate the vast number of applications for scholarships, student support, and transfers from one institution to another. . . .

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. . . Grades do not necessarily have to be expressed on a numerical, or even on a linear scale, but they must have enough gradation (or shades, if you like) to reward and stimulate the better than average, prod and motivate the average, caution or flatly penalize those who failed in effort, or in understanding, or in developing sufficient interest. Our institutions of higher learning are choked now with students who should not have been permitted to reach those levels—based on their performance.

The simplified (to the instructor, that is) method of "pass" and "fail" does not provide enough depth in rewarding outstanding accomplishment. Even such a clear-cut and simple situation as a corner traffic signal has a third possibility besides "stop" and "go." The conscientious teacher should be given the opportunity to give a constructive appraisal to his student through an appropriate grading system. This, obviously, takes extra time and effort on his part. But, if he is unwilling to do this, why does he waste his time on teaching? Definitely, some teaching machines do better jobs than these "R & D-minded" instructors and reward the student immediately after each properly answered problem, instead of letting him wait till the end of the semester.

As to the spreading practice of no-credit, no-grade courses, I do hope that the advocates of this practice will extend this principle to "no-degree" graduation. A person graduating with mostly nongraded courses, should, obviously, not be awarded a degree of B.A., but, say, "S4Y" (that is, served 4 years, or whatever time he spent at that institution).

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. . . Grading, after all, is part and parcel of the social process and there is no escaping it for any of us. It's one way that societies have of motivating individuals to perform adequately and contribute their share to the common life . . . in some way roughly commensurate with their capacity to perform. This is usually achieved by granting rewards as measured by visible performance. From one standpoint, that's what grades are in the educational system. They are one way of inducting the individual into the society's culture, particularly that part of it comprising the performance and reward system whose impact he will experience more intensely in adulthood.

The grading process seems to become more formal and rigorous as a culture grows in complexity. It is the more frustrating, irritating, and demanding character of a complex culture against which increasing numbers seem to be rebelling, inside and outside academia. Growing dissatisfaction with current college grading systems merely reflects the growing irritations many are experiencing. Abolition of grading systems is no answer to the fundamental problem.

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Are grades necessary? This is a question which was debated and decided some years ago by medical educators. Those that feel they are not, have changed to the Fail-Pass-Honors system; those that feel they are, have retained their own letter or number system. It is just about decided. Wolfle's editorial seems old-fashioned.

Now, what is not decided? This—should we allow students to take exam-

inations while under the influence of stimulatory and depressant drugs? Should we take urine samples or blood samples from those achieving the highest scores? Should we take urine samples from all the students and select several for evaluation? And then, how much of the drug is too much? What are the proper educational standards? How can we compare drugged and nondrugged students?

And this also—how can we turn out professionally trained doctors, lawyers, engineers, and architects whose learning periods were framed by a border of tranquilizers and whose test periods were flown through on stimulants? Can a doctor who spent his clinical years on tranquilizers maintain the standards established by those free from these drugs?

We need standards for this problem. *They are not being developed.* The student counselors steadily tranquilize nervous sophomores—without controls and without study of the effect of these drugs on the individual during the time of his schooling and later in his career.

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A Pretty Kettle of Fish

With reference to the cover (13 Sept.), all I can say is Holy Mackerel!

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. . . Fish may have many local names but to transplant Boston mackerel from New England to the Pacific Ocean and name them Pacific salmon is jolting. I caught enough Boston mackerel during the time I worked on a seine boat in Maine to recognize one even if mislabeled.

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Eternity of Print

On reading Dael Wolfle's editorial, "The next Rosetta Stone" (6 Sept., p. 967), I was reminded of an inscription in the market place of Haarlem, Holland, carved on the home of Lourens Janszoon Coster (who, it is still contended by a dwindling few, was the true inventor of printing with movable type): *Memoriae sacrum typographia, ars artium omnium conservatrix . . .* which has since been modified to the more familiar and more euphonius "Printing: the art preservative of all the arts."

While Wolfle rightly emphasizes the question of information content of any "Rosetta Stone" we may leave for scholars of future civilizations, he also raises the interesting point of the medium of language communication between "lost" civilizations. Future scholars digging into the remains of our world in search of some meaningful communication symbols will undoubtedly have to do their research without the help of contemporary linguistics' sophisticated equipment for recording and analyzing oral language. They will have to rely—as today's paleographers must—on remnants of our *visible* language.

Visible language may be an unfamiliar distinction. Linguists were early to stake out oral language as being the only meaningful province for language research. Indeed, it would be improper to speak of visible language, since all but a few linguists consider any written or printed medium of communication as only a system of visual signs with which language is *symbolized.*

The study of visible language is fragmented, an academic orphan, and only in the first stages of international organization. Omnipresent as letter forms and related symbols are today, we are conducting relatively little research on them; much basic information and theory is yet to be determined. What, for example, constitutes the "g-ness" of the scores of differently shaped letter g's you see as you page through the advertisements of this number of *Science*? Could we isolate the nature of a prototype "g"? Or, what is behind the contemporary artist's fascination with letter forms? The answer may be reflected in the emphasis the program committee for the AAAS Annual Meeting this year has placed on the interaction between art and science (three general symposia are scheduled: Arts and Science—will there be a difference? Interface—art and technology, and Art and Science—the analysis of communication of form). Since its earliest beginnings, the alphabet has provided a meeting ground for such an interaction. No educated person can look at letter forms without encountering two conflicting stimuli: the *meaning*