

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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## *The Grading System at Brown*

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Since the inception of the “new” curriculum in the late 1960’s, an intrinsic part of Brown’s undergraduate program has been the cultivation of an attitude of independence and responsibility in its students. The architects of the new curriculum regarded undergraduate education as a process of individual development and intellectual growth, a goal achieved by giving students both the freedom and the responsibility to take ownership of their education and explore more fully their intellectual interests. Providing students with the opportunity for individuality, experimentation and change were hallmarks of the new approach which emphasized (to paraphrase the 1990 twentieth anniversary review of the curriculum by then Dean of the College Sheila Blumstein): academic pursuits that crossed disciplinary lines; methods, concepts and values appropriate to the various areas of scholarly inquiry; a close working relationship between instructor and student; and a centering of the student’s educational motivation on the intrinsic rewards of learning rather than the extrinsic rewards and punishments of a standard grading system. Thus, one of the innovations instituted to support these goals was the introduction of a new grading system.

To encourage intellectual experimentation and risk taking, students were given the option to take courses for a letter grade (A,B,C/No credit) or Satisfactory/No Credit. Recognizing that a letter-grade-only policy might, in fact, be an obstacle to a truly liberal education, the authors of the reforms sought to eliminate what they considered the false indices of academic success while encouraging students to expose themselves to both the depth and breadth of the curriculum. The new grading system was intended to encourage students to challenge themselves in ways that suited them, either by being held accountable to the more specific nature of the letter grade option or by stepping outside their academic comfort zone with the S/NC option and taking a course that they might not risk otherwise. Students wanting a more detailed assessment of their performance in a course taken S/NC can request from the instructor a qualitative written evaluation, known as a Course Performance Report (CPR). To further de-emphasize the negative effects of the quantitative

assessment of the old grading system, the authors of the reforms also eliminated pluses and minuses, did away with the grade of 'D' (which was considered to be a failing grade) and withheld the entry of an NC grade from the transcript. It is generally acknowledged that the opening of the grade option has played a significant role in encouraging students to pursue a breadth of courses consistent with a liberal education and to explore new and challenging intellectual vistas.

*Ed. note* A brief history of the New Curriculum's origins may be found at: [http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean\\_of\\_the\\_College/DOC/s2\\_brown\\_curriculum/about.shtml](http://www.brown.edu/Administration/Dean_of_the_College/DOC/s2_brown_curriculum/about.shtml)