

From the Dean

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LAST SPRING, WE REVAMPED THE LAW SCHOOL'S GRADING SYSTEM, REDUCING THE NUMBER OF GRADES TO FOUR (H, P, R, F). To my surprise, the change received extensive coverage in the national media. True, we're only the third law school to adopt this kind of system, but similar schemes have been in use at medical schools and business schools (including Stanford's) for many years. Then again, maybe slowness to reform how we grade shouldn't be surprising. The boot camp aspect of law school including first-year grade obsession and the whole "paper chase" experience remains indelibly stamped on many lawyers' identities and is a favorite cliché of popular culture. More than a few of the letters I received, including those from supporters of the change, had a "we walked 12 miles barefoot in the snow" quality about them—particularly insofar as reducing grade pressure was among our stated goals.

The simple truth is that our grading system had become dysfunctional. Pieced together over time and many incremental reforms, it comprised 21 grades (2.1-4.3 awarded in increments of .1), with a rigidly enforced 3.4 mean. If one student did an outstanding job and deserved a 4.3, the only way to reward her or him was by lowering the grades of classmates to preserve the mean. Except that many courses were "off mean," meaning that instructors could give whatever grades they wanted. Predictably, they awarded high grades freely, and so whether a class was "on" or "off" mean became a significant factor in student course selection—often superseding the content of the class or whether it suited a student's educational needs.

Worse, the outcomes of our grading system conveyed a false sense of precision in describing differences among students. Many employers, especially judges, placed heavy reliance on the distinction between someone with, say, a GPA of 3.694 and someone with a 3.648. Yet there is, in fact, a tremendous amount of what statisticians call "noise" in a grading system that draws such fine distinctions, particularly since law school exams are seldom objective and grades are based on essays or papers. If students are to be grouped by results as measured in exams, the number of students who are similar is more realistically captured in fewer groupings—each of which is much larger than in our old system. Students in the bottom half of the class were particularly disadvantaged, as many employers picked a numerical GPA cutoff that, given the reality of our students and their performance, would scarcely survive rational basis scrutiny as a ground for drawing distinctions.

The time had come to wipe the slate clean and start over, which is precisely what we did—though only after consulting with employers, faculty at other schools, students, and alumni. The system we adopted still offers sufficient incentives for those who want to show their stuff, and students can and will distinguish themselves by the number of Hs they earn. The resulting cohorts will be larger, however; no longer will one be able to ordinally rank every student above or below every other student. And that's a good thing—because these larger groupings will more accurately reflect what real differences exist than are measured by exam performance. Employers can still choose cohorts from which to hire (top third, top half, etc.), but grades will do less of the work when it comes to making final decisions (as they should), and employers will need to give greater weight to individual factors that ought to matter more, such as a student's particular background and experience, additional or other skills, passion for the work, and so on.

We will, in the meantime, reap a number of pedagogical benefits. To the extent students have felt anxiety about exams and grades, there will be less of it—not so much less, we trust, that students will cease working but less that is unproductive and that detracts from the experience of actually learning. And because there is less need to translate student performance into a single, faux-precise numerical measure, faculty will be able to experiment more with the kinds of work they assign, mixing things up and giving work that challenges different skills. Plus, because our reform includes fixed ranges for the number of H grades that can be awarded, the need and incentive to "forum shop" based on how a particular professor grades should disappear.

Above all, this change is a vote of confidence in our students. We trust that they are ambitious and engaged enough to learn without the threat of a draconian grading scheme. We trust that they are remarkable enough that employers will be impressed without transcripts purporting to make fine-grained distinctions among them. Stanford Law School students are extraordinary. They bring so much more to the table than can ever be conveyed in a number like 3.785. Our new grading scheme should lead those who hire them not just to see that, but to act on it.