



## Ungrading General Education: Preliminary Results from a Pilot Study

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## Author Biography

Stacey J. Korson is an Associate Professor of Literacy Education at Eastern Kentucky University. Her research focuses on the use and selection of children's literature in the classroom, students' response to literature, critical content analysis of packaged literacy curricula, and preservice teacher preparation. Dr. Korson teaches literacy courses across programs focused on foundations, instruction, assessment, and children's literature. She has won several awards from the College and University for her teaching. She is a proud first-generation college student and McNair scholar. Dr. Korson earned a B.S. and M.S. in Education from the University of Central Missouri and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,

Travis L. Martin, PhD, is founding director of the Kentucky Center for Veterans Studies at Eastern Kentucky University. He has established several nationally recognized programs to support returning veterans in higher education and the non-profit sector. A scholar of American literature, psychoanalytic trauma theory, and social theory, Dr. Martin presents frequently at conferences and universities. He has published dozens of research articles and creative short works on veterans' issues. A former sergeant in the U.S. Army, he served during two deployments in the Iraq War (2003-04 & 2005). His book *War and Homecoming: Veteran Identity and the Post-9/11 Generation* was published with the University Press of Kentucky in 2022. He resides in Richmond, KY.

Matthew P. Winslow is a Professor of Psychology at Eastern Kentucky University. He helped found the Faculty Innovator program at ECU, and has facilitated more than 40 professional development workshops, professional learning communities, and has presented about teaching and learning at more than 20 conferences, both in the U.S. and internationally. Dr. Winslow has won numerous awards for his in-person and online teaching, and the 2017 Acorn Award, a state-wide competition of excellence in the professoriate open to all higher education institutions in Kentucky. Dr. Winslow earned a B.A. from Macalester College, an M.A. from UC Santa Cruz, and a Ph.D. from the University of Minnesota.

Alison Buck is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Eastern Kentucky University. She serves as the Program Coordinator for Sociology. Her research focuses on the reproduction of inequality across different organizational contexts, including within college classrooms and she has published several articles on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Dr. Buck earned a B.A. from Guilford College and an M.S. and Ph.D. from North Carolina State University.

Kaitlynn Moody is a current M.A. student at Eastern Kentucky University. Her research focuses on First-Year Writing courses at ECU that utilize ungrading methods to determine students' attitudes and engagement with the courses. She attends the Professional Learning Community meetings facilitated by Dr. Winslow and earned her B.A. from the University of Louisville.

# 2022 Pedagogicon Proceedings

## Ungrading General Education: Preliminary Results from a Pilot Study

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*A group of faculty members representing more than 20 courses listed in the Eastern Kentucky University General Education curriculum participated in a pilot program to test and measure the effectiveness of “ungraded” pedagogy. “Ungrading,” as defined by the group, can be any conscious effort to move student emphasis away from grades and onto learning. Given this definition, ungrading took many forms in the pilot: gradeless classrooms, grading contracts, and greater choice of assignments by students, to name a few. At the end of the semester, quantitative and qualitative data was gathered from student course evaluations; DFW and retention rates were considered; and focus groups comprised of students in ungraded classes were convened. This piece provides preliminary results from the pilot and in an effort to begin a larger conversation about the widespread adoption of ungraded pedagogies.*

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### **Ungrading General Education: Preliminary Results from a Pilot Study**

For decades, the conventional system of letter grades has been considered standard and immutable in higher education. Throughout the 20th century, educators commonly believed that grades played an integral role in student motivation and were necessary to help students improve future performance (Thomas & Oldfather, 1997). This system, however, has been often criticized as failing to capture the complex, dynamic nature of learning. The meaning of a letter grade is often inconsistent from course to course. Instructors frequently base grades on a variety of factors in different proportions, including student achievement, effort, attitude, attendance, and punctuality (Pilcher, 1994). Although many instructors expect that external controls (i.e., letter grades), coupled with close surveillance and monitoring, will uniformly motivate students, critics suggest that these practices foster an environment of boredom and/or anxiety for learners. More importantly, the standard letter grade system works against a student's intrinsic motivation for learning and growth (Niemic & Ryan, 2009).

An answer to the current system is a pedagogical approach called ungrading. This approach is defined by making changes to a course that move student focus away from grades to learning. Ungrading is not a singular strategy; rather, it consists of several strategies aimed at decentering grades as the focal point of a class (Blum, 2020). These tactics can include: gradeless assignments, grading contracts, individual student learning plans, qualitative feedback on student progress, and students' self-assessment and comprehensive reflection of the student's learning (Blum, 2020). Ungrading is one approach that is being used to reduce boredom and anxiety along with increasing learning, which led to the aim of this pilot study. In this study, we sought to (a) compare student performance and class and professor ratings between General Education classes that used ungrading (broadly defined) compared to those who did not use ungrading ; and (b) describe students' perceptions of learning within an ungrading classroom compared to a traditional classroom.

## **Methods**

A concurrent mixed method study was used for this pilot study. Quantitative data included DFW (D, F and withdrawal) rates, student ratings of the class and student ratings of the professor. Qualitative data included transcripts from two 30-minute focus groups, which were audio recorded. Focus groups were held towards the end of the semester so that students had participated in upgrading for most of the semester and could share their experiences. The interview protocol (Appendix A) provided space for the students to respond and share in an open manner. Students from two different ungraded General Education courses participated in the focus group. Focus group facilitators led a structured discussion surrounding (a) how the ungraded format affected their learning and (b) their understanding of the ungrading within their classroom.

### *Study sample*

The sample for the pilot study quantitative data included: undergraduates (N=287) enrolled in a total of 25 classes, taught by a total of 15 instructors across 12 disciplines. The study sites included online and in-person courses exclusively at Eastern Kentucky University. There were 287 students across all classes. The students were 67% women, and 77% white. African Americans were 8.7%, Hispanics were 5.23% and Asians 1.7%. The balance of students identified as multiracial. Courses ranged across the humanities (African American Studies, English, Philosophy), Social Sciences (Political Science, Psychology) and physical sciences (Astronomy). The largest course sections were for Anthropology,

Psychology, and Veterans Studies. After the courses were completed, focus groups took place in an undergraduate section of Introduction to Veterans Studies and an undergraduate section of Social Psychology and included all students present for that day who wished to participate.

## Results

### *Quantitative*

Ungraded courses had slightly lower DFW (D, F, and withdrawal) rates, but not statistically significant ( $p=0.58$ ). DFW rates ranged from 0% to 30% in Ungraded General Education class compared to 1.6% to 37.6% in a traditional class (See Table 1).

We did not have access to student evaluation of traditional classes but did have access to classes that provided an ungrading approach. Ninety percent of students assessed the instructor as good or excellent. Eighty-five percent rated the course good or excellent. Around 75% of students thought the course had met the goals of the course. Twenty-percent of students felt that ungrading was confusing. A 2-proportion z-test shows no statistical difference between graded and ungraded classes ( $p=0.58$ ).

**Table 1.** Student Performance

	DFW <sup>1</sup> Rate	Minimum Section DFW	Max Section DFW
Ungraded Gen Ed	17%	0%	30%
Graded Gen Ed	22.70%	1.60%	37.60%
Difference in DFW	4.90%		
Max Dif in DFW	23.90%		
Min Dif in DFW	-11.60%		

<sup>1</sup>Proportion of students who earn a D, an F, or Withdraw.

**Table 2.** Student evaluations of ungraded courses

	Low Combined	High Combined
Professor is good or excellent	9%	90%
Course is good or excellent	14%	85%
Ungrading made learning important	8%	77%
Ungrading made me responsible for learning	5%	85%
Ungrading was confusing	60%	21%
Ungrading let me focus on learning	8%	73%
Ungrading gave me freedom to explore	7%	77%

### *Qualitative*

The focus groups revealed three overarching themes: affective motivation, cognitive motivation, and social cohesion. Underlying all of these themes was the idea that students saw ungrading as a philosophy that fosters intrinsically motivated learning, reduces stress, and engenders a greater sense of trust and collaboration between students and instructors. Many of the students in these focus groups addressed how the Ungrading format was related to their sense of intrinsic motivation. With intrinsic motivation, students find activities worthwhile and meaningful and actively seek out the intended benefits of the coursework.

Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) the researchers identified three factors in the ungraded classroom fostering students' intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

**Autonomy.** Autonomy occurs when people feel that they are the source of their own behaviors and that their actions are a result of freewill. Students agreed that the ungraded format fostered autonomy in their learning. One student suggested that the class “gives you the freedom to control your own learning. You don't feel pressured by grades; you don't feel pressured by your professor and how they're going to judge you.” Another noted that the class offered “whatever you wanted to put into it—to get whatever you wanted out of it. Definitely took some pressure off in a good way.”

**Competence.** Competence involves feelings of effectiveness and the chance to express one's full abilities when faced with a challenge. Respondents noted a relationship between grades and their feelings of competence. One student suggested that the removal of grades helped him focus more on the overall

holistic quality of work, “It made me more invested in the work...it made me want to put that quality in there just because I didn’t have to worry about, ‘oh I am going to get this wrong because I misspelled a word.’” Another commented that, “There's still like a rubric and everything, but it's more like “don't worry so much about fulfilling all of these tasks—just fulfill these...and then...demonstrate to me what you've learned.”

**Relatedness.** Relatedness involves a sense of connectedness and belonging with others such as peers and other members of one’s community. Students noted an increased sense of social connectedness in the ungraded courses. One student asserted, “yeah, I definitely think that the ungrading has made the people in the class a lot more social, if that makes sense. So I really do think it promotes that kind of social connection.” For other students, relatedness was interwoven with the sense of autonomy fostered in the class. They suggested that interest in a subject makes it easier to share it and discuss it with your peers, “If you get to pick what you're learning about, then people are also going to be interested in talking about that topic.”

## **Discussion**

The results of this study seem to indicate that the practice of ungrading holds potential to improve student performance and satisfaction in general education courses. It takes time. It takes practice. And it takes resources. However, the philosophy of embracing “any approach that moves student emphasis away from grades and onto learning” seems to have improved students’ experiences in our pilot.

Particularly in this time of an ongoing global pandemic, the finding of social cohesion could be extremely beneficial in supporting students. McMurtrie (2022) argued that during the 2021-22 school years’ students struggled to return to the norms of college life and didn’t seek help from professors when they were struggling. Sung (2021) explains the migration to a pass-or-fail model during the COVID-19 pandemic was beneficial for students because they were already struggling with several difficulties created by the pandemic and this ungraded method allowed students to focus on the material rather than the grade and helped develop a more open dialogue with the instructors. The ability to develop social cohesion in the classroom, could provide the connection and relatedness students need to make this transition. Additionally, there is a growing body of research (Supiano, 2018) that suggests that developing a sense of belonging can increase students' ability to persevere to graduation and their overall well-being.

While this research focuses on the idea of belonging to the larger campus community; we argue that developing this social cohesion and connectedness in one classroom or with one professor can be a pivotal moment in the development of this sense of belonging.

From these initial findings, a few caveats about ungrading are warranted. Simply removing grades on assignments is not sufficient to foster students' intrinsic motivation. If not supported with skillful instructional communication, ungrading may fail to foster a rich learning environment. The ungrading format may be highly novel for individual students. Without meaningful rationales for learning activities and clear explanations of how ungrading fits with the class learning goals, students may become confused and agitated with the process. The format may even be resisted by high-achieving students. Learners with a history of earning high grades in conventional courses may have the greatest degree of ego involvement with letter grades. These students may object the most when grades are not utilized as the primary marker of achievement.

Instructors' interpersonal communication skills, both in and out of the classroom, can also be vital in supporting student motivation. Instructors' acknowledging student's perspectives on the subject matter, soliciting student input in decisions, and providing choices about the work they complete should foster student autonomy. Incorporating students' interests into the course curriculum (Goldman et al., 2017), offering challenging assignments, and providing informative feedback can help students increase feelings of mastery and competence. Finally, an ungraded approach that does not foster strong social connections for learners may fail to spur student motivation. The evidence from this study suggests that, as students investigate topics personally significant to them, it may facilitate social cohesion as they share their findings on these topics.

### *Limitations*

There are a number of limitations. First, the study lacked a control group. Second participating instructors had varying levels of experience with ungrading. Furthermore, most instructors varied in terms of scope and implementation of ungraded approaches in their courses (i.e., some did not provide any grades, some graded some assignments etc.)

### *Future Directions*

The leaders of the pilot, Drs. Travis Martin and Matthew Winslow, provided structure, resources, community, and instructional design support throughout



the process. They will continue offering this support to ECU's growing ungrading community by offering a third Professional Learning Community in the fall 2022.

In addition, ungrading is an emphasis in the "First-Year Think Tank", and it will be a piloted approach in Mathematics and Statistics. Participating instructors will be mentored through the Engage program and then transitioned into the PLC so that they have the support of a community of scholars. SoTL funds are being used for the development of a library resource guide to help instructors implement alternative grading approaches. It is likely that we will resume data collection and incorporate faculty focus groups into the current study later this year. Participation in the pilot was a rewarding experience and showcased the power of interdisciplinary scholarship, allowing the talents and passions of the various faculty from throughout the university to shine. There was a great confluence of competency and genuine scholarly interest among all involved.

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## Suggested Readings

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## Appendix A

### Focus Group Question List

1. Why did you choose ECU over other schools?
2. How would you evaluate your experiences at this university so far?
3. What is your personal relationship with grades and learning? Do grades and learning relate to your motivation in courses?
4. Some courses at ECU have adopted an ungrading approach. Each of you in this group is enrolled in a course that has adopted the ungrading philosophy in some way. At this stage of the semester, what does ungrading mean to you?
5. When you first heard your instructor had plans for ungrading, what was your initial reaction?
6. Has your perception of ungrading changed over the course of the semester? What might have caused this change?
7. Has the ungraded course affected the way you look at HOW you learn?
8. How do you see the ungraded class as different from their other courses?
9. How is your sense of responsibility for your learning different in your ungrading course compared to courses that do not use ungrading approach?
10. The mission of the General Education Program is to promote learning that is central to the intellectual pursuits associated with our educational programs and to enable students to make informed choices about matters of public and personal significance in a diverse, democratic society and global community. Can you tell us about how you see ungrading vs. traditional supporting this mission?
11. Are there any further important issues with ungrading that we haven't covered so far in this discussion?