

# Specifications Grading: *Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*

Linda B. Nilson, Ph.D.

Director Emerita

Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation

Clemson University \* [nilson@clemson.edu](mailto:nilson@clemson.edu)

[www.lindabnilson.com](http://www.lindabnilson.com) \* [www.linkedin.com/in/lindabnilson/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/lindabnilson/)

# Participant Outcomes

- Articulate criteria for evaluating a grading system.
- Critically evaluate our predominant system of grading against these criteria.
- Explain how a new grading system, *specifications (specs) grading*, works.
- Implement this system in your own courses.

# Criteria of an “Ideal” Grading System

- Upholds high academic standards
- Grade reflects students’ achievement of outcomes
- Students know what is expected of them
- Rewards higher-order cognitive thinking and creativity
- Motivates students to learn and do excellent work
- Makes students feel responsible for their grades
- Minimizes student-faculty conflict (e.g., grade protests)
- Minimizes student and faculty stress
- Gives students feedback they use
- Saves faculty time
- Discourages cheating
- Fosters high inter-rater agreement

***On which criterion does our  
current grading system  
perform well?  
Perform poorly?***



# **A New Gestalt**

# Element #1

## ■ **Pass/Fail grading of assignments & tests – like competency-based educ and:**

Bloom, B. (1971). Mastery learning. In J.H. Block (Ed.), *Mastery learning: Theory and practice* (pp. 47-63). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Davidson, C. (2009, May 3). Getting out of grading. *Inside Higher Ed*.  
<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/08/03/grading>.

Kulik, C., Kulik, J., & Bangert-Drowns, R. (1990). Effectiveness of mastery learning programs: A meta-analysis. *Review of Educ Research*, 60(2), 265-306.

Kunkel, S.W. (2002). Consultant learning: A model for student-directed learning in management education. *Journal of Management Education*, 26(2), 121-138.

Leff, L.L. (n.d.). Contract grading in teaching computer programming.  
<http://www.wiu.edu/users/mflll/GRADCONT.HTM>

Venditti, P. (2010, June 10). Re: End of semester sanity strategies? Post to POD listserv archived at <https://listserv.nd.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind1006&L=POD&T=0&F=&S=&P=67803>

# Elements #1 & #2

■ **Pass/Fail grading of assignments & tests**



■ **Tokens (virtual)**



# How Do You Wind up with Final Letter Grades?

- **Point system:** Each passed test or assignment = N points (all or nothing)  
# of points at end = A, B, C, D, or F
- **Or Bundles/Modules**

# Bundles and Course Grades

Higher grades for:

- Demonstrating mastery of ***more*** content and/or skills \*OR\*
- Demonstrating mastery of ***more complex, higher-level*** content and/or skills \*OR\*
- Demonstrating both

# Elements #1, #2, and #3

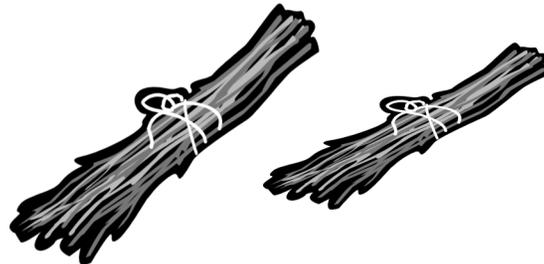
■ **Pass/Fail grading of assignments & tests**



■ **Tokens**



■ **Bundles**



# 10-Bundle Model

- For a D, students have to complete bundles 1 through 5.
- For a C, they have to complete bundles 1 through 7.
- For a B, they have to complete bundles 1 through 8.
- For an A, they have to complete all 10 bundles.

# 4-Bundle Model

- For a D, students have to complete only the easiest & most basic bundle.
- For a C, they have to complete that basic bundle + a more challenging one.
- For a B, they have to complete these 2 bundles + an even more challenging 3<sup>rd</sup> one.
- For an A, they have to complete all 4 bundles, where the 4<sup>th</sup> is the most challenging one.

# 3 Synthetic/Hybrid Models

For D: average 60-69% on exams

For C: average 70% or higher on exams

For B: C requ'ts & complete a group project

For A: B requ'ts & complete an individual paper

For C: successfully complete Module 1

For B: C requ'ts & Module 2

For A: B requ'ts & score  $\geq 90\%$  on Module 3

For C: average 70% or higher on exams

For B: C requ'ts & bundle of assignments

For A: B requ'ts & score  $\geq 90\%$  on final exam

# For Online or Blended Classes

For C: average  $\geq 70\%$  on non-proctored exams

For B: C requ'ts & average  $\geq 80\%$  on add'l assignments

For A: B requ'ts & average  $\geq 90\%$  on advanced material; **OR** B requ'ts & score  $\geq 90\%$  on proctored final

# Faculty are using specs grading at:

**Augusta University**  
**Clemson University**  
**Dalton State University**  
**Embry-Riddle University,**  
**Prescott, AZ**  
**Florida Southwestern State**  
**College**  
**Greenville Technical**  
**College**  
**Hobart and William Smith**  
**Colleges**  
**Indiana University**  
**Kennesaw State Univ.**

**Kent State University**  
**McGill University (Canada)**  
**Monroe Community**  
**College**  
**North Carolina State Univ.**  
**Northern Arizona Univ.**  
**Point Loma Nazarene Univ.**  
**Simmons University**  
**University of Utah**  
**Wilfred Laurier University**  
**(Canada)**  
**Xavier University**