

The value of grades in graduate school

Christine M. Cabrera, M.Sc. and Delyana I. Miller, B.A.
University of Ottawa, Canadian Psychological Association Student Affiliates

Source: Cabrera, C.M., & Miller, D.I. (2009). The value of grades in graduate school.
Psynopsis: Canada's Psychology Newspaper, 31(3), 19.

Receiving grades is the quintessential scholastic experience. We have been receiving grades since elementary school and they have been the external reward for our academic efforts. Grades are used to ensure we consistently strive and that this striving is a significant effort (the so called "110 %").

In addition, they also serve as a mark of comparison by which we can be measured against our fellow students. Although grades may serve their purpose in the undergraduate environment, in our opinion, the value of grades is greatly diminished upon entering graduate school. Self-determination theory (SDT), which emphasizes the importance of three main components related to intrinsic motivation: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, Ryan, 1991), is a useful frame by which to examine the value of grades in graduate school.

Grades are often advocated as an impetus for striving. However, grades are external rewards and as such may hinder the intrinsic motivation of graduate students. Motivational research in the field of psychology has suggested that external rewards can be detrimental to fostering intrinsic motivation. A meta-analytic review examining the effects of external rewards on intrinsically interesting activities found that external rewards undermined students' involvement in these activities (Deci, Koestner, Ryan, 1999). Graduate school is purported to be the environment where we

begin our professional training and the qualities of autonomy and competence tied to intrinsic motivation would greatly benefit us as professionals. Throughout our future work we may encounter many challenges, from a research roadblock to a difficult clinical case, where the external rewards may not be present and a cultivation of autonomy would fuel our ability to succeed.

Grades in graduate school are meant to reinforce us to reach for that extra bit of effort but the standard by which we compare ourselves is an external one. We continue to compare ourselves to this standard scale, as opposed to comparing ourselves to our own internal standards and values. We give value to a letter instead of giving value to our experiences in learning, and the sense of competence we have fostered within ourselves. Furthermore, the effort that comes from intrinsic motivation is lasting, and can change with your professional experiences. External motivations, on the other hand, only reinforce a behavior as long as they are present (Deci et al., 1999).

A key function of grades is that they provide an opportunity for ranking students and comparing their performances. This comparison is the standard by which students are accepted into graduate school. Yet, the range of grades in graduate school can be restricted and this limits the ability of grades to discriminate among students. While it is often argued that this discriminatory ability is critical in determining the adequacy of candidates for

academic scholarships, the limited range of grades often leads to the evaluation of candidates by other accomplishments (i.e. publications, presentations). Given that presentations and publications are closely linked to our future profession they may serve as an alternative tool by which to discriminate among students in terms of potential for professional contribution.

In our opinion, there are alternative evaluation methods to grades in graduate school, methods which will foster intrinsic motivation. In our experience with classes at the University of Ottawa, a pass/fail system of evaluation which includes qualitative feedback has been very useful. The pass/fail format of evaluation allows the student to set their own personal standards for success.

In addition, the qualitative evaluation component offers viable academic feedback which can more easily be incorporated into our professional development. It is possible that this format of evaluation will further contribute to the autonomy and competence of future psychologists.

References

- Deci, E., Koestner, R., Ryan, R. (1999). A meta-analytic review of experiments examining the effects of extrinsic rewards on intrinsic motivation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 125, 627-668.
- Deci, E., Vallerand, R., Pelletier, L., Ryan, R. (1991). Motivation and education: The self-determination perspective. *Educational Psychologist*, 26 (3&4), 325-346.