

Grades and Graduate Schools

A Recurring Issue

In 1969-70, while I was serving as Dean of the College, Wesleyan became embroiled in one of those grading system controversies that have become a commonplace in American universities. A recurring issue in these debates is the effect that various grading schemes have on admission to graduate and professional schools; and I attempted to improve my understanding of that issue by soliciting information from the admissions officers of law, business, medical and liberal arts graduate schools that had accepted more than six Wesleyan seniors from 1965 to 1969. While the schools polled have, therefore, a special pertinence for Wesleyan, the unanimity of opinion in their responses suggests a broader application.

As members of university faculties, political scientists are regularly confronted with policy choices about grading systems. Furthermore, the graduate schools' overwhelming preference, detailed below, for distinctly calibrated evaluations of applicants' work in their fields of undergraduate concentration has meaning for departmental faculties as they structure requirements for their student majors. To the extent that individual faculty members have the option, as we at Wesleyan do, to offer courses on a graded or pass/fail basis, their choices may be guided in part by the consequences for students. Where students individually decide whether or how they will be graded in particular courses and in universities which invite student participation in academic policy making, undergraduates ought to know the full implications of their choices.

Let me disclaim at the outset any intention to canvass the merits of various grading systems. Nor do I wish to be in the position of arguing that undergraduate programs should select grading schemes because of the preferences of graduate institutions or of employers. My purpose is to illuminate one factor which some teachers and students will include in their individual and collective choices about academic evaluation: what consequences for graduate and professional school admissions flow from their decisions? At Wesleyan, students themselves — however much they may deny its importance — have made this an urgent question because approximately 70 per cent pursue studies beyond the bachelor's degree.

The core of my letter to admission officers said, "It would be very helpful to us if you could give

us some idea of the relative merits of various grading systems from the perspective of graduate admissions. We are considering a wide range of grading systems, including pass/fail, the traditional letter grade system, a reporting only of courses in which the student does satisfactory work and gets credit, and a combination of pass/fail and letter grades." Other questions pertinent only to Wesleyan were asked.

I was surprised at the large number of harassed admissions officers who responded and at the care they took in explaining their problems and procedures. Fifteen of 20 liberal arts graduate schools replied, 17 or 18 medical schools, eight of 11 graduate business programs, and 10 of 14 law schools.¹ The replies touched on many subjects beyond those about which questions were directly asked. A portrait emerged of admissions officers swamped by large numbers of highly qualified applicants, striving to select those whose undergraduate training promised that they would be liberally educated professionals, and struggling to give applicants a fair hearing despite increasingly chaotic and unrevealing methods of undergraduate evaluation.

An Overwhelming Preference for Grades

The letters revealed a clear pattern in which undergraduate academic evaluation overshadowed every other indicator in graduate admissions. Although frequently deemed inadequate, standardized tests (the GRE, MCAT, ARGSB and LSAT) were listed as the next most important variable, and faculty recommendations were a third factor. Several business programs mentioned that they were interested in extracurricular activities, but this was never mentioned by other admissions officers.

¹ The confidentiality of replies was assured to encourage responses. Letters quoted here are therefore not attributed to their authors. Similarly, schools are not identified with the preferences and opinions expressed. It may be useful, however, to list those universities from which one or more graduate and professional schools responded.

University of California (1), University of Chicago (4), Columbia University (2), University of Connecticut (4), Cornell University (3), Duke University (3), Harvard University (3), Indiana University (1), Jefferson University (1), Johns Hopkins University (1), University of Maryland (1), University of Michigan (2), Northwestern University (1), New York University (2), University of Pennsylvania (3), University of Rochester (3), Stanford University (2), Syracuse University (3), Union University (2), Vanderbilt University (3), University of Virginia (2), Yale University (3).

Two other slight variations showed up. Arts and sciences graduate programs have highly diffused admissions' procedures in which departments apply their own standards. One graduate dean emphasized the point by reporting that "I have a veto over all, but it is about as effective as that of the House of Lords." The upshot, stressed by a number of graduate deans, is that the prestige of the student's undergraduate major department carries great weight with graduate department admissions committees and that letters of recommendation from well-known scholars in the field are very influential.

The opportunity for most undergraduates to benefit from this emphasis on letters of recommendation is quite slim, however. "Letters from young faculty may be very useful since they often develop a close and intimate relationship with the student. But however excellent these young men and however sincere and discriminating their judgment may be, since they are not generally known to the faculty of the Graduate School and since their judgments have not been tested by subsequent performance in graduate school of students they recommend, their letters of evaluation, to be persuasive, must be confirmed by other evidence [such as grades]." On the other hand, "how many undergraduates can find one, let alone three, mature faculty members whose judgment and whose predictions of the probable success of their students have been tested by the records of former students . . . admitted to major graduate schools?"

The medical school deans seemed willing to rely very heavily on the judgments of the Pre-Medical Advisory Committee. But this may reflect Wesleyan's special situation as a small institution with an unusually vigorous pre-medical advising program headed by a respected and energetic college physician of long standing. In larger schools or those without such medical advising programs, the likelihood is less that the emphasis on grades and test scores is similarly ameliorated.

Despite these slight variations, the overall pattern of responses showed an overwhelming preference for grades. A few admissions officers said that they were content with any system — whether traditional grades or a new set of designations such as High Honors, Honors, etc. — that clearly distinguished the quality of work of different students. But most did not concede even that much. Expressions ranged from affirmative assertions of the value of grades to warnings that

students in ungraded programs would be severely disadvantaged. In one law school, for instance, applicants from two ungraded universities were considered only if their LSAT scores were over 700; the ungraded programs made it impossible to distinguish among students on other grounds.

There were, finally, three reports that a "pass" was arbitrarily converted into a grade in the admissions process, and in each case this worked to the disadvantage of the applicant. A medical school averaged pass grades as C and a business school as C+/B—. The most generous treatment was a letters and sciences graduate school which converted pass to B; but since its selective admissions policy required a B+ or A— mean, this equivalence actually worked to the detriment of students with some pass/fail courses and many B+, A— and A grades by averaging their overall grade point downward toward the B level. If this practice is common elsewhere, it disadvantages even those students from undergraduate programs with very limited and closely circumscribed pass/fail options.

Among the 50 letters of response only two favored ungraded systems, and both were from business school admissions officers. One advocated a pass/fail system in which each faculty member would write a comment on each student in his class. The second reported that since "most material is fairly well correlated," it was possible to use letters of recommendation, test scores and other indicia about as effectively as grades. Two other business schools expressed lukewarm attitudes best described as a grudging willingness to try to adapt to pass/fail systems.

Of 15 arts and science graduate schools, four responded negatively to all ungraded programs, six said that pass/fail programs outside the major did not significantly harm an applicant's prospects, and five more found some other limited form of pass/fail grading acceptable. The range of those limits suggests so little agreement among graduate schools, however, that undergraduate faculties and students would have a difficult time accommodating such disparate preferences. Among the proposals were "one pass/fail course a year," "two courses per year," "a limited number — not more than 10 per cent," "a relatively small number," and "two each semester outside the major and minor." Five respondents volunteered that more emphasis would be placed on standardized tests if grades were not available and two others said additional weight would be given letters of recommendation.

Among 17 medical school replies, six expressed disfavor of any ungraded work, four accepted various limited pass/fail options, and six specifically said that the pre-medical courses in natural sciences should be graded but that others could be ungraded. One medical dean replied that so much emphasis was placed on the recommendation of the Pre-Medical Advisory Committee that an ungraded program would not seriously disadvantage an applicant, but he went on to express a preference for traditional grades. Four medical schools offered the view that in the absence of grades more emphasis would be placed on the MCAT and four others thought recommendations, particularly from pre-medical advisors, would weigh more heavily.

The surprising willingness of business schools to adapt to ungraded undergraduate programs confounded many of the stereotypes that others in liberal arts faculties must share with me about the conservatism of professional business education. Only two of eight responses opposed pass/fail grading of all kinds and one more suggested a limited pass/fail option of not more than 25 per cent of courses. As reported in a previous paragraph, the attitudes of other business schools ranged from enthusiastic advocacy of pass/fail to grudging acceptance.

Four law school admissions officers opposed any pass/fail, one more thought pass/fail outside the major a viable alternative, and five others favored various kinds of limited pass/fail options such as the usual "one course each semester," "not more than one-third of his courses," and "as few as possible." Eight law schools warned of greater emphasis on LSAT's when undergraduate academic records became less useful for distinguishing among students and three believed recommendations would count more.

Apparently the suggestion, advanced by some critics of traditional evaluation schemes, that Wesleyan provide simply a transcript listing courses passed with credit was not taken seriously by graduate and professional schools, for only seven commented on it. The tone of those comments bordered on outrage. One letters and sciences dean called it "dishonest," another warned that it would make Wesleyan's reports "skewed and probably unreliable," a third said that such transcripts will be of "no help to us, we are interested in knowing . . . [where] he is weak."

Even the most polite reply had a sharp edge: "I don't take to the notion of reporting only courses in which a student does satisfactory work and gets credit. That . . . seems to me too scanty a record." The idea was "hooted down" by one admissions committee. A medical school dean called the plan "intolerable" and another stressed that his committee wanted to know all of a student's performance.

Evaluation and Recommendations

Beyond their reactions to various grading systems, a number of deans and admissions officers commented specifically upon the usefulness of written faculty evaluations of student course work and on the quality of letters of recommendation. Since no specific question was asked about these matters, the number of responses (11 on evaluations, 9 on recommendations) is not great enough for more than impressionistic conclusions. Nonetheless, a number of these responses made arguments on the merits that deserve attention.

On the favorable side, one medical school dean reported that an undergraduate pass/fail system "worked out rather well . . . where the unrestricted portion of the student's transcript contained some very specific evaluations of the student's performance." Another thought that "if coupled with an expanded, meaningful written evaluation of the student almost any [grading] system could be acceptable," although he preferred a traditional grading system as easiest to work with. Three other institutions (two medical schools, one arts and sciences graduate school) which preferred grades said that where a pass/fail system was used, careful individual evaluations of student work must accompany the transcript, and one of these reported that most "[w]ritten evaluations which accompany grades under a pass/fail system do not, in [our] experience, add materially to other evaluations and sometimes prove detrimental to the applicant."

The more numerous critical comments about course evaluations emphasized the inherent difficulty in preparing statements that were meaningful and that made distinctions between students, the banality of most written evaluations, and the nearly impossible burden they impose on already overextended admissions committees or staffs. The strongest adverse statement came from an arts and sciences dean who said, "Having read

a fair number of end-of-course evaluative statements and having witnessed the utter frustration which at least some faculty members experience when faced with the problem of providing individual qualitative evaluations, I am quite skeptical about the amount of relevant and valid information which they contain. Upon reading a few such statements, one is likely to be impressed with what appears to be the penetrating insight and concern of the faculty member. Read them all day and you end up with intellectual (if not somatic) nausea when you realize that many such 'qualitative evaluations' are little more than collections of clichés and platitudes." A law school admissions dean also described evaluations as platitudinous. He suggested that it would be useful for students who advocate them to write evaluations of classmates and then compare results; they would, he asserted, find the results banal and useless in distinguishing among students. Complaints about the low quality of evaluations pervaded the comments of other respondents.

The problem of volume concerned a law school admissions dean who said simply that he did not have the manpower to read 10 to 20 pages of evaluations for each applicant. And a medical school dean despaired of student folders which included "reams of observations about the student. . . ." Course evaluations undoubtedly became even more unmanageable in 1970-71 than they had been in 1969-70 in the wake of a rising tide of applications for all graduate and professional programs, and especially for law schools.² The tendency to minimize the attention given to course evaluations is perhaps reflected in the practice of the Law School Data Assembly Service which reports LSAT scores and transcript summaries to law school admissions officers and which will calculate admission indexes using these factors if a law school requests them. "No attempt is made to summarize narratives or statements describing candidates' academic work."³ Ironically, those institutions in which faculty continue to shoulder the responsibility for admissions are most adversely affected by large-scale adoption of course evaluation systems: the burden of reading admissions files becomes too great for faculty members and they are forced either to

ignore such evaluations or to turn the admissions decisions over to a professional admissions staff.

While recommendations from pre-medical advisors and from well-known scholars in prestige departments are likely to carry weight, as mentioned above, letters of recommendation do not ordinarily have a high standing in the admissions process. The basic problem is that they are too indiscriminating and give too little information. Seven of the nine comments on letters of recommendation were negative or skeptical. A law school dean said that "honest grades are much more common than honest recommendations." An arts and sciences dean captured the general problem when he reported that ". . . the large majority of letters received . . . are so uniformly enthusiastic that they allow for little discrimination. The number of negative letters received is infinitesimal, so I am afraid that graduate schools cannot depend on the frankness of faculty members to give this method much value in choosing those to admit. . . ." Another said that one-third of the letters received were of no use and that many more were misleading. One dean complained that letters of recommendation put "a premium on gregariousness and forwardness in class" and that "a man who has unpopular views or is obnoxious may be dumped on in letters from faculty." A comment that encompassed both evaluations and letters of recommendations said that "evaluations tend to be very personal (and sometimes pretty far into the realm of amateur psychology) or they tend to be perfunctory, the sort of thing that one gets in the letter of recommendation." Although opinions about written course evaluations and letters of recommendation in lieu of grades were found in only about one-fourth of the letters received, those responses suggest tentatively that neither is a substitute for a clearly calibrated system of evaluation.

The Consequences of "Reform"

Let me emphasize again the limits of this study: it is basically impressionistic rather than rigorously quantitative, it surveys a limited number of graduate schools selected because of their pertinence to Wesleyan undergraduates, and it is concerned solely with the effect that grading systems have on graduate school admissions. One is compelled to conclude, nonetheless, that, to the extent students and faculty give weight to the aspirations of undergraduates to pursue graduate or professional studies, revisions in grading

2 The rising tide of law school applications was reflected in the numbers taking the LSAT: 60,503 in the 1968-69 academic year and 109,318 in 1970-71.

3 Educational Testing Service, *Law School Admission Bulletin* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1971), p. 35.

systems, especially "reforms" which substantially reduce or eliminate the calibrated evaluation of a student's course work, should be undertaken charily. The same warning is pertinent where students opt individually for graded or ungraded courses or programs, where each faculty member makes decisions about grading systems for his courses, and where departmental committees structure the grading requirements for student majors. The elimination or substantial curtailment of reasonably precise course grades will, in all probability, disadvantage applicants for graduate and professional schools or force those institutions to rely even more heavily on such arbitrary measures as standardized tests and the prestige of recommendation writers.