

Department of American Studies
Assessment Narrative
July 28, 2015

This year we tried to determine what the department's grading rubric and scale are, *in practice*, and what they should be. Motivated in large part by the data that Dean Breslin provided at the August 2014 Department Chairs and Program Directors retreat, we were concerned about the fact that, in AY 2013-2014, 70% of the students in AM classes received As and 24% received Bs. There are of course different ways of explaining these numbers, which are, in our view, too high. So we discussed, multiple times and at length and in depth, what we think specific grades signify.

According to the Skidmore College catalog, this what our grades "mean."

A+, A	Distinguished work
A-, B+, B	Superior work
B-, C+, C	Satisfactory work
C-, D+, D	Passing, poor-quality work
F	Failure, no credit earned

These are, in my view, distinctions that should be revisited and modified.

One outcome from our assessment work is that we have created a department grading rubric which is intended to be suggestive and a guide, rather than prescriptive. I also expect it to evolve further.

During our discussions, we focused on some of the characteristics we expect of A, B, C, etc. student work. Collectively, we have created the following rubric to assess American Studies student work.

A+, A	excellent work
A-	distinguished work
B+, B	good, strong work
B-, C+	proficient work
C	acceptable work
D+, D	barely satisfactory work
F	unsatisfactory

More specifically, we think work that earns the grades above should have these qualities:

A+, A	Organized, clear and concise, uses evidence effectively, interrogates assumptions, creates context, has an original thesis, conceptually nuanced and mature, critically alert
A-	Organized, clear and concise, uses evidence, creates context, has a thesis, conceptually nuanced
B+, B	Strong, evidence-based writing, good, solid ideas, underdeveloped

	thesis, prose and citations need polish
B-, C+	Undeveloped thesis, source issues, grammatical and/or organizational issues, but demonstrates potential
C	Problems with organization, grammar, and citations, inadequately sourced arguments, weak, elementary thesis (i.e., TBU: true, but uninteresting)
D+, D	Sloppy, disorganized, unclear, and poor use of evidence, but attempts to engage the assignment
F	Late, sloppy, disorganized, unreadable, lacks evidence, and does not engage the assignment

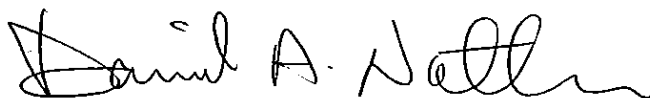
We will directly assess samples of student work using this assessment rubric before the 2015-16 school year begins. We want to be able to establish continuity across the AM curriculum about what grades mean and the department's standards, which we think should be high but attainable.

Another piece of our assessment work is to update our alumni page on the American Studies website. See http://www.skidmore.edu/american_studies/alumni/index.php. Part of that work includes adding a new subpage to the site that includes alums from 2010 to 2015. This work is ongoing.

As ever, we welcome constructive criticism that will help us do our jobs more effectively. So we welcome your feedback.

Let me add that if one of the primary goals of assessment work is to bring faculty together to discuss our individual and collective concerns and to think aloud about how to be more efficacious teachers, this year's assessment work was a success.

Sincerely,



Daniel A. Nathan, Professor and Chair
Department of American Studies

Dear Dan,

Thanks very much for your assessment narrative for 2014-15. Your department continues to be exemplary in the way that you track your alumni and make visible on your website all sorts of information about their lives and ways that they remain connected to their learning at Skidmore. It's also good to see that you took up a discussion in your department of your grades and their meanings. That discussion appears to have yielded excellent results, as we note below.

As before, we are responding to the department and program reports with particular attention to the ways faculty are framing goals for our students; analyzing student work directly (and also considering indirect information such as surveys and interviews) to see how well they are meeting our goals; discussing the results together; and making use of the results to change courses, requirements, and/or pedagogies.

To meet the standards for accreditation, we are asked to analyze our students' work directly on a regular basis. The key, as always, is to study our students' learning in ways that you find meaningful. Everything lines up behind that.

Student Learning Goals: Your report this year doesn't engage with your articulated goals for your students' learning in your courses and your major, but it does present a revised grading rubric that you developed together that de facto establishes goals for your students' work.

Assessments—Direct: You plan to make use of your new rubric to grade some papers collectively and see how well a sample of your students' papers aligns with your goals as expressed in the rubric.

Assessments—Indirect: Information on alumni continues to constitute your valuable indirect assessment of American Studies' impact on your past students.

Results: To be determined as you follow up this year.

Discussion, implementation: As your report notes, one valuable aspect of assessment work is to bring faculty together to share concerns and think aloud about how to improve our students' learning, and in that regard, your work this year was a success!

Looking ahead: This year, you plan to conduct a direct assessment of your students' writing using the grading rubric that you developed. Your purpose is to align your grades more fully with your sense of how well your students are actually writing. This is a natural and laudable next step for you.

Overall: You have tackled a thorny problem here, and you are planning to continue right into the thorns. This is important work. We trust that you will use the opportunity too to identify which aspects of your students' writing seem to need the most improvement. Following up on that could be as valuable as improving the ways that you use grades to communicate to students about their work. Of course, we know that you are a small enough department to

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have a constant eye on your students' work. It's a matter of building and communicating a consensus about how to address collectively any problems you see.

Thank you for this fine work!

Sincerely,
Lisa Christenson
Sarah Goodwin