

# Gradeless / Less grading at university: Implications for student learning and well-being

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# Research interest: going gradeless

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- Student-initiated worry about an increase in the performance culture
- ‘More learning, less performance’ (Dobrow et al., 2011; Dweck, 1986)
- Stress is increasing and well-being is declining (Chamberlin, Yasué, & Chiang, 2018)
- Business school students as more instrumentally thinking: “Is this important for the exam?” – extrinsic motivation (Ottewill, 2003; Rynes & Trank, 1999; Sutherland, Warwick, Anderson, & Learmonth, 2018).
- Findings show that grades decrease students’ intrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2001)
- Fostering unhealthy competition (Tannock, 2017)
  
- BUT... grades are also motivating and are a well-established metric for assessment (Beatty, 2004)
- SO... does it help to remove grades in the first year of business school?

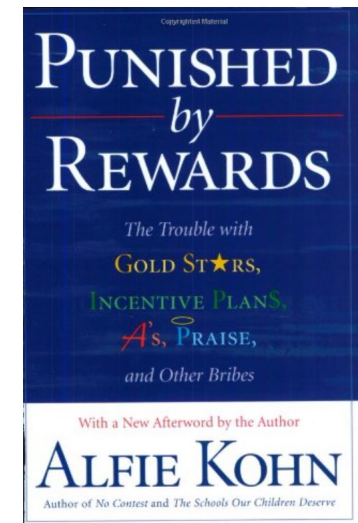
# What do we know about the negative implications of grades?

- They de-incentivize students
- They discriminate between students
- They make students stressed
- They challenge wellbeing

- You learn less
- You are more anxious
- You are less happy



Yale professor  
Laurie Santos  
*The Happiness Lab*  
podcasts



# Existing knowledge on the positive impact of gradeless learning

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Definition: Gradeless as no metrics but including pass/fail

Previous research has shown

- Reduction in level of stress and increase in wellbeing (Bloodgood, Short, Jackson, & Martindale, 2009; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2019; McMorran, Ragupathi, & Luo, 2017)
- Increased motivation and interest ((Hayek, Toma, Oberlé, & Butera, 2015; White & Fantone, 2010)
- Enhanced academic outcomes (Roberts & Dorstyn, 2017; Spring, Robillard, Gehlbach, & Simas, 2011)
- Increased reflection (Dahlgren et al., 2009 and Altahawi et al., 2012)
- Less risk aversion (McMorran et al., 2017)
- For a fuller review of the literature, please see Normann et al., 2023

## We decided to explore this further

- Introducing a full year of gradeless learning (pass/fail) at the Business administration and Psychology programme at CBS (studying the cohorts 2018 and 2019)
- Interviews with 18 individual students (interviewed twice), focus groups, full-cohort surveys and [in progress] another set of interviews to follow up on long term impacts.

Original Article



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# The gradeless paradox: Emancipatory promises but ambivalent effects of gradeless learning in business and management education

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*Management Learning*

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**Table 2.** Data structure for key themes.

First-order codes	Second-order categories	Aggregate theme
Less stress when no grades to compare Getting through first semester as whole human beings Having time to learn to become learners Unclear level of academic achievement Unclear if work effort is good enough for the long run	Well-being associated with starting at university  Anxiety about own performance and future opportunities	Relief for now but anxiety for the future
Fear of missing out on opportunities Immersion in self-selected academic subjects Academic risk-taking Seeing studying as opportunities for learning Not taking subjects seriously Not performing one's best Becoming lazy	Love of learning  Losing motivation and drive	Intrinsically motivated while disengaged from learning
Less peer competition and self-enhancement More willing to help each other Inclusive approach to learning No evidence of high achievements Losing one's identity Losing one's place in the social hierarchy	Collaborative learning  Losing straight A-student identity	Feeling part of a community but lamenting the loss of individual identity

## Does gradeless learning affect students' academic performance? A study of effects over time

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# Findings

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<b>Panel A: Student well-being</b>				
	<b>Stress</b>	<b>Loneliness</b>	<b>Social Integration</b>	
Gradeless	-0.227 (0.247)	-0.123 (0.239)	0.287 (0.264)	
Observations	89	89	89	
Controls	YES	YES	YES	
<b>Panel B: Study approach (Biggs)</b>				
	<b>Deep learning</b>		<b>Surface learning</b>	
	<b>Motive</b>	<b>Strategic</b>	<b>Motive</b>	<b>Strategic</b>
Gradeless	0.178 (0.240)	-0.160 (0.251)	0.214 (0.266)	-0.821*** (0.231)
Observations	89	89	89	89
Controls	YES	YES	YES	YES
<b>Panel B: Motivation and self-efficacy</b>				
	<b>Motivation</b>		<b>Self-efficacy</b>	
	<b>Intrinsic</b>	<b>Extrinsic</b>	<b>Exam</b>	<b>Learning</b>
Gradeless	0.763*** (0.244)	0.674*** (0.223)	1.647*** (0.263)	1.323*** (0.246)
Observations	89	89	89	89
Controls	YES	YES	YES	YES

# Findings – grades later on

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	3rd semester	4th semester	Bachelor
Gradeless	0.191** (0.090)	-0.269** (0.125)	0.017 (0.145)
Observations	250	250	236
Controls	YES	YES	YES

Complete sample

# Research in progress

- What about the longer term?
- Building on data on students interviewed and the ambivalences that they experienced over time.
- We will be re-interviewing the students who participated in the original study – almost all students have accepted to be reinterviewed.

## Questions:

- Has going gradeless in any way affected your personal/work identity?
- Did you learn from having to cope with the ambivalences you felt?
- Has it changed your perceptions of how to learn? How?
- Has it shifted your focus to learning rather than performance? [org idea]

# Contributions

- Eases transition into university
- + • It has a positive effect on study approach, motivation and self-efficacy
- It does not have a negative effect on performance midterm [our goal]
- New forms of anxiety and / or stress are introduced
- • Students who are used to get high grades miss the rush of adrenaline from getting high grades [we shift the challenge to another group]
- It does not seem to have an impact on learning midterm

# What we still need to know

- Longer term effects
- What are good gradeless designs?
- What groups of students benefit the most/the least?
- What are the consequences for those groups?
- What kinds of feedback are needed to replace grades?
- How can we support teachers in giving such feedback?
- How can we collaborate across educational levels to reap the benefits from gradeless learning?

# My reflections

- Dare to experiment
- Trust students' interest in learning
- The 'easy' admin structures have implications that are sometimes 'hidden'
- We could not have done this without collaboration across admin, students, faculty and across levels

# Contact

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