



# ACUE

Student Success  
Through Exceptional  
Teaching

## Reduce Bias by Focusing on Academic Achievement

According to Joe Feldman, author of *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms* (2019), the three pillars of equitable grading are:

1. grading practices that are mathematically accurate and reflect a student's academic performance
2. grading practices that are bias-resistant, preventing bias subjectivity from entering into grades
3. grading practices that motivate students to strive for academic success, persevere, and accept struggles and setbacks in order to gain critical lifelong skills

To be accurate, grades must correctly represent a student's level of academic performance on course outcomes. Including participation, attendance, or other nonacademic behaviors in the grade calculations yields a grade that does not clearly represent a student's academic performance. Bias-resistant grading practices prevent our implicit biases, which are impossible to ignore or erase, from misrepresenting students' academic performance (Feldman, 2019). Grading practices should also motivate students to prioritize learning, support a growth mindset, and give students opportunities for redemption (Feldman, 2019).

It is important to note that there are no research studies supporting the idea that low grades are effective punishment or encourage students to try harder or do better (Dueck, 2014; Guskey, 2000; Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000). In fact, Guskey (2008) found that low grades often prompt students to withdraw from learning.

### What Not to Include and Why

**Participation and effort** are behaviors that require instructors to "subjectively witness, interpret, and judge students through a culturally specific and biased lens" (Feldman, 2020). Including these behaviors depends on an instructor's interpretation of what levels of participation and effort are expected and assumes that they are able to observe these behaviors fairly in all students.

**Extra credit** reinforces the message that the class is not solely about mastering specific content; instead it is about acquiring points that can result in a grade that is not a clear representation of a student's academic progress on course outcomes. Even when extra credit is related to course content, it may allow students to earn extra points in one outcome to compensate for work in another outcome.

Finally, extra credit is inequitable because it often reflects a student's environment over which they may have little control. Although we make extra credit optional and open to all students, not all students can take equal advantage of the opportunities because they may require additional resources such as time or money. Research confirms that lower achieving students simply do not complete extra-credit assignments as often as higher achieving students (Feldman, 2019). Bottom line regarding extra credit: If the work is important to student learning, require it from everyone. If it is not, do not include it in your grades (Feldman, 2019).

**Attendance:** All grades should be determined by proficiency, not seat time (O'Connor, 2010). Attendance should be monitored but not graded unless student attendance is required to assess their mastery in course outcomes. Attendance may be required in some courses where student performance must be monitored and observed by faculty. In these cases, the results of the assignment or behavior observed is what is graded, not their attendance, and their lack of attendance would yield an incomplete grade.

### Sources

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