

# Good Men or Good Grades? *Assessing Students Classically*

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**C**lassical educators are seeking to turn education back into what it once was: the liberating force of humanity and the cultivator of human souls. However, parents and college admissions departments often define academic success today by elements such as high GPAs and high standardized test scores. “Why is my child’s grade so low?” and “Can I do some extra credit to increase my grade?” are common questions from parents and students. While these questions deserve a legitimate response regarding the status that numerical grades possess within the milieu of education, they also betray an underlying philosophy of education often at odds with liberal arts training. The question we all have to ask ourselves is “Do we want good students or good grades?” The purpose of this article is not to turn the classroom into a safe space devoid of objective standards. The purpose is to get parents to question the primacy of numerical grades and better understand why classical Christian schools are far more interested in partnering with God as co-laborers in the formation of children’s character than they are in supplying children with a form of currency called “grades.”

When placed on a timeline in the history of education, grading is a new phenomenon. It was not until the mid-19th century that grades started to become the established norm seen today. How, then, did the ancients, medievals, and early moderns build Western Civilization without grades? How is it possible to be sure

that an author such as Jane Austen is worth reading if there is no access to her report card? Yet, the ancients, medievals, and early moderns built Western Civilization without grades. Authors such as Jane Austen, published before grading became orthodoxy, were deemed worthy to read. The report card did not matter; Austen was worth reading because her work was true, good, and beautiful. Western Civilization was built because its builders believed in and operated out of the objective standards of truth, goodness, and beauty. Truth is God’s revelation of His ordered, reasonable, objective world, and that truth is able to be discovered by man. Goodness is the excellence of a thing or person, while beauty is the loveliness of and a desire for the true and the good.

With a proper understanding of truth, beauty, and goodness, a look at something false, ugly, and bad is worth consideration. Dr. Brian Williams, Dean of Templeton Honors College, explains in a series of lectures, “[I]f we habituate students to get good grades, we nurture them towards *curiositas* and we undermine attempts to cultivate their intellectual, affective, and moral, and spiritual formation.”<sup>1</sup> What is *curiositas*? Meaning “curiosity” in Latin, *curiositas* is a vice that misuses the intellect to pursue knowledge for unsavory purposes. Such unsavory purposes include pursuing knowledge as a means of exerting power over others or as a means of getting good grades. In both instances, *curiositas* has landed on the shores like a horde of

1. Dr. Brian Williams, “The History of Grading” (Assessing Students Classically, Classical U/Classical Academic Press, 2019).



Scandinavians going a-Viking. A misuse of “knowledge” can also involve treating it like a cash cow whose sole purpose is to exchange it for financial aid and college acceptance letters. In contrast, classical educators want their students to love learning, be virtuous, and learn the arts that liberate them to be free men and women. Thus, there are better ways to assess students classically beyond the grind of grades.

Illustrations from athletics help to shed light on what assessing students classically looks like. No seasoned basketball coach gives his players grades on their jump shots. He corrects their footwork, the position of their body towards the basket, their release, and any other element of a jump shot in which they are deficient. The same kind of training ought to take place in the classroom. For example, students should receive more than the empty feedback of “you wrote a B essay.” Their teachers ought to deliver specific, detailed, and timely feedback regarding the students’ development as writers and critical thinkers. The goal is not to make Joe Student a 94% essay writer; the goal is to turn Joe into an eloquent young man who conveys his thoughts truthfully and beautifully with the written word.

Summative assessments, like tests, should never signal to students that the learning is over. Yes, tests can assess a student’s development and understanding of learned material. Students waste tests, however, when they do not use the test itself as a tool for learning. An essay on *The Tempest* should neither signal that a student’s

time with Shakespeare has come to an end nor that writing essays on great pieces of literature can be dispensed with. An essay is a tool for developing the student’s writing skills and should also cultivate in students a desire to interact thoughtfully with great authors and great books again and again.

I understand that I’m presenting something of an either/or fallacy with the title of this article. Of course, good students should be producing good grades and good grades ought to come from good students. Wanting both is fine and having both is doable. But, as C.S. Lewis points out in a letter, when the “second things” become the “first things,” you lose both. Grades are an example of the “second things.” Virtuous young men and women who love Christ and speak eloquently are the “first things” classical educators strive for.

The depth of this topic is beyond the scope of this article. I’ll close with a thought experiment meant to challenge underlying assumptions that one may have regarding education. If you were freed completely from grades and a grading system, what would you have your students and your children do and how would you assess them? What would you want your son or daughter, or even yourself, to get out of their education if grades were no longer a part of the equation? Thoughtfully chewing on and answering those questions are worth their weight in gold.

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