

**Grade Expectations: A Paradigm Shift for Student Success**

Jenny E. Bennett, M.Agr.  
Colorado State University  
Agricultural Education  
College of Agricultural Sciences  
301 University Avenue  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-1101  
[Jennifer.Bennett@colostate.edu](mailto:Jennifer.Bennett@colostate.edu)

Julie K. Lamarra, Ph.D  
Utah State University  
Technology, Design & Technical Education  
College of Agriculture and Applied Sciences  
6000 Old Main Hill  
Logan, Utah 84322  
[Julie.Lamarra@usu.edu](mailto:Julie.Lamarra@usu.edu)

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### **Introduction**

The ungrading movement reimagines assessment in education, prioritizing holistic learning experiences over traditional grading systems using iterative, evolving, and democratic assessment processes (Blum, 2020). While the education system routinely explores novel instruction and assessment methods to enhance student learning, the global repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic required educators to forge innovative solutions (Ferns et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). One noteworthy strategy that emerged in educational literature, with potential longevity, is the concept of ungrading (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2021). When implemented effectively, prior research supports that ungrading can increase student engagement, investment, performance, and learning independence (Spurlock, 2023; Stommel, 2021; Traini et al., 2023; Mansland, 2023). Additionally, ungrading can alleviate stress and anxiety while enhancing relationships between students and teachers (Ferns et al., 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). While a new concept in education, the ungrading strategy exhibits promising potential for widespread application across diverse domains and academic disciplines. This innovative idea explores using ungrading within the context of undergraduate courses.

### **How it Works**

The ungrading movement seeks to revolutionize educational assessment and evaluation processes by prioritizing holistic learning experiences and student autonomy over traditional grading systems. At its core, ungrading encourages deep reflection from the instructor and the student. Students are asked to reflect on their learning processes, engage in self-assessment, and participate in constructive dialogues with educators. While the instructor practices robust feedback loops with the students and a continual examination of their implementation practice of ungrading, adjusting iteratively as needed through examination of data. This paper outlines the methodology of ungrading, comprising four phases: (1) Establishing the Framework, which involves clarifying expectations, fostering a collaborative classroom culture, and developing transparent assessment criteria; (2) Material Engagement, where students undertake reflective practices, receive constructive feedback, and engage in peer assessment; (3) Reflective Assessment, encompassing student self-assessment, dialogic negotiation with instructors, and a culminating reflection; and (4) Iterative Refinement, where educators reflect on the efficacy of ungrading, make adaptive adjustments, and enhance the learning experience for future cohorts.

Each phase contributes to the overarching goal of enhancing student learning and personal growth. Ungrading prioritizes learning over grades, process over product, and intrinsic motivation over extrinsic rewards, fostering a dynamic and responsive learning environment. Involving students in the assessment process through ungrading methods deepens their engagement with course material, cultivates critical thinking skills, and promotes lifelong learning. Together, these phases cultivate a dynamic, student-centered learning environment that prioritizes learning over grades, process over product, and intrinsic motivation over extrinsic rewards, ultimately fostering equitable, reflective, and engaged learning communities.

## Results to Date

The authors' decision to implement the ungrading strategy was driven by their aspiration to enrich the classroom experience for students and themselves. After applying this strategy to various undergraduate courses in 2022 and 2023, they observed several positive outcomes. Notably, there was a noticeable increase in student morale and motivation, significantly improving the quality of weekly assignments and final projects. The dynamic between students and instructors underwent positive transformations, resulting in a less stressful and more productive learning environment. Teaching and developing coursework became less burdensome, and the learning process felt more organic. Students appreciated the ungrading approach's flexibility, allowing instructors to be more inclusive of various student circumstances. However, the implementation also presented challenges. Some students struggled with the heightened expectations for autonomy in determining their course grades. The use of extensive feedback and a complete or incomplete entry into the grading system proved anticlimactic for students who had invested considerable effort in weekly assignments. Lastly, the front-loading process of devising how to implement ungrading was time-consuming and varied for each student group. Despite these challenges, the authors recognize the potential benefits of the ungrading strategy in enhancing the overall educational experience and have continued to implement variations of the ungrading strategy based on reflective practice for their individual courses.

## Advice to others

While ungrading holds promise in enhancing the educational experience, it's essential to recognize that it isn't a universal remedy for all educational challenges (Ferns et al., 2021). As Mansland (2023) highlighted, its effectiveness may vary across different contexts. Implementing ungrading demands careful planning and organization, emphasizing the need for a customized approach rather than a one-size-fits-all solution. Effective communication is critical, and educators should clearly articulate the grading plan to students, fostering transparency and understanding. It's worth noting that while introducing the concept, labeling it outright as "ungrading" might prove intimidating, particularly for undergraduate students who are often highly concerned about their grades due to factors such as scholarships, sports or club commitments, and the perceived impact on future employers' assessments of their academic performance (Ferns et al., 2021). Overall, with thoughtful planning and positive communication, ungrading has the potential to contribute positively to the educational landscape.

## Costs

Implementing this innovative grading approach incurs minimal direct costs, primarily limited to the investment of educators' time. One nominal cost reported by one of the authors involved opting for a Calendly subscription, priced at \$10.00 per month, streamlining the process for students to book office hours. It's worth noting that a free version of the Calendly app is also available. The financial implications associated with implementing this innovative approach situates ungrading as a feasible and accessible innovative strategy for educators.

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