

The Student Experience of Ungrading

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ABSTRACT

The term “ungrading” is an umbrella term encompassing educational practices that seek to eliminate or minimize the use of the A-F standard grading scale. The term grew in popularity during the Spring 2020 semester, as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required educational institutions to urgently and rapidly adjust their teaching platforms and learning expectations alongside widespread lockdowns across the United States, and the world. Research on “ungrading” has grown in recent years. Yet, research on the first person student experience of ungrading practices is still lacking. This dissertation contributes to this limited research. To address research questions focused on the student experience of “ungrading” (for undergraduate students), I conducted interviews with students who were in a course with an educator who used ungrading practices in the Spring 2023 semester. My student participants were from six courses, across five institutions. I also interviewed the educators who designed and taught these six courses. I conducted 99 interviews with 38 undergraduate students across the Spring 2023 semester: one interview at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the semester (28 students completed all three rounds). The need for further research to address claims and debates about ungrading as a more equitable practice than traditional grading led me to focus my findings and analysis on three student groups specifically: neurodivergent students, first generation college students, and students who had negative experiences of ungrading. To address my research questions, I first drew out themes of experience from each of these groups. For my study’s analysis, I then considered these themes through an analytic framework based on theorist and educator bell hooks’ concept of engaged pedagogy.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

The term “ungrading” is an umbrella term that refers to teachers’ efforts to eliminate or minimize the use of the A-F standard grading scale in their courses. The term grew in popularity during the Spring 2020 semester specifically, as the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required schools to urgently and rapidly adjust their teaching platforms and learning expectations alongside widespread lockdowns across the United States, and the world. Research on “ungrading” has grown in recent years. Yet, research on the first person student experience of ungrading practices is still lacking. This dissertation project contributes to this limited research. To consider the student experience of ungrading, I conducted interviews with undergraduate students who were in courses with teachers using ungrading practices. My interviews took place during the Spring 2023 semester. Student participants were from six courses, across five institutions. I also interviewed the educators who designed and taught these six courses. I conducted 99 interviews with 38 undergraduate students across the Spring 2023 semester: one interview at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the semester (28 students completed all three rounds). Claims and debates about ungrading as a more equitable practice than traditional grading led me to focus on three student groups specifically: neurodivergent students, first generation college students, and students who had negative experiences of ungrading. I first drew out themes of experience from each of these groups, and then considered these themes through an analytic framework based on the concept of engaged pedagogy, which provides a philosophy of teaching, and was developed by theorist and educator bell hooks.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The use of grades in schools is commonplace. The A-F scale is widely accepted as the standard for educational assessment. Yet, a look at the history of grades in the U.S. begs the question of what purpose grades actually serve? This history shows that grades and grading practices reflect societal shifts towards efficiency, standardization, conformity, and obedience. Do grades promote learning? Do grades actually reflect learning? Long-standing critiques of grades say no. Critics assert that not only do grades *not* promote or reflect learning, but that the use of grades actually impedes our human drive to learn (see Kohn 2018).

The practice of “ungrading” strives to challenge these impediments. As the term implies, ungrading rejects the use of standard grading scales in assessment. Ungrading is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of iterations and forms (including labor-based, specification, and contract “grading”/assessment, for example). The term “ungrading” has gained traction in recent years. The first book dedicated to the topic was published in 2020 (Blum 2020). To be sure, the context of COVID-19 helped to push ungrading into the limelight. The pandemic ushered in abrupt and unexpected changes for schools, students, and teachers, and resulted in many teachers re-thinking their own pedagogies and teaching practices (Moore 2021).

While research focused on ungrading has increased, this body of literature has room to grow. This is particularly true in regards to the qualitative student experience of ungrading. A majority of the qualitative research currently available on the student experience of ungrading uses small case studies, and centers the educator’s perspective (Hasinoff et al. 2024). Relatedly, a majority of this research has been conducted by educators using ungrading who conduct research with their own current and former students. Thus, this body of literature could benefit from research that considers (relatively) larger sample sizes, and, as a means to limit the influence of power dynamics in who volunteers to participate and the perceptions they share, this body of literature could also benefit from research conducted by researchers who are not otherwise involved in the student respondents’ ungrading experiences.

The current literature has also made a strong suggestion that future research qualitatively consider if and how different groups of students - based on social categories like race, gender, and class - experience ungrading differently (for example, Kuhn 2020; Hasinoff et al. 2024). Such

research would add to the overall consideration of ungrading, yet would also add important insight to the ongoing debates about whether ungrading is an equitable practice, especially for marginalized groups of students. Further, with a majority of this current research coming from departments and journals related to education and/or instructional-design, a sociological lens – inherently positioned to consider the connections between individual experience and larger societal patterns (Mills 1959) – would provide a valuable framework to consider these issues, and patterns across student groups. This is the project I pursued.

In the spring 2023 semester I recruited 38 student participants who were in a course using ungrading practices (as identified as such by the instructors). These students were in six different courses, with five instructors, across five institutions. I conducted three waves of interviews with these students: at the beginning, end, and mid-way throughout the semester. My analysis focuses on a sample of 16 students from this pool of participants, to answer research questions around how three specific groups of students experience ungrading: neurodivergent students, first generation college students, and students who have had negative experiences with ungrading. My project intends to add to the limited research on the student experience of ungrading generally, and to also amplify the experiences of three groups whose voices are particularly needed and/or have gone largely unheard.

To do so, my study provides an analysis of my data through a framework created from bell hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy. She details this pedagogy in her seminal work, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). Her descriptions of engaged pedagogy as a meeting between critical pedagogy and holistic teaching perfectly align with assertions of ungrading as inherently linked to critical pedagogy and equity in education. That engaged pedagogy grows from a recognition of socially constructed power dynamics in the classroom, and challenges them towards the goal of meaningful learning (for students and teachers), situates engaged pedagogy as a naturally sociological frame, and a valuable one for the student experience of ungrading. This is my study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Etymology of Ungrading

Ungrading is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of practices related to teaching and grading. The unifying theme of ungrading is a rejection of the A-F grading scale and a focus on assessment practices based upon student learning and growth. As Moore reports in her 2021 dissertation, “#Ungrading: A Digital Ethnography,” “the earliest use of the #ungrading hashtag was April 2, 2016 to share a piece on ungrading by Laura Gibbes with the hashtag #ttog for ‘teachers throwing out grades’ a movement started in K-12 education” (92). Around this same time, two educators in higher education would particularly become associated with the term: Jesse Stommel and Susan Blum (Moore 2021).

Educator and staunch critic of grades, Jesse Stommel, is often credited with coining the term “ungrading,” and first using the phrase in a publication in 2017 (Johanesen et al. 2023; Stommel 2023; Morris 2021). Stommel’s extensive blog (<https://www.jessestommel.com/>) includes numerous articles about ungrading, yielding his name as one of the most referenced and cited in the realm of ungrading. In 2023, he published a book, *Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop*, a collection of updated articles that originally appeared in his blog.

Although Stommel’s blog was around beforehand, the first book dedicated to the concept of “ungrading” was Susan Blum’s 2020 edited collection: *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (And What To Do Instead)*. Moore (2021:93) reports that, “When asked about the origin of the word ‘ungrading’ on Twitter, Blum said she made it up in 2017, as an analogy with ‘unschooling,’ soon after discovering Stommel had come up with this term as well.” Moore (2021:93), in her history of the “#ungrading hashtag,” recounts that “while the practice and terminology was spreading,” the “activity exploded in 2020 and 2021.” Blum’s book was published in 2020. Yet the context of the COVID-19 pandemic also played an important role in the timing of ungrading’s growing popularity.

In Spring 2020, the pandemic caused swift and massive changes to the institution of education, with many schools unexpectedly shifting to a virtual format. The challenges of this unplanned shift, in addition to the societal challenges, isolation, and physical/mental health issues that arose in the face of a global pandemic, led many colleges and universities to adopt temporary

adjustments to their grading structures. Many offered students the option to use a pass/fail option instead of an A-F grade.

In my own experience of the Spring 2020 semester, I was in my second semester of a PhD program and in my seventh year teaching sociology as an adjunct. While I am confident I would have granted flexibility to my students in any case, the duality of experiencing the onset of the pandemic as both a teacher and a student yielded extra depth to my empathy towards students in my courses. In March 2020, shortly after spring break, and the stark societal acceptance of COVID's seriousness for the foreseeable future, I decided to make the remainder of the semester's work optional for my students. I amplified the opportunity they had to take a pass/fail marker if their letter grade would have a negative impact on their GPA. I was also working as an academic advisor at the time, and similarly advised many struggling students to consider this option.

Like many educators, that Spring 2020 semester led me to some deep reflection with my role as an educator: my goals, my values, and what I see as my responsibilities to my students. While these reflections have always been a part of my teaching, this context further sharpened my critical approach to my own pedagogy. I had the unique vantage point of these reflections alongside my experiences as a student, observing how my own teachers' decisions and behaviors conveyed what they value about teaching and see as their responsibilities to students. The culmination of that semester led to my deeper commitment in the role of educator to connect my teaching practices with my pedagogy, and to value frequent and evolving reflection on what I see that pedagogy as being - in that semester and beyond. In hearing the term "ungrading" during this time, my interest was peaked. Apparently this was the case for many other educators as well (for example, see Taylor 2022).

Relatedly, as Moore (2021) reports, opportunities to learn about ungrading became more prominent online around this time, and especially via Twitter (currently, the app X).¹ Although no doubt influenced by my algorithm and follows, I personally recall a short lapse of time between hearing about ungrading for the first time, and then seeing its mention populate my Twitter feed. As Moore documents, "while Teaching Twitter culture existed long before the COVID-19 pandemic, many more faculty flocked to Twitter for ideas and support on how to teach remotely in March 2020" (2021:94). Moore describes the pandemic as a "'kairotic moment' for #ungrading" and

¹ Since the app was called Twitter at this time, I will be referring to the app as Twitter in this document.

recounts the experiences of numerous faculty who came to ungrading during the context of the pandemic (95-101).

While an informal measure, Figure 2.1 relatedly conveys trends in the frequency of the term “ungrading” in Google searches across the past 10 years. That interest shows a clear increase after the beginning of the pandemic in Spring 2020:

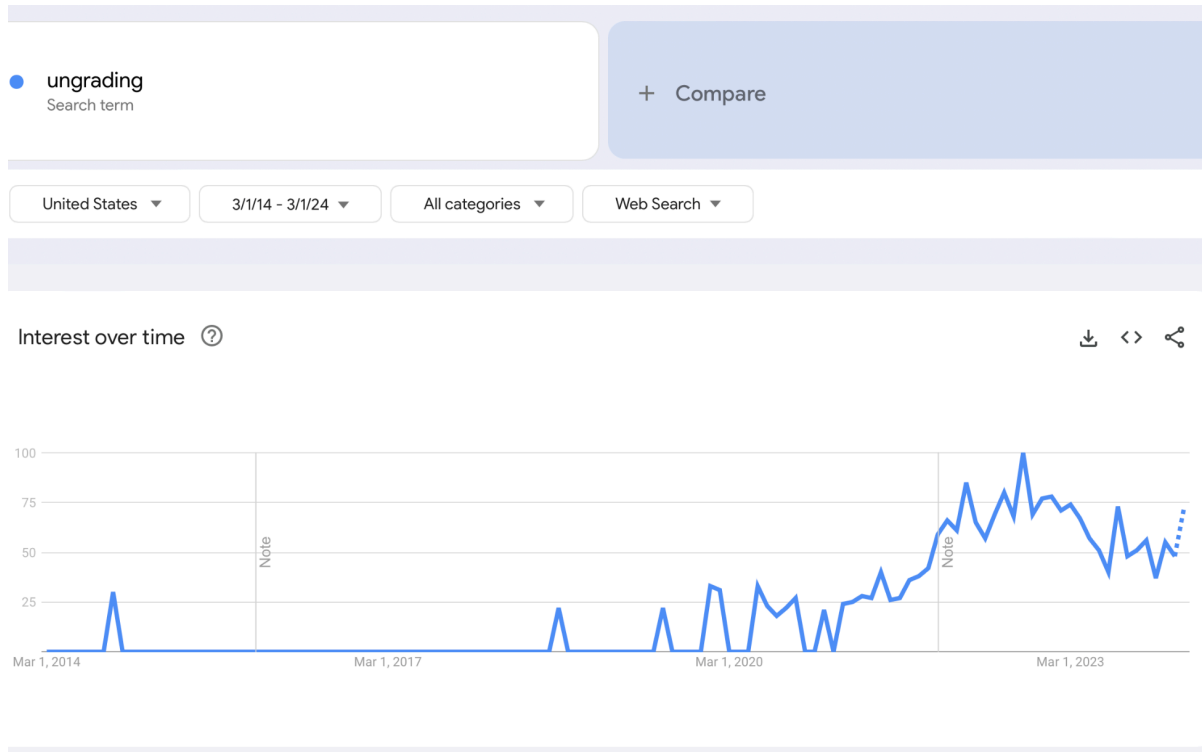


Figure 2.1: Trends in “ungrading” Google searches over time

Although the term “ungrading” is fairly recent, as this review will later cover, critiques of the A-F grading scale (and resultant alternative assessment practices), have a much longer history. First, though, let me address what “ungrading” actually is.

Ungrading: What it is and Common Ungrading Practices

As implied in the phrase itself, ungrading is centered upon a rejection of standard grades. The underlying assumption is that when grades are present, they become the focus, and that such a focus diverts attention from the goal of learning (Kohn 2018). The practice of ungrading can take various forms, and has been used in a variety of educational settings. Iterations of ungrading are practiced in elementary schools, high schools, community colleges, universities, medical schools, and law schools. It is practiced in social sciences, humanities, and STEM classes. It can look like the complete absence of grades, practiced by institutions including Hampshire College, Evergreen State College, Deep Spring College, New College of Florida, Alverno College, Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies at Western Washington University, Prescott College, Antioch University, and Goddard College (Blum 2020:4). It can also look like the use of a pass/fail scale, instead of A-F grades, as practiced by many elite medical schools (Blum 2020:4). Yet, many teachers who have adopted ungrading practices work for institutions that *do* require a final grade of A-F. Thus, these educators utilize other ways to challenge the hierarchy of A-F and to emphasize student learning and growth within their own courses.

Although great variety exists across different iterations of ungrading, central features of ungrading include: an emphasis on student learning and growth, a priority on feedback over grades, and encouragement of student reflection and self-evaluation of their own learning. A main ungrading practice, that can be used in courses without – or with – final grades, is the rejection of an A-F grade on individual assignments. This may take the form of no quantitative or tiered assessment whatsoever, may use a pass/fail assessment, or a three-tiered scale like check, check plus, check minus or 0, 1, 2. The practice of not using the A-F grading scale on individual assignments is often paired with extensive feedback to provide a qualitative assessment of the assignments. Qualitative assessments in which educators can detail strengths and areas for improvement align with the aim for students to focus on their learning and improvement versus a grade. Relatedly, another common practice of ungraders is providing opportunities to revise and resubmit an assignment, as a means to demonstrate growth.

The aim to encourage focus on learning over grades can also include regular assignments that ask for students to reflect on their own learning throughout a course (e.g., weekly reflection logs) and/or bigger self-evaluations at the end of the semester and maybe at mid-term. Sometimes this self-evaluation takes the form of a “portfolio” towards the end of the semester, that provides a collection of the student's work along with the student’s self-review of their progress and

improvement throughout the semester. For courses that require an ultimate A-F grade, such self-evaluations may be used to influence or entirely determine that final grade. For example, a component of the self-evaluation may ask for students to select their final grade and to provide a rationale for their selection.

This rejection of the A-F grading scale has been called ungrading, but also referred to by other names such as “de-grading” or “going gradeless” (Blum, 2020:2). Types of “alternative grading” practices that have been considered to be under the ungrading umbrella include other named practices like: contract grading, standards-based grading, labor-based grading, and specifications grading. Yet not all ungrading practices fit into one of these specific designations. Titles like, “Why There Isn’t One ‘Right Way’ To Practise Ungrading” (Miceli et al. 2022), “There’s No Right Way to Ungrade!” (Warner 2022), and “Ungrading: Another Iteration” (Zeller 2022), convey the perspective that ungrading practices vary, and can take different shapes for different educators. The similarly titled Teachers Going Gradeless podcast, “There’s No One Right Way to Ungrade” (Wennerth 2022), provides the rationale that: “Because ungrading is essentially an emancipatory practice, it cannot be held to one formula or singular standard.” Johanesen et al. (2023) provide a further detailed breakdown of ungrading iterations in their table, reprinted here (Figure 2.2).

Ungrading Approaches	
Ungrading	An umbrella term for a variety of practices that decenter grading in a class (Blum, 2022). Often involves eliminating or reducing numeric scoring in favor of descriptive feedback and/or reflection. Can be associated with classes that must assign a final letter grade for the course.
self-assessment	Students evaluate their own performance in a course and assign themselves a grade, usually accompanied by evidence they have met the course objectives and often includes reflections.
collaborative grading	The instructor collaborates with each student to determine a reasonable course grade for the whole of their work over the semester rather than assigning grades to individual pieces of work (Masland, 2023)
peer-assessment	Peer feedback is used to inform grade evaluations or discussion. This is often used in conjunction with collaborative, self-assessment, or reflection-based grading.
reflection-based grading	Students reflect on the learning process and how/if they are meeting course goals, often as part of self-assessment.
mastery grading	A broad category of grading systems in which student work is assessed by the instructor for mastery of a clear list of learning objectives, with multiple opportunities to demonstrate eventual mastery of each objective or specification (Bloom, 1968; Campbell et al., 2020).
specifications grading	Student work is evaluated by the instructor as a binary (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) and final grades are assigned according to a set amount of 'satisfactory' work completed (Nilson, 2015). Can be considered a subset of mastery grading.
labor-, effort-, or completion-based grading	A final grade is assigned based on the amount of work a student completes. Faculty may or may not require work to meet some standard of quality.
contract grading	A version of specifications grading or labor-based grading where student and instructor agree to a contract at the start of the semester, specifying the grade the student will work toward and the work required to achieve that grade.
minimal grading	Student work is graded on a simplified scale with just a few, meaningful gradations, e.g., three levels such as strong/satisfactory/weak, two levels such as pass / not yet, one level (completion only), or even zero levels where some work that is completed is not graded at all but instead received feedback. (Elbow, 1997)

These strategies can be combined and can be used for an entire course or a portion of a course.

Figure 2.2: Ungrading approaches from “Common-sense teaching for the 2020s: Ungrading in response to covid-19 and beyond,” by Johanesen et al., 2023:3.

Ungrading: More Than a Practice

It is important to note that while I have been referring to “ungrading practices,” that ungrading is usually framed as both a practice and as a pedagogical philosophy. There is an implication of this in the previous quote referring to ungrading as an inherently “emancipatory practice.” Jesse Stommel (2023:16) makes the point that “‘Ungrading’ means raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply ‘not grading.’ The word is a present participle, an ongoing process, not a static set of practices.” Ungrading has even been referred to as a “movement” (Blum 2020:2; Moore, 2021).

In his chapter, “An Introduction to Ungrading,” Stommel (2023:18) further details the centrality of critical pedagogy to ungrading:

In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire argues against the banking model of education, “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor.” In place of the banking model, Freire’s critical pedagogy advocates for “problem-posing education,” in which a classroom or learning environment becomes a space for asking questions – a space of cognition not information. The fundamental inconsistency between critical pedagogy and standardized, quantitative assessment is the germ for much of my own interrogation of grades as a system. Ungrading is not ideologically neutral work; rather, it asks us to examine the structural inequities of education and to revise all our pedagogical approaches.

Stommel goes on to suggest that the first step in addressing these inequities is to trust students. He elaborates that as educators, “we can’t instantly manifest a learning environment entirely free of grades and quantitative assessment, but we can create safe spaces for students to ask critical questions about grades and about how school works” (2023:25). To demonstrate an example of how this is put into practice, Stommel’s (2017) blog includes this following snippet from his own syllabi (Figure 2.3):

*This course will focus on qualitative not quantitative assessment, something we'll discuss during the class, both with reference to your own work and the works we're studying. While you will get a final grade at the end of the term, I will not be grading individual assignments, but rather asking questions and making comments that engage your work rather than simply evaluate it. You will also be reflecting carefully on your own work and the work of your peers. The intention here is to help you focus on working in a more organic way, as opposed to working as you think you're expected to. If this process causes more anxiety than it alleviates, see me at any point to confer about your progress in the course to date. If you are worried about your grade, your best strategy should be to join the discussions, do the reading, and complete the assignments. **You should consider this course a "busy-work-free zone."** If an assignment does not feel productive, we can find ways to modify, remix, or repurpose the instructions.*

Figure 2.3: Example paragraph from syllabus

Thus, it is clear that “ungrading” is envisioned as more than just a practice. It is a practice that is understood to be inherently tied to critical pedagogy (Moore, 2021), and using Stommel’s phrasing, to challenge “the structural inequities of education” (2023:18).

Yet, there is an important tension here in that link between ungrading as a practice and ungrading as a (critical) pedagogical philosophy. As previously mentioned, there is a strong sentiment that there’s no “one way” or “right way” to ungrade. Blum (2020:2) describes that, “though the destination tends to be generally the same, there is variation in the routes, the reasons, the contexts, and the specific ways various individuals at different levels of education enact [ungrading].” Stommel (2023: 25) relatedly asserts that “the notion of best practices does harm,” and in a nod to bell hooks’ emphasis on the ability of teachers and students to bring their full selves into the classroom, details the need for flexibility in that:

Power flows in specific and complicated ways in education. Pedagogical practices that work for a disabled, queer white teacher may not work in the same way for an able-bodied indigenous, woman of color. And “what works” will shift from one year to the next, one institution to the next, one geography to the next, one group of students to the next.

Thus what “ungrading” looks like can take a variety of forms, such as those considered in the previous section on ungrading practices. This flexibility, however, does seem to be bound within the parameters of pedagogy, and a specifically critical pedagogy. It is this dynamic, and differing

interpretations of this dynamic, that seem to be a source of tension amongst some educators – specifically over whether there is a right way, or wrong ways, to ungrade.

This tension is well captured within two articles: the first, “The Problem with Ungrading? Everyone’s Doing it Wrong” (Morris 2022) published in October 2022, in *Times Higher Education*, followed by a rebuttal (and already mentioned title) “Why There Isn’t One ‘Right Way’ to Practise Ungrading” (Miceli et al. 2022), published in the same outlet two months later in December. In the first piece, published by Sean Michael Morris, he asserts that: “Done right, ungrading should turn education on its head,” but that “the problem is, almost everyone is doing it wrong.” He draws an intrinsic link between the practice of ungrading and critical pedagogy, and warns that, without acknowledging and intentionally incorporating that critical pedagogy piece, that the practice of “ungrading” is essentially meaningless. He critiques that:

...the vast majority of applications of what is referred to as ungrading rely on rubrics, stated learning outcomes and, yes, grades by other names and clever means. Educators continue to bow to the prevalence of mastery and evaluation. Instructors remain in control of the process and determine what success looks like. Ungrading as it is commonly practiced has not changed the way students are assessed in any meaningful way. It has not helped students overcome their wariness or outright fear of being graded. It has not given students agency. The long shadow of grades - which pit students against one another in a fierce contest for good scores and top rankings - continues to darken the classroom. This power dynamic remains unchanged and unchallenged.

Morris advises that “instead of regarding ungrading as the latest plug-and-play best practice, we need to be talking about the philosophy behind it.” He states that this involves recognition that: “[educators] need to care for students and trust them and change the way we think about how learning happens. Learning should not be about making a grade. It’s much bigger than that.”

A webinar led by Morris in the previous year, in June 2021, titled “How to Ungrade,” reveals that he has had such concerns, related to the separation of practice from pedagogy, since the inception of the term “ungrading” itself. Morris shares that he was “sitting at the table with Jesse Stommel, in a tiny apartment in Leamington Spa, England, when he penned ‘Why I Don’t Grade,’ the blog post where he first used the term ‘ungrading.’” Morris explains his skepticism of the phrase:

I begged him not to use the term. It was too catchy, I argued, like the chorus of a Celine Dion song. Ungrading, I said, would play on the radio, would get dub-step remixes, would end up in clubs and bars where people would dance to it with smiles on their faces. And eventually, we’d start to hear it in grocery stores, malls,

elevators...It's not just the bandwagon effect of a cool new idea in education, though, that bothers me, it's the automaticity that's implied. As if saying the word is nearly equivalent with changing the landscape of education.

In response to Morris' October 2022 piece, multiple educators published "Why There isn't One 'Right Way' to Practise Ungrading" in the same outlet (*Times Higher Education*) in December 2022. Their article (Miceli et al. 2022) opens with Morris' claim (and a direct link to his piece) that "the problem with ungrading is that the majority of us 'are doing it wrong'" and responds that: "this misconception has harmed the ungrading community." These authors go on to provide a detailed explanation that I believe is worth quoting in full:

Various critical pedagogical approaches (for example, feminist, decolonial, and many others without an academic label) resist the assumptions that there is one "right" way to teach and learn. Ungrading is another example of this resistance. Indeed "ungrading" is simply the academic label many of us have given diverse pedagogical approaches that scholars across disciplines (for example, hooks, Freire, Muhammad) have employed long before it had this name. All these approaches aim to extricate us from A-F grading scales, which were created to rank, sort, and stratify students and to uphold elitist and supremacist educational systems.

It is precisely because of this history of resisting supremacist systems that we encourage our readers to seek examples beyond a handful of white-presenting scholars². Keeping too narrow a focus, intentional or not, upholds racist, patriarchal, ableist and wealth-based systems and structures. It minimises, and even erases, the contributions of educators who have engaged in ungrading praxis for years. It also harms those who wish to try ungrading but are afraid to because they are already marginalised, disrespected and/or lack the privilege to dispense with grades entirely...

Changing these systems requires taking a 'big tent' approach to ungrading. This means philosophy and pedagogy are *already* at the heart of our practices. Such an inclusive, big tent approach allows us to de-emphasize grades in a way that best fits our individual contexts. Thus, it is antithetical to conclude that most people engaging in liberatory practices are "doing it wrong." Educators do not need to adopt a "purest" or idealized version to begin ungrading. Working on our pedagogy through

² It is worth noting that the phrasing "white-presenting scholars" was hyperlinked to this tweet from October 2022. The tweet was made as a comment/response to another tweet sharing Morris' article, and was apparently responding to Morris naming a few select names in his article of educators he said are doing ungrading "correctly." The tweet was posted by one of the signatories listed of the article. (The reference to the "website that facilitates cheating" is apparently about Morris being employed by Course Hero.)
https://twitter.com/DrCJSobers/status/1584182407996940291?s=20&t=3DtccquUhhQ4T_N8qpDJKw

trial and error not only embraces the goals of an ungraded approach but also models for our students that failure and growth are part of the learning process.

It is not at all surprising to witness an increase in ungrading at a time when multiple traumas have disrupted teaching and learning: a long history of systemic violence against marginalised peoples and communities, unpredictable natural disasters such as wildfires and hurricanes and the COVID-19 pandemic, to name a few. While grades remain deeply entrenched in our educational systems more educators are choosing to reduce the harm caused by traditional grading within their individual teaching. This movement is much more than a mindless bandwagoning of the latest in vogue practice.

The combination of these two articles provides a lot to unpack regarding ungrading, pedagogy, and power. Both articles agree that ungrading is bound to a critique of power dynamics and critical pedagogy. For Morris, ungrading isn't meeting its aims when "power dynamics remain unchanged and unchallenged" and he critiques that the term is being used in a way that assumes that "saying the word is nearly equivalent with changing the landscape of education." The authors of the second piece similarly equate ungrading with resistance and liberatory education. Yet, they emphasize an important layer: that the critique of power dynamics that is foundational to critical pedagogy should be inherently skeptical about any assertions "that there is one 'right' way to teach and learn" (Miceli et al 2022). Of related relevance to power dynamics, the authors of this piece further point out the harm of presenting only "a handful of white-presenting scholars" as the ungraders who are doing it "right" (which the list of specific names in Morris' article that he presents as doing upgrading "correctly" appears to do). The authors of the rebuttal piece detail that a critical approach should be mindful that: "Keeping too narrow a focus, intentional or not, upholds racist, patriarchal, ableist and wealth-based systems and structures," and this "minimises, and even erases, the contributions of educators who have engaged in ungrading praxis for years."

Thus, the authors of the second piece are reminding educators who value critical pedagogy about the need for this critical lens to be applied, not only within our classrooms and courses, but to greater dynamics around epistemology, power, and knowledge claims. As a sociologist, I would also call this big(ger) picture lens the practice of the sociological imagination (see Mills 1959). As one more sociological step in this literature review trajectory, to really unpack ungrading, I think it is important to move beyond the term itself. While so far this literature review has been grounded in that specific term, it is important for this review to take a bigger picture lens to grading - given that

it is this practice that ungrading is in direct critique of. To understand ungrading further, it is important to understand why alternatives to grading are seen as needed.

A Brief History of Schools & Grades

In my review of the literature, I found several relevant points in the history of schools and grades. Here I will review these examples, and in the next section consider their relevance to critiques of grades.

Schooling in the 1600s-late 1800s

The earliest noteworthy example that I found of attempts to establish schools in the U.S. was the reported first attempt, in the mid-1600s, to establish schools in English/colonized North America. Urban, Wagoner, and Gaither report that this first attempt came from colonist/colonizer leaders in the Virginia colony who were attempting to “educate Indian children in their vicinity ‘in true religion’ and the principles of civilized life” (2019:16). These efforts parallel the intentions of the American Indian boarding schools that became supported by the federal government in the late 1800s (see Snipp 2020 for a brief review of this history). The Native Americans rejected these attempts by attacking settlements and torching the intended Henrico College, ultimately thwarting these first attempts to establish schools in English/colonized North America (16).

Other early efforts towards education in the 1600s happened within religious groups. For example, the Calvinist Puritans encouraged “compulsory education in order to ensure the perpetuation of Calvinism and the suppression of possible dissent” (Rothbard 1974:13). As a result of this encouragement, “in 1642, Massachusetts Bay Colony passed the first law in the New World requiring that children be taught to read and write,” making Massachusetts “one of the first places in the world to make education of young people a public responsibility” (Open Anthology of the American Revolution, 2021). Yet, it would not be until 1852 that Massachusetts – as an entire state – would become the first state to pass compulsory education laws (Katz 1976).

In the meantime, through the 1600-1700s, “most southern colonists tended to accept without question the prevailing European precept that education was essentially a private matter, a family concern” (Urban, Wagoner, and Gatiher 2019:18). Ultimately, this meant that financial stability determined the ability of a family to provide education to its children. The reality of the

situation was that “many of the children of the less cultured members of society...had little chance of receiving even the basic rudiments of literary training,” and that “the farther into the backcountry people lived, the less likely they were to have access to books or literate neighbors” (19). Thus, access to education was largely determined by class status.

Although schooling outside the home became more prevalent in the 1800s, this schooling – like earlier examples – seemed most present for children at the ends of social hierarchies. It was available to children from relatively wealthy families who could afford it (a status also heavily tied to race), and efforts were put forth to invest in school as an institution towards the assimilation of children from the lower ends of the class spectrum. The “Founders...continued to follow colonial precedent in devoting public funds to education mainly at the two extremes: colleges and academies (both public and private) for the well-to-do, and pauper schooling for the embarrassing and troublesome poor” (2019:74).

Access to education was of course also determined by other social categories, like gender and race. For example, “most of the proposals of the post-Revolutionary era were, in keeping with the social arrangements of the time, limited to the education of the male population” (Urban, Wagoner, & Gatiher 2019:75). Also reflecting American social hierarchies was the passage of anti-literacy laws, like the Negro Act of 1740, that forbade the literacy of free and enslaved Black people (Sandles, 2023). As Feldman (2023:18) quantifies, at the end of the 1800s, “relatively few children attended any formalized school--around half of white children ages fifteen to nineteen, and far fewer children of color who were either enslaved or, if they were free, still faced legal and extra-legal restrictions on their access.” Even across these few examples, we can see how the history of schooling and education in the United States has deep connection to social inequalities.

Schooling in the late 1800s - early 1900s

Widespread compulsory education would eventually come in the early 1900s. While Massachusetts was the first state to pass compulsory education laws in 1852, it would not be until 1918 that all states had passed laws requiring school attendance (Katz 1976). Drastic shifts in American society during the late 1800s and early 1900s played a pivotal role in this development. In his chapter, “A Brief History of Grading,” Feldman (2023) provides an insightful articulation of this societal context – and ultimately, its relevance to the mainstream adoption of the A-F grading scale.

He outlines five major themes that are worth reviewing here. These themes provide an insightful context for the evolution of schools and grading that most Americans are familiar with today. Those themes are: (1) the rise of manufacturing, (2) migration and immigration, (3) progressive educators, (4) the rise of intelligence testing and categorization, and (5) the popularity of behaviorism.

Let's start with the first (1) theme: the rise of manufacturing and the shift from an agricultural society. As the US saw a sharp increase in industrial output by 1900, factory owners saw it to their advantage to use their power in society to "[persuade] policymakers to incorporate characteristics of industry—specialization, chain of command, timed routines, and efficiencies—into public institutions, including schools" (Feldman 2023:19). These industrial capitalists focused on schools as helpful instruments towards conditioning potential future workers. As Mokyr (2001:10) corroborates, "much of this education, however, was not technical in nature, but social and moral," with schools serving as an agent of socialization towards the goals of the industrial capitalists. The increased interest in schooling during this time as a potential means towards instilling adherence to hierarchy, obedience, routine (and ultimately, towards factory owners' profit) is not a far iteration from earlier aims to use schooling as a means towards obedience, "civilization," and suppression of dissent.

The second (2) important social context of this time: was migration and immigration. Manufacturing jobs and an improved railroad system resulted in increasing city populations. This increase came from Americans migrating to cities from rural areas, and also from an increase in immigrants from Europe, largely related to employment (Feldman 2023:19). These demographic changes increased the population of schools and also changed the demographics of children attending school. Relatedly, "this education system largely standardized the rules, curricula, and teaching methods," which "didn't account for the diversity in the student demographics," and also served to "inculcate both American and the increasing population of immigrant children with conformity" (Rothbard 1974, as cited in Kuhn 2020:25).

The third (3) important social context of this time was: the efforts of progressive educators. Feldman names John Dewey as one figure that vocalized support for universal education as a necessity of democracy, yet also details the perspective that progressive educators championed universal education for the aforementioned aim of assimilation. He describes that some believed "that Progressives wanted school to acculturate and assimilate the influx of immigrants so they were prepared to contribute to both democracy and capitalism" (Feldman 2023:19).

Thus, in all these three themes so far, we see a continuation of the earlier occurring theme through the 1600-1800s of school as a tool of socialization towards obedience and hierarchy. In the evolution of these themes into the 1900s, we see their perpetuation on a greater scale (with the passage of compulsory education laws) directly reflecting the aims of industrial capitalists. The fourth and fifth themes provide further components for how this context led to the widespread use of a standardized grading scale in schools.

That fourth (4) theme was: intelligence testing and categorization. Feldman (2023) details that this intelligence testing was not only used towards a division of labor, but an unequal division of labor that was used to enforce and justify social hierarchies. The results of such testing, and the related development of the concept of the “bell curve,” were used to justify social hierarchies and resultant inequalities as “natural” and scientifically based (Feldman 2023:20). The fifth (5) and last theme: behaviorism, “this theory of learning—that animals, including humans, could be taught to act in certain ways through extrinsic reinforcement or consequences—became wildly popular” (Feldman 2023:20). The strong influence of behaviorism on the standardized grading scale would become a foundational critique of grades – as creating a focus on an external reward and a detraction from meaningful learning.

The collection of these five aspects of the early 1900s impacted the evolving institution of school in critical ways. The shift from an agrarian to an industry-based society/economy gave industrial capitalists power that they in turn used to influence American institutions, including schools, to act as agents of socialization towards their own profit. This societal shift relatedly encouraged migration within the U.S. from rural to urban areas, and immigration to U.S. cities from European countries, drastically increasing city populations and increasing the population and diversity of school-aged children. The increasing numbers and diversity of this population further encouraged standardization in schooling. This social context provided a situation in which the institution of school would be vulnerable to increasing interests in intelligence testing and behaviorism, paving the way towards the mainstream adoption of grading in schools.

Grades

Aligning with the societal context in which US schools became institutionalized, early grading systems are said to have developed as an adaptation of “grading” in the factory:

The grading system had originated earlier in the factories, as a way of determining if the shoes, for example, made on the assembly line were “up to grade.” It was used as benchmark to determine if the workers should be paid, and if the shoes could be sold. (Hartmann 2000:191)

While there are many accounts on the specific timeline of the adoption of the A-F grading scale in the United States (a timeline that, for example, includes Harvard instituting a point scale to assess students in 1830 [Durm 1993] and the origination of the A-F scale at Mount Holyoke in 1897 [Blum 2020]) - for the purposes of this project, this timeline is not of great importance. Of greater importance to this project is the context and purpose behind this grading scale, and that will be the focus of this section.

In response to the shifting social context in the early 1900s, schools became “charged with preparing students to meet the needs of the industrial and commercial world,” and “could do so most efficiently if they matched each student with the appropriate curriculum based on the student’s ability” (Feldman 2023: 21). These aims were able to utilize the up-and-coming interest in intelligence testing. Feldman details that: “To help schools efficiently place each student ‘where he belongs,’ a group of psychologists adapted the scales of the U.S. Army’s IQ test, used to screen enrollees for officer training, to place students into different academic ‘tracks’” (2023:21). Like those original IQ tests, their adaptation for children in school similarly reinforced social hierarchies. Tracking students “helped replicate the existing social and racial hierarchy and provide ‘scientific’ justification for doing so,” with “schools assign[ing] African Americans, immigrants, and lower-income student groups to lower tracks designed to teach them behaviors and skills that consigned them to reap fewer opportunities and a smaller share of the American Dream” (Feldman 2023:22).

In schools, grades similarly served to rank students. In his brief consideration of the history of grades, Hartmann (2000:191) explains what this ranking actually reflected: “Grades didn’t give students deeper insights into their topics of study. Instead, grades forced children to memorize by rote only those details necessary to pass the tests, without regard to true comprehension of the subject matter.” Thus, in-line with many points in the history of U.S. schools, grades served to reflect students’ (ability and willingness towards) conformity to a one-size-fits-all model that was more about performing obedience than learning. The “efficiency” of such quantified grading scales

further helped to standardize education in a way that could allow for one educator to “teach” many students at once.

This dynamic between teacher and student differed drastically from earlier iterations that were focused on learning and growth – albeit iterations that were only afforded to children from wealthy families. Schneider and Hutt’s (2014) “Making the Grade: A History of the A-F Marking Scheme,” reports that prior to mass compulsory schooling, the dynamics between teacher and student had been focused on intimate and internal (between teacher and student/family) communication that revolved around personalized support towards learning objectives. As also detailed by Kuhn:

In the earliest years of our country until the turn of the nineteenth century, American teachers did not use grades to measure performance or knowledge; instead, teachers provided mentorship, built relationships with students, gauged students’ potential and progress, and served as references when students applied for jobs ... This process, however thorough and beneficial to students’ success, also meant spending a significant amount of time with each student. (4)

Mass compulsory schooling “changed things dramatically” in that “mass schooling placed the school at the centre of a society increasingly dominated by complex bureaucratic institutions, including the school system itself” (Schneider and Hutt 2014:202). While the dynamics between teacher and student had previously been focused on intimate communication that revolved around personalized support towards learning objectives, “reformers saw grades as tools for system-building rather than pedagogical devices” (202-203).

Critiques of Grades and Ungrading as a Response

This limited review of the history of schools and grades provides context for the main critiques of grades that ungrading contends to address. The societal shift towards widespread compulsory education and the adoption of the A-F grading scale in U.S. schools reflected a quantification and homogenization of education that aligned with industry and the goals of industrial capitalists. The two main critiques of grades that I am interested in exploring here are critiques that find rich insight within this history. Those two critiques are: 1) that grades impede learning, and 2) that grading is an inequitable practice.

Grades Aren't About Learning

A main critique of grades is that they don't work. That is, when the goal is learning, grades do not facilitate this goal, and can even be psychologically harmful. Research finds that a focus on grades detracts from learning (Beck, Rorrer-Woody, and Pierce 1991; Schinske and Tanner 2014) and that frequent, quantitatively graded assessments impede "higher order skills development" (Harland et al. 2015:536). Research conducted in the 1980s and 1990s by educational psychologists came away with three main conclusions about grades: that "grades tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they're learning, that grades create a preference for the easiest task possible, and that grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking" (Kohn 2011:29-30). Further, grades create an environment of stress. As articulated in one study on the impact of grades on teaching and learning: "because the next assignment was always imminent, students felt under pressure, had no time to think outside of assessment, and lived with the constant reminder that they might not achieve their goals in terms of marks and grades" (Harland et al. 2015:537).

Grades also stifle risk-taking and impede trust between student and teacher: factors that, in turn, impede learning, and further create stress. As Feldman (2023) points out, in graded classrooms, students are usually penalized for behavioral as well as academic "mistakes," such as docked points for late work, arriving late to class, incorrectly formatting a paper title, etc. Within these practices we can see the assimilationist and dissent suppressing goals of the colonizers and Calvinists of English North America in the 1600s and the industrial capitalists of the 1800s and 1900s. Feldman details how this environment/context impedes the goal of learning and only creates stress:

In this environment, *every* mistake is penalized and incorporated into the final grade ... While some might argue that this is simply accountability—'I asked the students to do something, so it *has* to count' in their grade— it's missing the forest for the trees. The more assignments and behaviors a teacher grades, the less willing a student will be to reveal their weaknesses and vulnerability. With no zones of learning that are 'grade-free,' it becomes nearly impossible to build an effective teacher-student relationship and positive learning environment in which students try new things, venture into unfamiliar learning territory, or feel comfortable making errors and grow. When everything a student does is graded, and every mistake counts against their grade, that student can perceive that to receive a good grade they must be perfect all the time...It becomes unsurprising that students are feeling so much stress in school. (2023:32-33)

One of the most referenced names I have come across in the literature on ungrading (and more informal ungrading spaces) is Alfie Kohn, advocate of progressive education, and prominent long-standing critic of grades. His 1993 book *Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes* saw its 25th anniversary edition release in 2018, and continues to make the case that grades do not promote learning.

One of the main take-aways of Kohn's book is that rewards, like grades, cultivate external motivation, an orientation that necessarily erodes internal motivation. Kohn asserts that the use of "gold stars" and "A's" is a solely behaviorist approach. It is an approach that orients the reward-seeker to the reward - and thus encourages the repetition of behavior that earns the reward - but does not encourage the seeking of meaning or benefit from the behavior/process itself. In the case of grades, this means that grades orient the student to the end result of the grade, and not to the experience/benefit of learning. Implying behaviorism's roots in studies with dogs and rats, Kohn draws a parallel to grades, reminding readers that "For as long as animals have been domesticated, people have been using rudimentary incentive plans to train their pets" (5). While Kohn recognizes that this type of behavioral learning is important for some aspects of human life, he argues that it is detrimental to teaching and learning school subjects.

In his chapter "Lures for Learning: Why Behaviorism Doesn't Work in the Classroom," Kohn outlines three points about the motivation to learn. They are: 1) Young children don't need to be rewarded to learn, 2) At any age, rewards are less effective than intrinsic motivation for promoting effective learning, and 3) Rewards for learning undermine intrinsic motivation (Kohn 2018:144-148). Ultimately, the conclusion is that grades not only take an emphasis off of learning, but that the use of grades actively impedes learning (i.e., the shiny object not only takes away your attention from other aims, it minimizes your perceived importance of other aims). Kohn uses an experience with a student to highlight this point that, although long, I feel is worth quoting here in its entirety:

Once, when I was a high school teacher in the early 1980s, I gave a ride to a fifteen-year-old girl who had no particular interest in anything she was being taught. Awkward and taciturn, she spoke only to ask if I would turn on the car radio. She then proceeded to sing along with every song that was played for the duration of the ride, displaying not only more enthusiasm than I had thought possible but also a rather remarkable memory. Relating the event to my colleagues later, I shook my head and smiled condescendingly at how this girl, a washout in the classroom, had somehow managed to learn Top Forty lyrics to perfection.

Only later did I realize that the girl had something to teach me about motivation and its relationship to achievement. If we teachers had never seen her steel-trap memory in action, or witnessed the look of total absorption I glimpsed in the car that day, that was not necessarily just a reflection of her misplaced priorities. It may have said more about what was going on in the classes she sat through – the curriculum and the motivational strategies being used. No one had to promise her an A for learning all those songs, or threaten her with an F for messing up. Her most impressive achievement did not require carrots and sticks. It may have required their absence. (145-146)

This vignette is a powerful reminder that grades provide incentive to achieve a grade, not a reflection of a desire to learn.

Grading is an Inequitable Practice

A second main critique of grades that ungrading is said to address is that grading is an inequitable practice. In a society constructed around social hierarchies like race, gender, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability, across its history and institutions, the institution of schools are not exempt from this influence. As shown in the brief history of U.S. schools here, that history has a deep connection to social hierarchies. Efforts towards compulsory education demonstrate that when education was considered a public responsibility, the ultimate aims were about conformity, assimilation, and obedience rather than learning. The A-F grading scale that we are familiar with today relatedly grew out of the aim to standardize education, ultimately towards the goal of industrial capitalist profit – a goal that is dependent upon the maintenance and perpetuation of social hierarchies like class, race, and gender.

As also considered, early efforts to track and rank students in schools came from the influence of “intelligence testing,” a phenomenon that became popular in the late 1800s/early 1900s, as was used to try to justify social inequalities, particularly racism, by claiming that they were a result of differences in biology (and not related to treatment in society). Thus, the development and use of grading scales in school never had a goal of equity, and if anything, it served to maintain inequalities.

Educator Asao Inoue has published numerous works on assessment/grading and racism. Although he focuses on writing assessment in particular (as a professor of rhetoric and composition), his broader points around institutions of education and their connections to white

supremacy are poignant to the argument of grading as inherently inequitable. As he poignantly articulates:

Grading, because it requires a single, dominant standard, is a racist and white supremacist practice...Grading is almost always employed in order to control students (and sometimes their teachers), force students to be accountable (and sometimes their teachers), and measure or rank students (and sometimes their teachers), either against each other or against a single standard. Each of these purposes for grading in writing classrooms is detrimental to learning generally, and more harmful to many students of color. (2022:5)

Relatedly, as Feldman (2023) details in his chapter, “Traditional Grading Hides Information, Invites Biases, and Provides Misleading Information,” the process of grading is arbitrary. One student’s performance can be ranked differently, by different teachers, depending upon aspects like how different facets are weighted, or the degree to which points are docked for behavioral aspects like turning in an assignment late. Thus the same exact work may earn a different grade in one class versus another, just by the sheer chance of whose class a student ends up in. Such inconsistencies are not only arguably unfair, but again affirm that grades are not reliable reflections of a student’s learning. Grading is a process that will necessarily be influenced by implicit bias, with the greatest detriment being to those students who belong to marginalized groups, with research showing that this is especially true for Black students (Feldman 2023).

In regards to class, markers of educational “achievement,” including grades, are connected to material circumstances. Students from financially stable backgrounds may benefit from: attending well funded K-12 schools, parental availability to help with homework, family ability to afford tutors (for coursework and SATs), security of having basic needs (food, clothing, shelter) met, etc. Whereas students from lower socioeconomic class backgrounds may face: inadequately funded K-12 schooling, competing responsibilities with school including work and/or care-taking responsibilities, financial stress which may include food and/or housing insecurity. All of these factors can influence a student’s ability to “achieve” high grades.

Ungrading as a Response

Advocates of ungrading claim that ungrading addresses these critiques. Advocates assert that ungrading puts the focus on learning (instead of a grade), and that ungrading is a more

equitable approach to teaching and learning. Often these aims are framed as inherently supporting one another.

Ungrading is said to reject a one-size-fits-all approach to learning and assessment. In doing so, it is said to allow for a focus on learning, and to support equity in assessment (vs. conformity to one, dominant standard). A previously mentioned theme of ungrading related to this assertion is the focus on qualitative feedback in ungrading. In material on ungrading, I've frequently come across mention of research that finds that students only pay attention to feedback on assessments, when only feedback alone is available. Specifically, in a study which examined how students respond to three scenarios: 1) assessment with feedback and grades, 2) assessment via grades only, 3) assessment via feedback only - it was found that feedback was only considered by students who received feedback alone. When grades and feedback were presented, students focused on the grades and did not pay attention to the feedback (Blum 2020; Butler 1987). Thus, the ungrading practice of using feedback solely, instead of grades, aims to foster a focus on that qualitative assessment.

The focus on feedback can provide a teaching and learning experience that is more personalized than a quantitative scale. Through feedback on assignments, teachers can provide personalized perspectives regarding student strengths, areas for improvement, and growth. The focus on feedback allows for student assessment to take into account personal starting point, and growth and effort throughout a course. This stands in opposition to the assessment of every student's work against a universal rubric of points. While earning my degree in social work, I recall the common phrase/suggestion to "start where the client is." The framing of ungrading as a rejection to a one-size-fits-all approach to education led me to similarly think of it as an aim to "start where the student is."

Students can take this feedback and put it into practice: whether in future assignments, or on the same assignment, if revisions are allowed. Revisions are a common ungrading practice, as a means to allow for mistakes/risks without permanent penalty (and relatedly, a less punitive approach). The incentive for students to heed this feedback is said to be because ungrading aims to put the responsibility of learning in the student's control. Instead of aiming to meet what may seem like arbitrary goal posts, subjectively assessed by an external perspective across a hierarchical ranking, ungrading purports to put the student in control, in order to encourage internal vs. external

motivation (like Kohn talked about). This aim can take a variety of forms, including (forms of) contract grading and/or student self-assessment.

As Kuhn (2020:11) details about contract grading: “Contract grading is one possible intervention to promote equality. Contract grading is a system in which student and instructor agree on a set of assignments that the student will complete for the desired course grade rather than assigning points/percentages to assignments.” This can look like a situation in which a course has 10 major assignments and 20 minor assignments, and students can elect to follow the “A contract” and complete a stipulated number of those assignments for an A grade, or can follow the “B contract” for a smaller number of those assignments, or a “C contract” for even lower number, etc. Or, contract grading can look like Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009:245-246) example in which they provide students with a guarantee that they will earn at least a B in the class if they meet ten stipulations (e.g., not missing more than a week’s worth of class, completing all low-stakes writing assignments, attending conferences with teacher to discuss drafts, etc.), with the option to aim higher for an A grade. They make the case that their use of “the word ‘contract’ doesn’t fit something we impose so unilaterally on students” but that instead “we want to give students written evidence that we contract ourselves to keep this unusual promise to award a B for doing things rather than quality of writing” (2009:247). They see the term “contract” as further fitting in that: “the term ‘contract’ aptly describes the type of written document that spells out as explicitly as possible the rights and obligations of all the parties--a document that tries to eliminate ambiguity rather than relying on ‘good faith’ and ‘what’s implicitly understood’” (2009:247).

Towards the aim of giving control to students over their own learning, the use of student self-assessment may be used alongside contract grading. Or, it may be used on its own. Student self-assessment is just that: asking that students self-evaluate their own performance and growth throughout a course. This can be done through asking students to self-assess individual assignments, or can be a more summative check-in, which may take the form of a student portfolio, to document the student’s work across a semester. In Danielewicz and Elbow’s example of contract grading, considered in the previous paragraph, they factored into their “B contract” a submission of a midterm and final student portfolio. Without the contract grading element, student self-assessments may be utilized to determine the final grade of a course - often in conjunction with a meeting between student and teacher to discuss the portfolio and final grade.

Ungrading is said to be a more equitable approach to teaching and learning (versus the use of grades) in that it rejects a one-size fits all approach (like standardized testing, which disproportionately advantages students who already have privilege in terms of race and/or class and/or ability). Advocates of ungrading often cite these reasons as behind their support of the practice. Yet, ungrading is not without its own critiques.

Critiques of Ungrading

An important piece to this consideration of ungrading are the critiques, which is what I will conclude with. While advocates of ungrading champion it as a response to critiques of grades, critiques of these claims have also been made. Two critiques are that: 1) ungrading is impractical, especially for larger class sizes (and thus can't actually meet the goal of prioritizing learning), and 2) that ungrading is not necessarily an equitable practice, and further, that such claims can be dangerous.

As implicated in the consideration of ungrading as focused on qualitative, personalized feedback, it is a practice that takes time. One purpose that quantitative grading scales served was efficiency in assessment for relatively large numbers of students. An emphasis on detailed qualitative feedback is difficult, if not impossible, for many students at a time. It follows that: if it is difficult or impossible to provide quality feedback, it can relatedly be argued that this approach isn't able to truly provide the individualized focus on learning that it is purported to. Even advocates of ungrading recognize the need for more research about the use of ungrading in large class sizes (Blum 2020:221-222). Some ungraders, do however, maintain that ungrading can be done with large courses. For example, Jesse Stommel, who says ungrading can be successful in courses of 50, 100, and even 400 students, when there is a focus on aspects like metacognition and self-evaluation, and not as much on individualized feedback from the instructor (Stommel 2023b:103-104).

Yet, critiques have also been made about the use of student self-evaluation in ungrading. These critiques are under a larger umbrella of concerns regarding claims of ungrading as an equitable practice, and assertions that ungrading may actually exacerbate certain inequities. For example, in an Inside Higher Ed publication, educator Robert Talbert (2022) shares his experiences using ungrading in an undergraduate math course. While he shares several positives, he includes a list of three main concerns which left him questioning if he would use ungrading again. Bringing this

back to student self-evaluation, his first concern is that “ungrading seems to work only as well as students’ abilities to self-evaluate.” He asserts that “if a student lacks those skills, you can give all the helpful feedback you like, but that student will struggle more to make sense of it than another whose skills are better developed.” He concludes that, “you’re always going to find variations in students’ preparation in college-level courses, but in ungrading, those variations seem to be amplified.” Relatedly, his third major concern is that “ungrading shifts more work onto students” in that “it makes them responsible for not only understanding the material itself but also for understanding their understanding.” Thus, Talbert’s concern with the use of student self-evaluation is that it can disadvantage some students, including a disproportionate addition to student workload for some students versus others.

Beyond these potential issues with the skill of meta-cognition, others highlight how the social location of race and gender can advantage certain students and disadvantage others when it comes to student self-evaluation. As Donahoe (2024a) articulates, “ungrading, as great as it is, does introduce some potential for bias and unfairness...especially given the anecdotal evidence that women and students of color tend to suggest lower grades for themselves than white male students.” I have similarly heard such anecdotal accounts in my own informal interactions and experiences with ungraders: in online spaces (particularly twitter), monthly meetings with educators using ungrading (Ungrading Office Hours, 2022, that I attended late in the year), workshops (The Future of Grading? 2023) and conferences related to ungrading (#Ungrading Con:Assessment for Equity, 2022; The Grading Conference, 2023).

From a sociological perspective this internalized bias makes sense through the concept of socialization, as it pertains to socially constructed hierarchies related to gender and race (for example, see Brown, Rosnick, Segrist 2016 and Rahmani 2020). Thus, one concern regarding ungrading and equity is that student self-evaluation can reflect and even exacerbate social hierarchies: that students who do not already possess the skills of metacognition are at a disadvantage, and that women and students of color may rank themselves lower due to the socialization of (in the words of bell hooks) an “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarch[al]” society.

This issue with potential bias and ungrading can also extend to the instructor. Jayme Dyer (2024), instructor of biology at a community college where “approximately 30% of her students are white, 30% are Black, and 30% are Hispanic,” shared her experience with ungrading, and concerns

with bias that led her to the decision to not continue using it. She highlights the potential impact of bias on the part of both student and teacher:

Whether the final course grade is determined collaboratively, or by the instructor alone, there is substantial potential for implicit bias to ‘act out’ by perpetuating systemic inequities. Of course, implicit bias can ‘act out’ any time an assignment is graded non-anonymously, but the size of the equity impact is that much bigger when the judgment call is about a student’s entire course grade...And for collaboratively-graded classes, the impact of implicit bias is even worse because the student’s implicit bias can also perpetuate systemic inequities.

Thus, students’ implicit bias could compound instructors’ implicit bias. As Dyer points out, while instructor bias can certainly influence the use of grades on assignments, the stakes can be higher with ungrading.

Questions have also been raised about ungrading and equity in regards to students’ race specifically. A twitter post from 2023 asks, “Is there a privilege inherent in the #ungrading movement? Are we removing a cultural currency, and returning to a culture of relational capital with white teachers?” (Vardabasso 2023). This is a poignant question, especially given the consideration of teacher bias (implicit and otherwise). In response to that post, the account “The Madwoman in the Classroom” responded, directing to her own twitter thread from 2021 which reads:

I’m seeing a lot of talk about the system’s dependence on grades, but not a lot of talk about how to ensure Black and Brown students and their familiars are not the victims of teacher and systemic violence any further than they already are.+

+ Have we asked the students and families most burdened by unfair grading practices how they’d like this problem to be addressed? Taking the focus off grades without centering Black and Brown students seems like a very white solution to me.
(The Madwoman in the Classroom. 2021a, 2021b)

These are questions that merit investigation, especially given the claims of ungrading as a more equitable alternative to grades. Research on ungrading has highlighted the need for future research about ungrading and equity, with specific attention to the experience of students of color, as well as other groups (Hasinoff et al. 2024:13).

Relatedly, concerns have been raised about ungrading practices being labeled as anti-racist. In her 2021 article, “Your Contract Grading Ain’t It,” Sherri Craig focuses on the problem of labeling ungrading practices like contract grading as anti-racist. As she emphasizes, these practices within a

classroom do not address, “the systemic racism present at universities” (145), or challenge the bigger picture context of “annual assessments, course and instructor evaluations, adjunct labor, and tenure and promotion protocols (all of which are arguably also rooted in white supremacy)” (146) that take place in the greater departments and institutions where individual educators may use these practices. She shares her experience expressing such concerns to her department “during a forum on building a more equitable writing program where the only solution presented was to encourage contract grading practices throughout the first-year writing curriculum based on the experiences of a few instructors.” She describes her frustration:

Being in a conversation with a small group of well-meaning white people arguing for the removal of traditional assessment practices to express their equitable views towards their BIPOC students was surprising. Had my colleagues never considered the big picture? White savior complex aside, for now, the prevailing idea seemed to be that it was possible to read a few articles, engage in a couple of conversations, and magically implement a collaboratively designed grading contract to a group of students who were not only new to the university, but who would be beginning their college careers in the middle of a global pandemic, with the stress and anxiety of their targeted Black bodies. These same students who would be bringing 12 plus years of traditional writing assessment practices and would be held to similar standards throughout our university, were to suddenly embrace a new set of grading practices comfortably. (145-146)

Thus, labeling practices of ungrading as anti-racist may not only be inaccurate, but harmful. As described by Hong (2008), “the context of the contemporary university, where ‘diversity’ is tokenistically but not substantively prioritized,” is a context that would allow, even encourage labeling practices as anti-racist without doing the actual work needed to combat racism. This dynamic within the university can similarly be seen with the emptied usage of the term “intersectionality” (see Nash 2019).

Craig’s concerns with “students who would be bringing 12 plus years of traditional... assessment practices and would be held to similar standards throughout our university,” being asked “to suddenly embrace a new set of grading practices comfortably” are echoed by others. The last of three main concerns brought up by Talbert (2022) in an article mentioned earlier is that:

Ungrading might unwittingly contribute to equity gaps in higher education ... by removing marks from the picture, it may take away the guideposts that learners from less privileged backgrounds might need as they navigate college courses. It’s as if someone took away all the signs in an airport and then dropped a nonnative-language speaker into it. By having the signs, it’s possible this person might focus on the signage more than their journey, but those signs are helpful, and it’s hard to enjoy anything if you’re lost.

Thus, the challenge of having to adapt to a new “grading” model (especially for one or a few courses within a larger institution that does use traditional grading scales), can be detrimental to students in terms of introducing an unnecessary adjustment, especially to students already marginalized and facing disproportionate challenges in adjusting to and succeeding in college.

Another group that has been specifically considered in this regard is neurodivergent students. While the argument has been made that the personalized approach of ungrading has great potential value for neurodivergent students whose individual strengths and challenges present a great range (Weingath 2021), the concern has also been expressed that ungrading may actually be a harmful approach for neurodivergent students who may need/rely on the structure and consistency that the standard grading scale provides (Carillo, 2021; Kryger and Zimmerman 2020). Further, Kryger and Zimmerman (2020:8) explain that ungrading in the form of contract grading may result in more work and less reward for neurodivergent students:

For example, anxiety or depression can cause students to struggle to maintain sustained effort on a task; ADHD can require a student to read a passage multiple times to gain the same benefit as a neurotypical student due to difficulties in managing attention; autistic students may need assistance to provide expected levels of linguistic expression on assignments; and dyslexic students may need to access material through differentiated technologies that require additional time investments. In each of these cases, neurodivergent students often invest more embodied/physical and emotional/affective labor toward completing the cognitive labor than a neurotypical peer but are provided the same reward for these arguably more extensive efforts. Thus, inequity is created in LBGCs [labor-based grading contracts] where the question ‘Did you complete the ask?’ flattens student production of academic performance to a variable that is more difficult for neurodivergent students to achieve through their labor, even if there are guided instructions.

As these authors state here, ungrading approaches like contract grading may exacerbate challenges for neurodivergent students.

Thus, the practice and growing popularity of ungrading has led to skeptics as well as advocates. The concern that ungrading could cause disproportionate harm to already marginalized students is one to take seriously, especially given the argument of ungrading as a more equitable alternative to grading. Notable advocate of ungrading, Jesse Stommel (2023b: 28), even warns that careful intention must guide the practice of ungrading:

... don't replace visible goalposts with invisible ones. To the extent that we can remove (or decenter) grades, we have to be sure we aren't just shifting the goalposts for students, replacing clear policies with 'hidden curriculum.' The problem of removing grades without changing any of our other pedagogies is not that we end up removing the ground underneath students' feet. Grades are not and have never been a stable or supportive ground beneath students' feet. But we can't simply remove grades without actively interrogating our own biases and the structures of privilege that grades enable and reinforce.

This makes clear sense. Yet, to bring this quote into dialogue with the observations of Craig (2021) and well-meaning educators, good intentions don't always equate to an adequate interrogation of "biases and the structure of privilege." As Peggy McIntosh's (1989) foundational article on privilege ("White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack") states, the unearned privilege that people receive due to socially constructed hierarchies is designed to go unnoticed by those who benefit from it. Another tweet poignantly captures the potential issues of practicing ungrading without careful intention: #Ungrading without divesting from carceral + harmful pedagogies is just a control in a costume + will do nothing to humanize classrooms + make them more relevant + responsive. We don't want to obfuscate power dynamics, we want to deal with them directly. (Austin 2023).

Researching Ungrading: The Student Experience

In reviewing the literature on ungrading, one aspect became particularly intriguing to me: the student experience of ungrading. While the student experience of ungrading has been considered, research in this area has significant room to grow. A decent amount of informal feedback on the topic can be found, in forms like online articles, personal blogs, and university websites (for just a few examples, see: Donahoe 2024, Lanning 2023, and Lee 2021). Many book chapters and journal articles written by educators about their experiences using ungrading also incorporate student perspectives that have been shared with them and/or quotes from student evaluations about the experience (see Blum's 2020 collection, and Ferguson 2013, for example). Usually, these perspectives are from students who have communicated a positive experience.

Yet, insight from academic/scientific research is not as plentiful. It is a growing body of research that currently provides valuable initial insights, yet also highlights important gaps. For

example, the authors of the recent 2024 article³, “‘Success was Actually Having Learned’: University Students Perceptions of Ungrading,” published in the journal *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, write that they were prompted to conduct their study on student perceptions of ungrading due to these gaps. As they explain about current research on the topic: “much of the research on student experiences of ungrading is based upon ethnographies, small qualitative studies, and case studies which, although informative, are often anecdotal and sometimes emphasize instructors’ perspectives” (Hasinoff et al. 2024: 3).

In response, their study was conducted with ten educators using ungrading practices (including some of the co-authors of the paper), and a total of fourteen of those educators’ courses. At the end of the fall 2021 semester, surveys were sent to the 364 students in these courses. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions, and focused on the students’ experiences with ungrading, including comparisons with experiences in graded courses. As a means to minimize bias, the survey did not ask students to identify which course they were in, and “in the analysis phase, the written responses were separated from the demographic data” (Hasinoff et al. 2024: 3). The subjects of the fourteen courses ranged from biology, communication, education, history, psychology, and art history (5). Courses included undergraduate and graduate courses, although “most respondents were enrolled in junior or senior level undergraduate courses (84%) and were taking a course required by their major (74%)” (5). Of the surveys administered, 128 were completed (thus a 35% response rate). This data was used for both quantitative and qualitative analyses.

The overall finding was that most of these students had positive experiences in these courses. They report that: “More than 70% of respondents reported that they experienced all 15 of the factors that described positive perceptions of learning either ‘somewhat more’ or ‘much more’ in their ungrading course as compared to conventional courses” (5). These results were summarized in a figure that is copied and replicated here (Figure 2.4).

³ This article was published after my own data collection in Spring 2023.

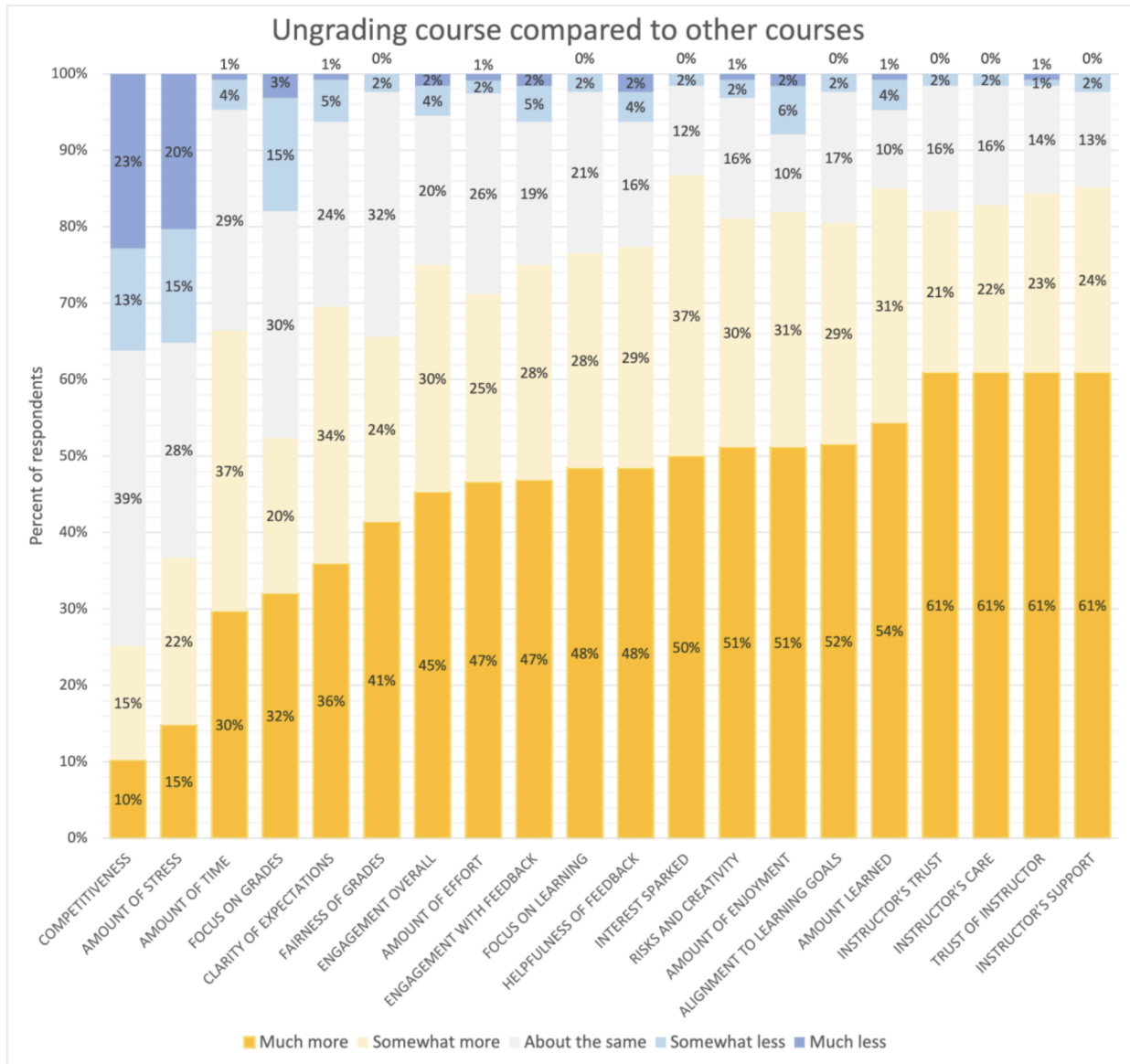


Figure 2.4: From Hasinoff et al. (2024:6): “Quantitative factors (n=20) assessed with more/same/less Likert scales, ungrading course compared to other courses”

Regarding qualitative analysis of the survey responses, the article includes one sentence referring to the authors’ use of “thematic analysis” to code the data, that references Braun and Clarke’s 2012 “Thematic Analysis” in the *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology* (5). The authors’ main qualitative conclusion (via the coding of the open-ended responses) was the identification of five main themes across student experiences: engagement, enjoyment and interest, success and motivation, risk and creativity, and stress.

Although a majority of student experiences in their study were positive, it is worth noting that while “most students reported stress levels that were about the same (28%) or less (35%) in ungrading courses as compared to others” that “37% reported more stress in their ungrading course” (Hasinoff et al. 2024: 11). Reasons that students gave for this increase of stress included “uncertainty about their performance and their final grade...being unsure about their self-assessment...discomfort with the subjective nature of grading both in assessing themselves and providing feedback to others,” and in some cases “flexible deadlines and/or no late penalties seemed to increase stress for a minority of students who may not have had adequate independent work and time-management skills” (11).

In terms of the limitations of the study, the authors conclude that: “our convenience sample was not representative, the response rate was just over one-third, and survey and distribution methods and incentives varied” (13). I additionally perceive a limitation in that the lack of identification of the specific course (of 14 courses) that students were in, and the separation of responses from demographic information, meant a loss of information. These strategies make sense in this study, as a means to limit bias for the researcher/educators, yet nonetheless do yield gaps in analyses.

The authors themselves suggest that “future research on this topic would benefit from larger and representative samples to address lingering questions about ungrading and equity, especially with respect to the experiences of first-generation students, students with disabilities, students of color, and students of different genders” (13). Thus, as this recent example illustrates, while interest is growing in filling the literature gaps around the qualitative experience of ungrading, this work has only begun. The handful of prior qualitative research on the student experience of ungrading shows the same, and aligns with Hasinoff et al.’s (2024) assessment of this research as small ethnographies and case studies that sometimes emphasize the instructor’s perspectives. I will review those studies briefly, yet first want to introduce a summative table of that research in Table 2.1. As the # of students column conveys in this table, Hasinoff et al.’s 2024 article provided the first comparatively large sample size. I will consider each of the previous studies, chronologically, and then come back to some themes expressed in this research.

Table 2.1: Summary of qualitative research on the student experience of ungrading

Year	Author	Number of Instructors/Courses	# of Students	Course description	Data collection	Methodological approach to data
2020	Kuhn	3 instructors (including author), multiple sections of course	12	transfer-level community college composition course	Focus groups	Validation theory (196)
2021	Guberman	1 instructor (author), 1 course	20	"Society, Culture, and Rock and Roll"; undergraduate, online, asynchronous summer course	Optional end of semester survey	Self determination theory (92) and the theoretical framework of informed learning (94)
2022	Koehler & Meech	1 course (authors were course facilitators)	14	Advanced instructional design theory course; graduate level, online (sync & async components)	Student reflections during and student-teacher conferences at end of semester	Ethnographic case study
2022	Gorichanaz	1 instructor (author), 1 course	8	Undergraduate information technology course; online synchronous	Interviews	Interpretive phenomenological analysis
2022	Greenburg, Sohn, and Moret	1 course (authors included instructors)	12	"Educational Psychology"; graduate level, online synchronous	End of semester self-reflection	Phenomenological methodology
2023	Turcotte et al.	1 course (first author was instructor)	13*	"Introduction to Educational Technology"; graduate level, online	Self reflections during and interviews after semester	Case study approach
2024	Hasinoff et al.	10 instructors (including authors) and 14 courses	128	Range of topics, courses from undergraduate to graduate level	Optional end of semester surveys	Thematic analysis

Note: Some studies were mixed methods, but only the qualitative research is reported here.

*13 for self-reflections, 8 for interviews

Starting in 2020 was Kuhn’s dissertation, “Get the ‘F’ Outta Here: Exploring Contract Grading as a Decolonizing and Equity-Minded Assessment Practice in Composition Classrooms” in an Educational Leadership program. Her dissertation sought to “investigate whether contract grading is an effective intervention for mitigating equity gaps among underrepresented student populations,”

including an exploration of “the nature of students’ experiences in contract-grading writing classrooms to ascertain how contract grading contributes to repairing inequities” (51). Thus, her study looked at a particular iteration under the umbrella of ungrading: contract grading.

The study centered on “transferlevel composition courses” (12) at two community colleges and used a mixed-methods approach. The study’s quantitative aspect looked at historical and current records (like retention and course grades) from 2016 to 2020, for a total of 1,620 students across 25 courses using standard grading and 23 courses using contract grading. The qualitative aspect used focus groups to explore current student experiences with contract graded courses. Three faculty members participated in the recruitment of students for the focus groups, and communicated with students in their spring 2020 semester course(s) the opportunity to participate. From these efforts, three students volunteered to participate. The researcher also contacted “all of her former contract-graded students” which resulted in nine additional students, for a total of 12 students participating in the focus groups used in this particular study.

The dissertation includes a section on validation theory, used as the theoretical framework for the study. Kuhn explains that the theory, developed by “student advocate, activist scholar, and contemplative educator” Laura Rendón (Rendón 2021), focuses on students’ transition to college, with special attention to the experiences of non-traditional and low-income students. In her findings, Kuhn shows that the courses that used contracts instead of standard grading: quantitatively showed greater equality in terms of ultimate course grades and retention across Latinx, Black, Middle Eastern, and white students, and qualitatively provided positive experiences which provided context to support these outcomes. Kuhn draws the conclusion that “[an] intervention that promotes liberatory pedagogy is contract grading because it promotes a more democratic classroom by allowing students to be involved in critical discussions with the instructor, decreases implicit bias, and promotes equity” (2020:196).

Her dissertation provides valuable insight into the student experience of ungrading. Though, the qualitative aspect of the research was limited in its small sample size and that nine of the twelve participants were previous students of the researcher. As Kuhn herself identifies, “because the researcher led the focus groups for this study, students may not have been as inclined to provide their honest feedback about contract grading” (80). Further, self-selection bias (choosing to participate *because* of positive experiences) is also likely, especially given that the researcher is asking participants about experiences in a course that the researcher taught. In regards to

limitations of the sample/study and recommendations for future research, Kuhn “recommends that future studies compare how students experience contract and merit grading differently depending on how they identify racially and ethnically and with regards to gender, age, socioeconomic status, veteran status, foster youth status, and first-generation status” (192-193). Thus, while Kuhn’s research provides an important piece to the qualitative consideration of the student experience of ungrading, more is needed, especially in respect to how student experiences may differ across different social locations.

In 2021, a year after the publication of Kuhn’s dissertation, Guberman published “Student Perceptions of an Online Ungraded Course,” in the journal *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*. For this study, the author used his course “Society, Culture, and Rock and Roll,” to consider student experiences with ungrading. The course was an online asynchronous course offered by a history department over a summer semester. It was described as mostly attended by upper level students in their third or fourth year, and as having a cap of 50 students. The data collected for this study came from “an anonymous survey distributed two weeks before the semester ended” that was completed by 20 students (92). This survey included “three survey tools” as well as open-ended comments (92). Regarding analytical framework, the survey tools used self-determination theory (92), and the theoretical framework of Informed Learning (94). The summary of results focused on tables that conveyed the results of Likert-scale survey questions, such as the figure (Figure 2.5) replicated below. Although quotes from the open-ended survey questions were incorporated into the article to support the Likert scale survey results, themes were not identified within the open-ended responses themselves. Thus, while this study marked another contribution to the consideration of the student experience of ungrading, its qualitative considerations were limited.

These items were rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree; 7=strongly agree) n=20				
Learning climate prompt	Min.	Max.	Mean	Std. dev.
I feel that my instructor provides me choices and options.	5	7	6.70	.571
I feel understood by my instructor.	5	7	6.45	.686
My instructor conveyed confidence in my ability to do well in the course.	6	7	6.60	.503
My instructor encouraged me to ask questions.	5	7	6.55	.605
My instructor listens to how I would like to do things.	5	7	6.50	.607
My instructor tries to understand how I see things before suggesting a new way to do things.	4	7	6.40	.821
Total LC	5.5	7	6.53	.497

Figure 2.5: From Guberman (2021:92) “Learning climate questionnaire.”

The year 2022 saw the publication of three articles based on qualitative research of the student experience of ungrading. One was Koehler and Meech’s “Ungrading Learner Participation in a Student-Centered Learning Experience,” published in the journal *Tech Trends*. The authors developed this research project around the research question: “How do learners navigate ungrading of participation in a student-centered learning experience and how does technology influence this process?” (79). This study used a “qualitative, interpretivist paradigm, employing a case study design” (2022:79). The researchers participated as course facilitators in an online advanced instructional design (ID) theory course using ungrading in the spring 2021 semester, enrolled with 14 students. The data collected included student reflections during the semester and conferences between the instructor and student at the end of the semester. It is worth sharing the authors’ note that since “the focus of this research considered the use of regular instructional strategies, the study was approved by the university Institutional Review Board as an exempt study, and therefore, no informed consent was required of participants.” (81).

Based on their analyses, the authors found that “being prompted to assess their participation in the course was a new experience for learners,” and that “while some students embraced the experience, others struggled to establish personal participation purposes and navigate achieving those purposes” (81). They relatedly conclude that “while adopting an ungraded approach to course participation aligns well with the student-centered paradigm, this research reveals that even advanced students struggled with the responsibility of establishing appropriate

participation goals and managing their efforts to gain the most from their participation,” and they recommend that “instructors must intentionally prepare and support learners to navigate an ungraded approach to course participation” (2022:87). These critical results are especially insightful given that the study was exempt from seeking informed consent, and that this eliminated self-selection bias in terms of participants. This was the only study in Table 2 in which all students in a course were participants in the study.

Also in 2022, Gorichanaz published, “‘It Made Me Feel Like it was Okay to be Wrong’: Student Experiences with Ungrading.” In this study he conducted interviews with eight students who “were former students of mine who had taken multiple classes with me, both before and after I switched to a self-reflective ‘ungrading’ model of student assessment” (2022:4). The research question which developed the study asked “What is it like for students to experience a holistic and self-reflective grading system for the first time?” (4).

In regards to his methodology, Gorichanaz “used interpretative phenomenological analysis, an interview-centered methodology that was developed in psychology: (2022:4). Through his analyses he identified four themes of student experience: “de-gamification...time to think and reflect...rich communication...and learning community” (7). Ultimately he concludes that: “students found the system to undo the gamification of learning that occurs through traditional grading, to provide time to reflect on their work and thereby deepen their learning, to enrich the communication between teacher and student during the course, and to create the foundation for a learning community within the classroom” (2022:10). Overall, he reports students’ experiences as positive, although he does note challenges for some students, including those for whom grades served as a motivation.

The year 2022 also saw publication of “Life in an Ungraded Course” (Greenberg, Sohn, and Moret). This research focused on a “3-hour, semester-long, graduate course in Educational Psychology at a predominantly white institution” (291). The course enrolled 16 students, and 12 students agreed to participate in the study. The article notes that “the instructors and a guest lecturer of the course were part of the research team conducting this study” (292). The data for their study came from student-written “end-of-semester reflections” and the data was analyzed through a “phenomenological methodology developed at The University of Tennessee” (292). The researchers found positive student experiences overall. They did, however, also find that many of the students expressed that they felt initially confused and even overwhelmed with the ungrading

setup. Yet, with the exception of one student, those students reported growing more comfortable with the set up after a few courses and finding it to be a valuable experience. Overall, the authors found four themes in the student reflections: (1) mental transformation (at first “feeling adrift” but then feeling that the “veil lifted” and the ability to approach learning in a new way), (2) “untethered” (having the feeling of being able to be vulnerable and being able to trust the learning and teaching process), (3) “wonderful classmates” (feeling a sense of community in the class), (4) “far beyond a test or quiz” (having “aha moments” that felt like meaningful learning for their own lives). Thus, the authors identified positive experiences of ungrading overall. They do, though, also make an important note that because most of the students in the course had teaching experience of their own, that this could have been influential on their perceptions of the course.

Then, in 2023, Turcotte, McElfresh, and Rodriguez-Meehan published “‘It’s About the Journey, Not the Destination’: Graduate Students’ Perceptions of Ungrading.” For this research, they conducted interviews with graduate students in a graduate level online course, Introduction to Educational Technology, taught by the first author of the article. It is worth noting that, similar to the Greenberg, Sohn, and Moret (2022) article just discussed, that this course was also directed to “current and pre-service educators” (61). The course enrolled 13 students. Students were assigned “process letters” at three points throughout the course, which intended to get students to self-reflect on their learning in the course. After the semester concluded, all 13 students agreed to let this study use those process letters as data, and eight students agreed to participate in semi-structured interviews about their experience.

For analysis of this data, the researchers used a qualitative case study approach attributed to Yin’s 2014 *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. From this analysis they identified three themes in student experiences. They report that, “due to the holistic nature of ungrading, students: (1) desire to engaged in feedback and reflection cycles... (2) tie their course learning to their personal and professional contexts, both inside and outside of education... and, (3) complete assessments without the fear of making a mistake that would lose them points” (63). The authors additionally report that: “our students’ previous experiences with ungrading and grades encouraged reflection of past trauma, from stress associated with an overt focus on ranking to anxiety and feelings of persecution” (63).

To summarize and consider some themes within this research, I would like to revisit Table 2.1. As mentioned, the table does align with Hasinoff et al.’s 2024 observation of relatively small

sample sizes, as well as influence of educator interpretations of their own student's experiences. All seven of the studies either included or solely focused on courses taught by the researcher(s) conducting the study.

Of the seven studies, five gathered data during the semester from courses taught by one (or more) of the researchers. Four of those five (Guberman 2021; Koehler and Meech 2022; Greenberg, Sohn, and Moret 2022; Turcotte, McElfresh, and Rodriguez-Meehan 2023) focused on a singular course, meaning that all data in those studies came from students while in a course with one of the researchers. The fifth was Hasniouff et al. (2024) which used data from ten instructors, including some of the authors. (Recall that they also did not ask participants to indicate what course they were in, towards the aim of minimizing potential bias in analysis). Thus, some, but not all of Hasniouff et al.'s data came from students while in a course with one of the researchers. Regarding the two other studies, Kuhn's focus groups did include three students as they were taking an ungraded course (with other educators) in spring 2020, yet also included nine of her own former students from previous semesters (2020:67-68); all of the interviews conducted by Gorichanaz were with his former students from previous semesters (2022:4).

Of all seven studies, six required that student participants opt in to the study. As mentioned, Koehler and Meech (2022) was the exception in that their study was exempt from requiring consent - also meaning that their study was the only one that eliminated the influence of self-selection bias. Yet, given that this data came from student reflections and conferences that were assignments completed for a course, it is still possible that this data was influenced by the power dynamics of the teacher-student relationship.

Future research could minimize bias and self-selection bias by conducting studies with researchers who are not directly involved with teaching the courses in which student experiences are being studied. The studies in Table 2.1 also represent a variety of course topics, levels (undergraduate and graduate), and formats (online asynchronous, synchronous, etc.). Further research could add insightful information as to how these different contexts may influence the experience of ungrading. Both Kuhn (2020:192) and Blum (2020:222) for example, suggest future research be conducted across disciplines, including STEM fields. Blum (2020:222) further suggests the importance of research with "gen ed" courses to consider how "findings vary when ungrading in electives is compared with ungrading in required courses? How does [student] motivation change if

students are not interested at all?" Kuhn (2020:193) further suggests that including instructors in the study of student experience would be valuable.

I would also argue that bringing a sociological lens to the qualitative student experience of ungrading would bring a valuable contribution. All of the research in Table 2.1 is affiliated with education departments or higher education/instructional-design based journals. Sociologically-based studies could provide a valuable complement. A sociological lens would be particularly beneficial in focusing on making connections between individual experiences and patterns across experiences and groups. Kuhn (2020) and Hasinoff et al. (2024) both suggest future research that attends to patterns of experiences within groups. While Kuhn "recommends that future studies compare how students experience contract and merit grading differently depending on how they identify racially and ethnically and with regards to gender, age, socioeconomic status, veteran status, foster youth status, and first-generation status" (2020: 192-193), Hasinoff et al. suggest that "future research on this topic would benefit from larger and representative samples to address lingering questions about ungrading and equity, especially with respect to the experiences of first-generation students, students with disabilities, students of color, and students of different genders" (13). The previous section in this literature review that considers debates around ungrading as equitable for marginalized groups of students would benefit from such research. These suggestions are ripe for a sociological lens. This collection of consideration informs the development of my own research questions.

Chapter 3: Research Questions & Framework

Research Questions

Through my investigations into ungrading, three considerations stood out to me: 1) claims of ungrading as equitable and critiques of these claims, 2) the seemingly universal connection of ungrading to critical pedagogies, yet starkly different interpretations of that connection, and 3) the limited qualitative study done with students' experiences of ungrading. In terms of consideration for my own project, that third point seemed a practical and valuable avenue to pursue – as well as one that could add to the ongoing conversations around the first two points.

Thus, I first developed a research question around the student experience of ungrading. Given the limited research focused on the student experience, this research question can generate valuable research for this growing body of literature. Research with relatively large sample sizes (compared to the majority of those in Table 2.1) would be especially helpful. A study with a relatively large sample size could also provide an opportunity to consider the suggestions concluding my literature review regarding the need for research that considers whether/how different groups experience ungrading in different ways.

These considerations led to the development of my initial research questions. In the proposal draft of this dissertation, my research questions were presented as follows:

1. What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom?
2. Does the social location of students (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) have a relationship with the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom? If yes, in what ways?
3. What do these results add to the conversation around ungrading as an equitable practice?

As is often the case with qualitative research (Agee 2009, Bailey 2018), my research questions were further refined during the research process. As I elaborate further in my methods and data collection section, my pool of student participants provided me with the opportunity to consider the specific experiences of three groups, whose voices are particularly valuable in contributing to questions around the student experience of ungrading. These groups are: (1) first

generation college students, (2) neurodivergent students, and (3) students who had negative experiences with ungrading.

As the literature review considered, these are groups whose voices are lacking and needed. As reviewed, some advocates of ungrading view it as beneficial for challenges faced by students in marginalized groups, including first generation students and neurodivergent students. Yet, others have made the case that ungrading can pose further difficulties for these students. Since my participant pool ended up allowing me to talk with multiple first generation college students and neurodivergent students, I decided to focus on these students' experiences.

The third group I ultimately decided to focus on was students who had a negative experience of ungrading. As reviewed in my literature review, while there is great room to grow in terms of research on the first person student experience of ungrading, consideration of negative experiences with ungrading is particularly lacking.

Thus, as my research process unfolded, I used a strategy of purposeful sampling to narrow my focus on these groups, based upon the makeup of my overall participants (as discussed further in my methods and data collection section). Based upon this selection, my research questions were revised as follows:

1. What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom for (three particular groups of students):
 - a. neurodivergent students?
 - b. first generation college students?
 - c. students who have had negative experiences of ungrading?

As also further detailed in my methods and data collection section, my use of these guiding questions does not intend for generalizable results. It is meant to provide meaningful contributions towards larger questions around the student experience of ungrading by selecting these particularly information rich cases to explore in detail, contributions that aim to stand as a building block towards greater understanding of this currently under-researched facet of ungrading. My project further intends to provide value to this limited literature because the researcher (me) does not hold an outside relationship with participants (i.e., the researcher is not interviewing their current or former students). Additionally, my research involves three rounds of interviews with students throughout a semester, providing a unique analysis of experiences and perceptions across time.

Framing the Student Experience of Ungrading: Engaged Pedagogy

“To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (hooks 1994: 13)

For a framework to organize my data in a response to my research questions, I propose bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy. First and foremost, it is a pedagogical framework that values what ungrading claims to be: a critical yet also holistic/caring pedagogy. Many ungraders cite hooks’ engaged pedagogy specifically as an influence to their practice of ungrading. Thus it is a relevant and suitable framework. Relatedly, it offers a suitable lens for a sociological analysis. The *sociological imagination*, the heart of the field of sociology, offers a lens that provides the ability to connect individual experience with broader patterns in society (Mills 1959).

Engaged Pedagogy

As a methodological tool towards understanding the concept of “ungrading,” this study will use bell hooks’ (1994) framework of an “engaged pedagogy” to help frame/organize student experiences of ungrading. To demonstrate the value of the concept for this study, it is important to first detail it. In her book *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks describes her engaged pedagogy as a concept heavily influenced by the work of Paulo Freire and Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, two teachers that she describes as foundational to her own development as an educator. I see it as important to let hooks’ words speak for themselves regarding her vision of engaged pedagogy. In regards to Freire’s influence, she details:

When I first began college, Freire’s thought gave me the support I needed to challenge the “banking system” of education, that approach to learning that is rooted in the notion that all students need to do is consume information fed to them by a professor and be able to memorize and store it. Early on, it was Freire’s insistence that education could be the practice of freedom that encouraged me to create strategies for what he called “conscientization” in the classroom. Translating the term to critical awareness and engagement, I entered the classrooms with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active

participant, not a passive consumer. Education as the practice of freedom was continually undermined by professors who were actively hostile to the notion of student participation. Freire's work affirmed that education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor. (hooks 1994:14)

Here, hooks is detailing the development of her engaged pedagogy and defining one of its foundational aspects as being an inherently critical pedagogy with a goal of liberatory education. This quote also implies engaged pedagogy as inherently sociological. In its recognition for "knowledge as a field in which we all labor," hooks' engaged pedagogy utilizes a sociological lens in highlighting knowledge as situated within a social context. Yet, as she goes on to describe, engaged pedagogy is not solely a critical (and sociological) pedagogy:

In his work Thich Nhat Hanh always speaks of the teacher as a healer. Like Freire, his approach to knowledge called on students to be active participants, to link awareness with practice. Whereas Freire was primarily concerned with the mind, Thich Nhat Hanh offered a way of thinking about pedagogy which emphasized wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spiritual practice. His focus on a holistic approach to learning and spiritual practice enabled me to overcome years of socialization that had taught me to believe a classroom was diminished if students and professors regarded one another as "whole" human beings, striving not just for knowledge in books, but knowledge about how to live in the world. (14-15)

Her engaged pedagogy takes these two pieces – Freire's critical lens and Thich Nhat Hanh's emphasis on wholeness – and joins them together. She positions these two perspectives as complementary, and the combination as necessary for learning. As the opening quote of this section indicates, hooks recognizes that holding respect and care for our students is necessary groundwork for learning to occur. This involves acknowledging our students as "whole" humans, as people with lives and responsibilities outside of the classroom.

Although in some ways a simple tenant, hooks indicates that a commitment to engaged pedagogy requires ongoing effort. She details that this effort includes emphasis on student well-being, and, implicitly, a challenge to some hierarchical power dynamics in the classroom between teachers and students. It additionally requires teachers to practice responsibility for their own well-being:

Progressive, holistic education, "engaged pedagogy" is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively committed to a

process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. Thich Nhat Hanh emphasized that “the practice of a healer, therapist, teacher of any helping professional should be directed toward his or herself first, because if the helper is unhappy, he or she cannot help many people.” (15)

Thus, her engaged pedagogy is a joining of critical and feminist pedagogy with a holistic approach that is grounded in respecting students whole selves (as more than just their role as students), and caring for one’s students as well as one’s self. Engaged pedagogy values the engagement of students in learning and critical thinking, and sees this holistic approach as a necessary component.

Engaged Pedagogy & Ungrading

The framework of Engaged Pedagogy will provide structure to this study’s analysis. The framework is suitable for this project on ungrading in that: **1)** Engaged pedagogy is grounded in the two main benefits of ungrading, as touted by its advocates, and **2)** Engaged pedagogy presents a valuable balance between specificity and flexibility.

To tackle **#1**: As considered in the literature review, the main criticisms about grading that ungrading is touted as responding to are that: grades detract from learning, and that grading is an inherently inequitable practice. Respectively, the main benefits of ungrading are framed as: **A)** putting a focus on learning and **B)** encouraging equity for students in their education.

In regards to point **A**: through hooks’ descriptions of engaged pedagogy, it is clear that a main goal of this pedagogy is meaningful learning. A main tenet of engaged pedagogy is Freire’s emphasis on active learning, critical thinking, and rejection of the banking, transactional model of learning. Freire’s articulation of and call to challenge this “banking model” of education is a cited motivation by many ungraders (see Blum 2020, chapter 7; Stommel 2023). Engaged pedagogy prioritizes learning and critical thinking, and demonstrates critical thinking in praxis by challenging unhelpful hierarchies that don’t serve the purpose of education. Engaged pedagogy relatedly recognizes knowledge as a “field” reflecting implications around epistemology and power.

As a result of its critical lens, engaged pedagogy relatedly rejects a one-size fits all approach to education by meeting the student where they are. It goes further in embracing a holistic view of education that values care and respect for students – as an important aspect of the role of educator

generally, yet, as the quote opening this section indicates, also to help create an environment for meaningful learning. As research shows, students care more about learning when they feel that their teachers care about their overall well-being (Abdullah 2022; Lavy and Naama-Ghanayim 2020).

Also relevant to how engaged pedagogy puts an emphasis on learning is that within engaged pedagogy we can see the rejection of the external motivation that is the main critique of Kohn and other critics of grades. In hooks' descriptions of engaged pedagogy there is no mention of grades or materials or assignments or other external motivators. Her engaged pedagogy implies the cultivation of intrinsic motivation through a pedagogy based on care, connection, and engagement. Thus, a main feature of hooks' engaged pedagogy is its emphasis on learning.

In regards to point **B**: engaged pedagogy's support of equitable education greatly overlaps with the ways in which it emphasizes learning. Its critical lens rejects a one-size-fits-all blueprint of learning that every student is expected to conform to. This is because its critical (and sociological) lens recognizes the unequal power dynamics inherent to one dominant model and that such a blueprint would necessarily reflect the unequal power dynamics of an "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarch[al]" society (hooks 1984/2015), and would perpetuate the privilege of already privileged groups while presenting disproportionate challenges to groups already facing disproportionate challenges.

Instead, engaged pedagogy gives space to different learning styles and meets students where they are in terms of their own learning. The critical lens of engaged pedagogy also recognizes how different roles and facets of student (and teacher) identity reflect and are influenced by the power dynamics within an "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (hooks 1984/2015). In rejecting the one-way transactional (banking) model of education, and instead meeting a student where they are, engaged pedagogy's personalized approach does not disadvantage students who may not easily meet standards - including grading rubrics - set by a culture steeped in social hierarchies and inequalities.

Engaged pedagogy further (and relatedly) reflects the value of equity in education through its holistic emphasis on the whole person, including the value of self-reflection for educators, and recognition that students in our courses have vast and varied lives outside of our courses. Although hooks doesn't use the specific phrasing of an "intersectional pedagogy" in her descriptions of engaged pedagogy, an intersectional lens is clearly present in its holistic, feminist and critical

framework. The catalog of her overall work⁴ stands as a testament to her inherently intersectional approach, and perspective that intersectionality must be a foundation of any critical, feminist framework. We see an intersectional lens in engaged pedagogy's recognition of student's whole selves, including identities of marginalization and their intersections. We can also see a connection between attendance to complex power dynamics and resultant inequalities and experiences of marginalization in engaged pedagogy's challenge to traditional hierarchies of power and control in the classroom.

Just as ungrading is positioned as a way to orient students to learning in its rejection of a one-size-fits-all approach, the framework of Engaged Pedagogy similarly rejects this one-size-fits-all approach to education in emphasizing a pedagogy focused on making space for the "whole" of each student.

To circle back to point #2: that hooks' framework of an Engaged Pedagogy strikes a valuable balance between specificity and flexibility – this is demonstrated in hooks' outline of several key aspects to an engaged pedagogy. These aspects include that engaged pedagogy: contains the value of critical thought found within critical and feminist pedagogies, yet builds upon this with a holistic approach that emphasizes wholeness and care, both towards students and within educators internally. It is important that although she specifies these parameters, she does not give them a specific blueprint. She does not outline exactly how these attributes get built into course materials, course assignments, the course structure, etc. She provides an outline, but not a one-size-fits-all instruction guide. This balance between specificity and flexibility is feminist in its making space for flexibility, variety, change, and growth. This balance provides particular value for this study in lending an apt framework to engage with debates around ungrading as to whether there is "no right way" to do it, or whether it can be "done wrong." Perhaps hooks' framework for an Engaged Pedagogy can make space for, yet also reconcile, these two seemingly antithetical stances.

As one last point, others have cited the relevance of hooks' work to the concept of ungrading, and expressed the need for further consideration of her pedagogy within the practice of ungrading. An entire chapter in ungrading pioneer Jesse Stommel's (2023), "Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop" is dedicated to the consideration of "If bell hooks Made an LMS." Its main conclusion is that she actually wouldn't make an LMS, given her pedagogy's alignment with

⁴ See her "Feminist Theory: from Margin to Center" and "Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism" as just two examples.

“leaving policies, rubrics, grades, assignments, and other bureaucratic minutia at the door” (Stommel 2023: 57). Stommel also asserts that the practice of metacognition that is important to ungrading aligns with hooks’ vision of pedagogy: “Metacognition is a skill that cuts across disciplines. bell hooks advocates for ‘continual self-evaluation’ both of a student by the student and of a teacher by the teacher” (chapter one in Blum 2020: 36-37). In the conclusion to the book that chapter is a part of, editor and author Susan Blum (2020:219) states that:

Though ungrading isn’t necessarily a time-saving approach, nor does it emphasize efficiency, it does tend to lead to both greater learning and more positive relationships. Nobody pretends it’s simple, especially at first. But all agree it’s worth it. As bell hooks put it so forcefully in her essential book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy. She urges us to “think and rethink, so that we can create new visions,” and in so doing, make “education the practice of freedom.”

Furgerson’s (2023) short reflective piece, “Ungrading as Feminist Praxis” additionally positions ungrading as a feminist practice in line with hooks’ vision of pedagogy. Although hooks’ name is less commonly mentioned in (at least mainstream) ungrading circles than others (like Freire and Kohn for example), ungrading’s premise in subverting power dynamics that create inequity should more fully strive to find insight from the work of this Black feminist scholar and educator. Further, as already considered, hooks’ engaged pedagogy is fully aligned with Freire’s rejection of the banking model of education, yet it stands as a further enriched pedagogy in joining Freire’s critical work with the holistic approach of Thich Nhat Hanh – a combination that seamlessly aligns with the main tenants of ungrading. As a brilliant scholar and educator working from a Black feminist framework uniquely positioned to understand the complexities of inequalities and oppressions (and my own personal role model as a teacher!), this study intends to use hooks’ concept of engaged pedagogy –specifically its combination of a critical, feminist pedagogy and a holistic approach centered on wholeness and well-being – as a valuable framework for unpacking the study data and applying it to my research questions.

This framework provides: (1) a conceptualization of pedagogy that aligns with ungrading, (2) relatedly helpful themes for organizing experiences of upgrading, (3) an opportunity to bring students own experiences into the conversations around ungrading as a practice vs. pedagogy, as

well as assertions of ungrading's ability to encourage an equitable, learning focused experience.

Chapter 4: Methods & Data Collection

In order to understand the student experience of ungrading, this project utilized semi-structured interviews conducted over zoom, with professors and students. Interviews were conducted with: 1) educators teaching an undergraduate course (offered by a U.S. college or university) using a self-described approach of “ungrading” in their course and 2) students taking one of these courses in the Spring 2023 semester. Interviews were conducted across the Spring 2023 semester. Interviews first took place with educator participants, and then took place in three waves across the semester with student participants.

In this section, I first provide further detail about how and why the parameters for recruitment were set. I will then highlight how the recruitment of educators and students in their courses was planned. Then, this section will conclude with a detailed trajectory covering how recruitment of educators and students actually went.

Planning Recruitment Parameters

Although ungrading is a pedagogical practice that is utilized across educational levels (K-12, undergraduate, graduate, professional programs, etc.), this study focuses on the practice of ungrading at the undergraduate level. As a teacher of undergraduate courses, I have a personal and practical interest in pedagogical practices within higher education. The focus on undergraduate courses also eliminated the variability of experiences that would exist due to different educational levels.

As considered in the literature review, the limited number of qualitative research studies on the student experience of upgrading have relatively small sample sizes (e.g., Kuhn’s (2020) dissertation with twelve students; Koehler and Meech’s (2022) ethnography with fourteen students; Gorichanaz’ (2022) in-depth interviews with eight students) and a majority is research conducted with students in a single course. In response, my goals for this project were to recruit at least 30 participants from a total of three to five courses. These parameters developed through conversations with my committee members about what seemed both reasonable for recruitment and valuable for sample size.

My recruitment goals were to identify three to five courses/educators teaching undergraduate courses using ungrading practices in the Spring 2023 semester – and to then recruit five to ten student participants from each course. I aimed to target three to five courses specifically, in order to avoid a situation with a greater number of classes, where I would, for example, end up with ten to twelve different courses with two to three students in each. Such a situation would make consideration across experiences difficult to assess adequately, given there would be so many differing contexts to consider (different course environments, different institutions, related student demographics, course subjects and levels, educators, etc.).

After recruiting educators, identifying courses, and then recruiting students in those courses, I planned to interview these students at three points in time across the semester: at the beginning of the course, at midterms, and at the end of the course. As Small and Calarco (2022:47) assert, establishing multiple points of contact with participants in this way is of primary importance for qualitative research:

We have argued that the most important precondition of good qualitative work is exposure, the amount of time the researcher has spent with those interviewed or observed. Exposure does a lot for the researcher, including building rapport with those studied, generating trust, increasing cognitive empathy, and expanding the range of issues about the people or context that the researcher comes to understand.

This was my basic plan for this study: a focus on the U.S. context and undergraduate level, recruit three to five educator participants, focus on three to five of their undergraduate courses (total), recruit five to ten student participants from each course for a total of at least thirty student participants, and interview them in three waves throughout the Spring 2023 semester.

In the brainstorming and planning phases of this project I considered further parameters, like course type, course level, and keeping the demographics of educators consistent (e.g., white women). I also considered what potential parameters might be set to encourage a diverse student sample. I hoped for a student sample that would be diverse in terms of race, gender, class, and ability, given that these aspects of student identity come up the most regarding ungrading, and that many suggestions for future research on the student experience of ungrading emphasize the need for further research with diverse student samples (Hasinoff et al. 2024; Kuhn 2020). Ultimately though, I ended up hesitant to place further parameters; I was concerned that setting further

stipulations would impede my ability to reach my desired sample size of at least 30 student participants.

I had this concern given the relatively low recruitment numbers of other studies similarly conducting qualitative research on the student experience of ungrading. For example, recruitment efforts for Kuhn's (2020) dissertation project on contract grading yielded the recruitment of three educators who shared an interest form with their students (67-68). Of these recruitment efforts, she ended up with only three student participants. She additionally made the effort to recruit some of her own former students, which resulted in an additional nine students, for a total of 12 student participants. As reviewed in the research question section, the majority of other qualitative research on the topic has been conducted by a researcher or researchers that have utilized their current or former students.

Thus, I decided to refrain from adding any further parameters to my recruitment aims beyond seeking educators teaching at U.S. universities and colleges at the undergraduate level that self-identify as using ungrading practices, who would be willing to participate in my study and be willing to assist my efforts to recruit student participants from their courses. My top priority in answering my main research question about the student experience was to meet the goal of thirty student participants.

Planning the Recruitment Process

With these parameters set, the next step in my project was to develop a plan for recruitment. To ultimately find potential student participants in U.S. undergraduate classes using ungrading practices in the Spring 2023 semester, I first needed to find such courses. This would be done through identifying educators using ungrading practices in their courses during this semester. Thus, step one of the recruitment plan was to seek out potential educator participants. Step two of the recruitment plan was to seek out potential student participants from the participating educator's courses.

I first needed to find potential educator participants who met the criteria and who would also be willing to share student recruitment flyers with students in that course (or courses). I wanted to cast a wide-net for educator recruitment. Since my study was open to recruiting participants

across the United States, and because social media is a practical avenue for reaching people nation-wide based upon interests and/or profession (e.g., often via the use of hashtags), this study primarily recruited participants through social media. Given that research has shown that Twitter is a popular virtual space for teachers to form communities, including communities that have developed specifically around the topic of ungrading (Moore, 2021), Twitter became the primary site of focus for recruitment for this project. (I did additionally reach out to a professor who I had previously worked for as a graduate teaching assistant, who used ungrading in her courses. I let her know of my study and asked if she'd be willing to participate and/or be willing to share my flyer with other educators who might be potential participants.)

I created a personal/professional account on Twitter in summer 2022 as a means for potential recruitment. In December 2022 I received approval for this project from my institution's IRB (see Appendix A: IRB Application and Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter). In January 2023, I started my recruitment efforts. The implementation of my recruitment plan yielded an ultimate sample of five educators, six courses (at five institutions), and 38 students total. The details of this recruitment follow.

Recruitment of Educators and Data Collection

The first step of the recruitment was posting on Twitter the recruitment flyer I made for potential educator participants (see Appendix C for this flyer). This recruitment flyer featured the header question, "Do you 'ungrade'?" with the further stipulation that I was looking for educators at the undergraduate level who use practices in their teaching that they identify as "ungrading." I first posted this flyer on January 5th, 2023, with the following text: "Do you 'ungrade'? If so, I would love to hear from you! I am a doctoral student conducting research on ungrading. Please check out my flyer. If interested, take a short survey here [link]" (see screenshot of tweet in Appendix D).

The included link went to a Google Form survey for potentially interested participants to fill out. This survey included questions about how respondents use ungrading in their courses, institutional and department affiliation, the titles of courses they would be teaching and using ungrading in for the Spring 2023 semester, and willingness to share a recruitment flyer with their students. (See survey questions in Appendix E). In this tweet I also included the following hashtags:

#ungrading, #highereducation, #AcademicTwitter. After my original tweet posted on January 5th, 2023, I re-tweeted this posting as a quote tweet on January 10, 2023, with the text “Will you be ‘ungrading’ this semester? If so, I’d still love to hear from you! Please check out my flyer about my research on #ungrading. Thanks!” (See screenshot of re-tweet in Appendix D). From these tweets, I received a total of 19 educator responses to my Google Forms survey. I received the first responses on January 5th, 2023, and the last response on January 19th, 2023. Of these 19 responses, four were not viable to move forward in the study based upon their responses to the Google survey.

Of these four, one indicated on the survey that they would not be willing to share flyers with their students for potential participation, and another indicated that they would be on leave for the Spring 2023 semester. Neither of these respondents provided their email address for follow-up. A third indicated that they were no longer teaching and had moved to another career. The fourth indicated that they were teaching at an institution that does not assign grades at all.⁵ I followed up with this respondent to thank them for their response and inform them of the decision to not use courses at institutions with no grades at all. With these four educators not viable to move forward, this left a remaining viable sample of 15 potential educator participants.

I followed up via email with each of those 15 potential educator participants. I sent them my “Informational Sheet for Participation in a Research Study” sheet, created as a consent form following my institution's IRB protocol (see Appendix H). I asked them to review that sheet, and to let me know whether they agreed to the parameters of the study and whether they wished to move forward with participation. For participants that I did not receive a response from within 7-10 days, I re-sent this email to them.

I received one response from an educator who indicated that they decided not to move forward, as their courses were already involved in a research project that semester, and they did not want to overwhelm their students. Two respondents never followed up to my initial email or reminder email. With these additional three not moving forward, this left a remaining 12 potential educator participants.

Those remaining 12 educators responded to the informational sheet provided, and confirmed their willingness to move forward with their participation. Although the main focus of my

⁵ I did not include this educator in my project, assuming that students seeking out such a college experience would be a specific demographic that was seeking out this type of educational context. I was more interested in the majority of ungrading practices, which seem to be taken on by educators in larger institutions that do require ultimate course grades.

study is the student experience, I felt it important to also interview the educators. Thus, my next step was to set up an interview with those educators and to also ask them to share the student recruitment flyer with students in their eligible courses. One of these 12 educators did not follow up with me about scheduling an interview date. I do not know whether they shared the student recruitment flyer with their students; however, I did not receive any responses from students in their courses. Thus, they ultimately did not move forward with participation. Another educator scheduled a tentative interview date with me, yet this interview did not end up happening. I did receive responses from four of this educator's students in the Spring 2023 semester; however, I did not pursue the inclusion of these students⁶ in my study.

The remaining ten educators did schedule and complete an interview with me during January and February 2023. The interview focused on the educator's path to learning about ungrading, their experiences with implementation, and general observations about using ungrading. See Appendix I for the full semi-structured interview protocol used. The findings of these interviews will be discussed in the Results section.

Recruitment of Students and Data Collection

As mentioned in the previous section, I ended up recruiting 11 educator participants who scheduled an interview with me, and I ultimately conducted interviews with 10 of those educators. In January 2023, in my communication with these 11 educators to set up an interview, I also provided them with a flyer to share with their students. I asked the educator participants to share my flyer with the students in their ungraded courses. See Appendix F for the student flyer.

This student recruitment flyer stipulated my interest in talking with students in courses using ungrading (with the provision that they were receiving the flyer through the course using ungrading) and also provided a link to a Google Forms survey for potentially interested student participants to fill out. This questionnaire asked students to identify the course they received the flyer in, whether they were familiar with ungrading, and optional demographic questions like year in school, major,

⁶ This was partially because I wanted to have an interview with the educator of the courses that I would be speaking with students from. Additionally, these four student respondents were in three different courses: two students were in the same course, and two students were the only student respondents in the course that they were in. As I will discuss further in the section on student recruitment, I did not pursue interviews with students in courses that I received less than five student responses from.

race, gender, and first generation status. See survey questions in Appendix G. This flyer also stipulated that student participants would receive compensation to complete this study: a total of \$60 for three interviews, with \$15 provided for each interview, and a bonus \$15 for completing all three. This compensation was provided with the goal of encouraging student participation and reimbursing them for their time, especially given my concern about meeting my goal participant numbers.

Of the 11 educator participants, I received Google form responses from students in nine of the educators' courses. From January to early February 2023, I received responses from a total of 85 students. In March, I received six additional responses from students⁷, for a total of 91 student responses. See Table 4.1 for the breakdown of responses, broken down by those 11 educators. The "courses" column indicates how many courses taught by that educator received student responses, and the last column indicates how many students responded in each course.

⁷ These responses were from students at an institution that operated on a quarterly instead of semester based schedule. The course they received the flyer in started in March instead of January/February like the other courses in the sample.

Table 4.1: Student Responses, Broken down by Educator & Course

Educator	Courses	Student Responses
1	1	19
2	0	0
3	1	10
	2	2
	3	2
4	1	21
5	1	12
6	1	1
	2	1
	3	1
7	1	2
8	1	6
	2	4*
9	0	0
10	1	3
	2	2
		1**
11***	1	2
	2	2
TOTAL		91

*Two of these students were also in the course listed above, with the same educator. For the sake of tallying total students, they were not included in that above number.

** This student did not provide the title of the course in which they received the flyer.

*** An interview with this educator was not completed.

As indicated in Table 4.1, I did not receive any student responses from students of two educators (educator 2 and 9). My goal to seek at least five participants in each course was not met by four educators' courses (educator 6, 7, 10, and 11). This left five educators that did yield at least five potential participants: 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8 in Table 4.1. I thus moved forward with these educators and their courses. I also decided to include both courses taught by educator 8. Even though their second course received only four responses, I decided to include this course, given that there were students who were enrolled in both courses, and that both courses were taught by the same

educator. Thus my recruitment efforts ultimately resulted in the participation of five educators, at five schools, and a total of six courses.

As per the email address provided by students in the Google Forms questionnaire, I followed up via email with the students in these six courses. I sent them my “Informational Sheet for Participation in a Research Study” sheet, created as a consent form following my institution's IRB protocol (see Appendix J). I asked them to review that sheet, and to let me know whether they agreed to the parameters of the study and whether they wished to move forward with participation. If they agreed to move forward, I asked them to schedule an interview with me. For participants I did not receive a response from within 7-10 days, I re-sent this email to them. If I did not receive an email response after the second email reminder, I considered these students to be no longer interested. The result was 38 students signing up for an interview with me for round one of interviews. The breakdown of this by educator and course is detailed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2: Student Participants, Broken down by Educator & Course

Educator	Courses	Student Responses	Student Participants
1	1	19	6
3	1	10	8
4	1	21	13
5	1	12	4
8	1	6	5*
	2	4	4*
TOTAL		91	38

*Two students were enrolled in both courses. These two students were included in the number of student participants listed here per course but were only counted each once for the total number of students (which was 38).

Round one of interviews with students were conducted towards the beginning of the semester, in January and February of 2023. Round two of interviews was then set up and conducted towards the middle of the semester, from March to early April, 2023. The final round of interviews with students, round three, was then set up and conducted once the semester was over, from mid-May to early June, 2023. Table 4.3 details the retention of students across these three waves.

Table 4.3: Student Participants, and Retention Across Three Waves

Educator	Courses	Student Participants for Interview #1	Student Participants for Interview #2	Student Participants for Interview #3
1	1	6	5	4
3	1	8	6	3
4	1	13	11	10
5	1	4	4	4
8	1	5*	5*	5*
	2	4*	4*	4*
TOTAL		38	33	28

*Two students were enrolled in both courses. These two students were included in the number of student participants listed here per course but were only counted each once for the total number of students.

Analytic Cases

Participant Demographics

Overall, my data collection resulted in interviews with a total of 38 students, across six courses, at five institutions. Three rounds of interviews were conducted: one at the beginning, one in the middle, and one at the end of the semester. In the first round, 38 students participated, in the second round, 33 of those students participated, and in the third round, 28 of those students participated, for a total of 99 student interviews.

Of the six courses, two of the courses were at the same institution and taught by the same professor, for a total of five professors. For the sake of distinction moving forward, I will refer to the five institutions as Institution A, Institution B, etc., up through Institution E. Each educator will correspondingly be referred to as Professor A, Professor B, etc. Professor E was the professor who taught two courses in my study, and those courses will be referred to as course Ei and course Eii. This breakdown, as well as the number of student participants in each category is depicted below, in Table 4.3. Table 4.4 depicts the breakdown of these same student participants by race and gender.

Institution	Professor	Course	Number of Student Participants
Institution A	Professor A	Course A	6
Institution B	Professor B	Course B	4
Institution C	Professor C	Course C	13
Institution D	Professor D	Course D	8
Institution E	Professor E	Course Ei	3
		Course Eii	2
		Both Course Ei and Eii	2

Table 4.3: Student participant breakdown by institution, professor, and course.

Gender of Student Participants	Race of Student Participants	Gender & Race of Student Participants																																								
<table border="1"> <tr> <td>women</td> <td>24</td> </tr> <tr> <td>men</td> <td>9</td> </tr> <tr> <td>non-binary</td> <td>5</td> </tr> </table>	women	24	men	9	non-binary	5	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>white</td> <td>18</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Asian</td> <td>12</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hispanic /Latinx</td> <td>5</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Black</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Middle Eastern</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Pacific Islander</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </table>	white	18	Asian	12	Hispanic /Latinx	5	Black	1	Middle Eastern	1	Pacific Islander	1	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>white women</td> <td>10</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Asian women</td> <td>7</td> </tr> <tr> <td>white men</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hispanic/Latina women</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Asian men</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>white non-binary</td> <td>4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Black woman</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Middle Eastern woman</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Pacific Islander woman</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Hispanic/Latino man</td> <td>1</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Asian non-binary</td> <td>1</td> </tr> </table>	white women	10	Asian women	7	white men	4	Hispanic/Latina women	4	Asian men	4	white non-binary	4	Black woman	1	Middle Eastern woman	1	Pacific Islander woman	1	Hispanic/Latino man	1	Asian non-binary	1
women	24																																									
men	9																																									
non-binary	5																																									
white	18																																									
Asian	12																																									
Hispanic /Latinx	5																																									
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Middle Eastern	1																																									
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Asian men	4																																									
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Black woman	1																																									
Middle Eastern woman	1																																									
Pacific Islander woman	1																																									
Hispanic/Latino man	1																																									
Asian non-binary	1																																									

Table 4.4: Student participant breakdown by gender, race, and gender and race. These categorizations are based upon participants' responses to questions about gender and race on the pre-screening survey and in our

interviews. Some students listed “female” in their response for gender; those students were categorized as women in this chart. Some students provided multiple responses for race, for example “Asian-American/Bengali- Muslim” and “Chinese and Filipino”; these responses were categorized in the relevant categories above. Table 4.5 and Table 4.7 convey the specific, individual responses of participants.

Selection of Analytic Cases

In his book *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, Patton (2001:24) states, “There are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources.” In consideration for the entirety of my 109 interviews (99 with students and 10 with educators), it retrospectively became clear that a purposeful sampling approach would be both valuable and practical in moving forward with an analysis of my data. Having conducted my interviews, it was clear that certain cases would be more information rich for my project than others. Patton’s purposeful sampling strategy helped to identify “information rich cases” in my sample that would be most valuable for my project. Furthermore, given my time and resources, this selection helped me to be more efficient with my work.

Patton’s purposeful sampling focuses on selecting “information rich cases,” or in other words, “those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (2001:230). As he details, “studying information rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations,” thus, “what would be ‘bias’ in statistical sampling, and therefore a weakness, becomes intended focus in qualitative sampling, and therefore a strength” (2001:230). In the chapter “Qualitative Designs and Data Collection” Patton outlines 15 purposeful sampling strategies, with a 16th strategy that involves combinations of those 15.

My case selection process utilized the combination approach, using both intensity sampling and criterion sampling. With intensity sampling, “one seeks excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest,” and requires that “the researcher or evaluator must do some exploratory work to determine the nature of the variation in the situation under study, [to] then sample intense examples of the phenomenon of interest” (Patton 2001:234). With criterion sampling, “the logic of criterion sampling is to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton 2001:238). I consider my interview process with all 38 students exploratory

work in that it was going through that process that revealed relevant information to my selection, such as which students experienced difficulty with ungrading and which students disclosed being neurodivergent.

Using these approaches yielded a sample of 16 students. I will detail the process of this selection shortly, but would first like to provide a summary of these students to refer to. Table 4.5 shows the breakdown of these 16 students by institution, professor, and course. This table also includes demographic information for these selected cases, based upon information provided by the participants from a pre-screening survey and/or through the interview process. Table 4.6 provides a breakdown of this same group, by race and gender. Sixteen of these students completed all three rounds of interviews. Student D1 was the only student who did not complete all three rounds; he completed only the first interview. Thus, this sample yields a total of 46 interviews.

Institution A	Professor A	Course A	A1: male, white, middle class-upper middle class, first generation college student, ADHD A2: female, white, middle class, ADHD A3: female, African-American, lower class, first generation college student A4: female, Hispanic/Latina, household income is around \$65,000, first generation college student, dad is immigrant from Mexico
Institution B	Professor B	Course B	B1: female, Middle Eastern, middle class, negative experience with ungrading B2: nonbinary, "pale person" (race), lackluster (socioeconomic background), negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade B3: female, white, middle class, parents from Cuba, negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade
Institution C	Professor C	Course C	C1: female, Chinese and Filipino, middle class, negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade C2: male, Asian, "average-good" (socioeconomic background), international student from India/UAE, ADHD C3: female, Latina, middle class, first generation college student, dad is immigrant from Mexico

			C4: male, Asian, middle class, parents are immigrants, first generation college student C5: male, Hispanic, low middle class, first generation college student
Institution D	Professor D	Course D	D1: male, white, middle class, autism spectrum
Institution E	Professor E	Course Ei	E1: cis woman, white, upper class, unhappy with final grade
		Course Eii	E3: cis woman, Multi-racial Latinx, low income, international student from Brazil, first generation US college student
		Both Course Ei and Eii	E2: nonbinary, Asian-American/Bengali-Muslim, low-income, first generation college student, ADHD

Table 4.5: Selection of analytic cases, with demographics, broken down by institution, professor, and course.

3 white women students	1 Asian woman student	3 Hispanic/Latina women students	1 Black woman student	1 Middle Eastern woman student
3 white men students	2 Asian men students	1 Hispanic/Latino man student		
1 white nonbinary student	1 Asian nonbinary student			

Table 4.6: Selection of analytic cases, broken down by race and gender. Like Table 4.4, students' individual responses have been categorized into these categories.

Next, I will discuss how intensity sampling and criterion sampling led to the selection of this group.

Intensity Sampling

Intensity sampling provided me the opportunity to utilize the cases that provided particularly rich data towards my research questions. As considered in my literature review, a lot of

the coverage I encountered on the student experience of ungrading came from the perspective of the educator, and/or was research conducted by the educator with their current/previous students. The majority of all this coverage focused on positive student experiences. In my interviews, I spoke with some students who had negative experiences with ungrading. Although these experiences were in the minority across my 38 student participants, as Patton clarified about purposeful sampling, the goal is not “empirical generalization,” but the insight that “information rich cases” can provide to addressing the research questions and to more effectively uncover the contours of the lived experience of students in these classes.

It is with this caveat in mind that I selected students who did not have positive experiences in their ungraded course. These cases can not only provide perspectives that have not been a focal point for most of the literature on ungrading, they could also provide practical insight for educators wanting to adopt or improve the use of ungrading in their own courses. These student cases revolved around two subsets: (1) students who had an overall negative experience of ungrading, and (2) students were not happy with and did not agree with their final grade. As shown in Table 4.5 these students are: B1, B2, B3, C1, and E1.

Out of the six courses in my study, one course, Course B, disproportionately yielded these negative experiences. Four students from this course participated in my study. Three of those four students had an overall negative experience in that course. One of those students so strongly disagreed with their final grade in the course that they took efforts to appeal that grade. In Course C, one student who participated in all three rounds of interviews had a consistently, progressively negative experience in the course, and strongly disagreed with her final grade in the course. In course E1, one student had many positive experiences, yet encountered multiple frustrations with the assessments in the course, including unhappiness with the instructor’s determination of her final grade. Patton’s intensity sampling approach led me to include these five students in my ultimate sample given that their experiences provide valuable information that has largely been lacking in regards to the student experience of ungrading.

Criterion Sampling

In regards to my use of criterion sampling, one main aspect of my research questions is to address whether student social location impacts the student experience of ungrading. As considered

in my literature review, while advocates of ungrading frame it as a more equitable alternative to grading, others have questioned these claims of equity, especially for students with marginalized identities in terms of race, class, gender, and ability. Specifically, questions have been posed about the equity for non-white and especially Black students, first generation students, students from working class or limited income families, and students with disabilities, particularly neurodivergent students. When iterations of ungrading include student self-evaluation, the concern has also been raised that race and gender may impact this process, with white men feeling more comfortable with ranking themselves more highly than other groups.

The 38 students in my study provided the opportunity to consider some of these aspects of student social location. As shown in Table 4.4 , the 38 student participants showed some diversity with gender and race, with the three groups most represented being white women (10 students), Asian women (7 students), and white men (5 students). Of the total 38 students, seven identified as first generation college students, six identified as “lower class” or low-income⁸ (six chose not to disclose class information), and five identified as neurodivergent. Thus, this sample as a whole provides a variety of potential angles to consider in terms of student social location. Yet, given my intention to utilize purposeful sampling, and the criterion and intensity sampling approaches specifically, two groups that stood out as “information rich” for my study were the neurodivergent group and the group of first generation college students.

In regards to neurodivergent students, when it comes to student social location and questions of equity with the practice of ungrading, neurodivergent students have been specifically identified as one group for whom the practice of ungrading may harm, instead of help (Carrillo, 2021; Kryger and Zimmerman 2020). As Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) detail, the challenge of breaking out of normalized grading structures can be particularly harmful to these students:

Students become accustomed to the rhythm of these activity systems, and this includes internalized understandings of how to labor in ways recognized as academic performance, how that performance is valorized, and how grades are the primary currency exchanged with the broader academic ecology. When we remove these expedited systems, we automatically require students to adapt, to (re)orient ... Yet

⁸ I am aware that a term like “lower class” has pejorative connotations, and thus is not one that I would use to describe others. This term is used here, however, because I am utilizing the terminology that some students used to describe themselves. Of these six students, the terminology they specifically used to described their sociological status were: “lower class,” “lackluster,” “low middle class,” “low-income” and “low income.” Table 4.5 details these responses.

cognitive dissonance can only be 'productive' if it is transformed or directed into positive action ... for neurodivergent students, the converse is often true: The dissonance can stymie growth by trapping students in unfamiliar and unnavigable territory. (6)

Even proponents of ungrading for neurodivergent students caution that ungrading must be practiced with consistent intentionality in order to support these students. For example, while Weingath (2021) argues that ungrading can foster equity for neurodivergent students in its rejection of a one-size fits all model, he also argues that:

...if you want to do inclusive #ungrading to help your students with learning differences, neurodiversity, or whatever other label helps them identify their years of marginalization at the hands of the educational system, then I have some advice for you: dismantle everything you think you understand, and be prepared to build it from the ground up by learning not about the interventions and strategies, but about the students' individual ways of compensating in an exclusionary system, and how that system contextualizes their entire experience up until your classroom.

As this quote highlights, in order to enact ungrading as a potentially equitable practice, one must put in a great deal of work beyond just learning about the "interventions and strategies" of ungrading. Similarly, Jesse Stommel - staunch advocate of ungrading and credited with coining the term itself - also cautions to teachers ungrading:

... don't replace visible goalposts with invisible ones. To the extent that we can remove (or decenter) grades, we have to be sure we aren't just shifting the goalposts for students, replacing clear policies with "hidden curriculum." The problem of removing grades without changing any of our other pedagogies is not that we end up removing the ground underneath students' feet... Grades are not and have never been a stable or supportive ground beneath students' feet. But we can't simply remove grades without actively interrogating our own biases and the structures of privilege that grades enable and reinforce. (2023b:28)

Even though Stommel is not here specifying the experience of neurodivergent students, he is similarly considering the potential problems of removing "visible goalposts" for students as expressed by Kryger and Zimmerman (2020). Similar to Weingath, he calls out the critical, yet difficult responsibility of ungraders to engage in work well beyond the practice of ungrading alone, and to "actively interrogat[e] our own biases and the structure of privilege that grades enable and reinforce," in order for ungrading to be able to function as an equitable practice. Thus, hearing from

neurodivergent students directly about their experience in an ungraded classroom would be a valuable contribution to discussions around ungrading, social location, and equity. The five students in my study who disclosed being neurodivergent as shown in Table 4.5 are: A1, A2, C2, D1, and E2.

Purposeful sampling also led me to select students who were first generation college students. Like neurodivergent students, these students may similarly be impacted by the removal of normalized grading practices. As reported from Talbert 2022, “ungrading might unwittingly contribute to equity gaps,” in that it “may take away the guideposts that learners from less privileged backgrounds might need as they navigate college courses,” stating “it’s as if someone took away all the signs in an airport in a foreign country and then dropped a nonnative-language speaker into it.” Thus similar to questions around equity in ungrading for neurodivergent students, first generation college students may also be disproportionately harmed by ungrading in that they also face greater obstacles in adjusting to the unfamiliar role and experiences of being a college student. As shown in Table 4.5 there were seven student participants who identified as first generation college students: A1, A3, A4, C3, C4, C5, and E2. An eighth student, student E3, expressed that she is not technically a first generation college student, because her mother attended college in Brazil as an adult when she was 35, yet I included this student as a first generation U.S. college student because she did talk about how different the cultural contexts are, and how being a first generation college student in the United States required a great deal of adjustment and figuring things out on her own. Thus, purposeful sampling led me to include these eight students.

In looking at the demographics of the eight first generation students in my sample, seven of these students are not white, four of these students identified as coming from a working class or limited income background, and three have a parent or parents who are immigrants. Thus, several students in this first generation group have multiple social locations that may pose challenges in adjusting to college that their peers do not have. Therefore, students in this group may be especially vulnerable to ungrading’s potential to “take away the guideposts that learners from less privileged backgrounds might need.” This group of students, then, provides rich insight regarding ungrading, the student experience, and student social location. As researchers Hasinoff et al. have asserted, “future research on [ungrading] would benefit from larger and representative samples to address lingering questions about ungrading and equity, especially with respect to the experiences of first-generation students, students with disabilities, students of color, and students of different

genders” (2024: 13). By focusing on first generation students and neurodivergent students, I have strived to amplify these needed voices.

These groups—students who had negative experiences with ungrading, neurodivergent students, and first generation college students—came to a total of 16 students. In Table 4.5 these students are shown in a breakdown by institution, professor, and course. In Table 4.7 these students are shown in a breakdown by their selection criteria (negative experiences with ungrading, neurodivergent students, and first generation college students), and relevant overlapping identities (students from working class or limited income backgrounds, students with an immigrant parent or parents, and international students).

<p>Negative Experiences</p>	<p>B1: female, Middle Eastern, middle class, negative experience with ungrading B2: nonbinary, “pale person” (race), lackluster (socioeconomic background), negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade B3: female, white, middle class, parents from Cuba, negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade C1: female, Chinese and Filipino, middle class, negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade E1: cis woman, white, upper class, unhappy with final grade</p>
<p>Neurodivergent</p>	<p>A1: male, white, middle class-upper middle class, first generation college student, ADHD A2: female, white, middle class, ADHD C2: male, Asian, “average-good” (socioeconomic background), international student from India/UAE, ADHD D1: male, white, middle class, autism spectrum E2: nonbinary, Asian-American/Bengali-Muslim, low-income, first generation college student, ADHD</p>
<p>First Generation College Student</p>	<p>A1: male, white, middle class-upper middle class, first generation college student, ADHD A3: female, African-American, lower class, first generation college student A4: female, Hispanic/Latina, household income is around \$65,000, first generation college student, dad is immigrant from Mexico C3: female, Latina, middle class, first generation college student, dad is immigrant from Mexico C4: male, Asian, middle class, parents are immigrants, first generation college student C5: male, Hispanic, low middle class, first generation college student E2: nonbinary, Asian-American/Bengali-Muslim, low-income, first generation college student, ADHD</p>

	E3: cis woman, Multi-racial Latinx, low income, international student from Brazil, first generation US college student
Working Class/Limited income	A3: female, African-American, lower class, first generation college student B2: nonbinary, “pale person” (race), lackluster (socioeconomic background), negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade C5: male, Hispanic, low middle class, first generation college student E2: nonbinary, Asian-American/Bengali-Muslim, low-income, first generation college student, ADHD E3: cis woman, Multi-racial Latinx, low income, international student from Brazil, first generation US college student
Parents are Immigrants	A4: female, Hispanic/Latina, household income is around \$65,000, first generation college student, dad is immigrant from Mexico B3: female, white, middle class, parents from Cuba, negative experience with ungrading and unhappy with final grade C3: female, Latina, middle class, first generation college student, dad is immigrant from Mexico C4: male, Asian, middle class, parents are immigrants, first generation college student
International Student	C2: male, Asian, “average-good” (socioeconomic background), international student from India/UAE, ADHD E3: cis woman, Multi-racial Latinx, low income, international student from Brazil, first generation US college student

Table 4.7: Selection of analytic cases, with demographics, broken down by selection criteria and relevant identities. For the listing of race, class, and gender in this table, the participants’ responses (either from the prescreening survey or in the interviews) to questions about their race, class, and gender are replicated verbatim.

The last point here that I would like to make is that I additionally perceive this use of the purposeful sampling approach in my project as aligning with my methodological use of the critical and feminist pedagogical philosophy of bell hooks. As considered in an earlier section, bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy is the result of her bringing together the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire and the holistic pedagogy of Thích Nhất Hạnh within her Black feminist lens. The holistic piece invites students to bring their entire selves to the classroom and asks us educators to acknowledge students’ multifaceted lives and identities. The Black feminist perspective inherently recognizes the importance of understanding social identity through a three-dimensional lens, including the experience of intersecting axes of marginalization, or “intersectionality” (for just a few examples, see Collins 2009; Combahee River Collective 1977; Crenshaw 1989; Davis 1983; hooks 2015). As the Black feminist tradition is situated to appreciate, the stories and experiences at those intersections

are both particularly important to understanding issues of equity, yet also the most likely to go unheard.

From my group of 38 student participants, I have used purposeful sampling, as detailed, to come away with a sample of the 16 students from that group who either have felt disadvantaged by ungrading, or who have been identified in other literature as most likely to encounter difficulties with ungrading. Or, in other words, I have selected from my 38 student participants the stories and experiences most important to understanding equity and inequity in ungrading, and also the voices which have so far gone largely unheard. I appreciate the participation and engagement of all my participants, and learned a lot throughout all of my interviews. Yet, in terms of those students who were not selected for analysis, I do not perceive that their inclusion would substantially enhance my analyses related to the dissertation's core research questions. Thus, it is with the experiences of these 16 students, across the span of a semester, and 46 interviews, that I moved forward with my analysis.

Chapter 5: Results

In this results section, my data is reported in five sections: Sections A, B, C, D, and E. Each section begins with a brief review of the corresponding institution, then reports the data from my interview with the corresponding educator, and then reports the data from each of the students in my sample from that institution. As detailed in the previous section, “Selection of Analytic Cases,” my ultimate sample comprises 16 students: 4 students from Institution A, 3 students from Institution B, 5 students from Institution C, 1 student from Institution D, and 3 students from Institution E. The results reported here are detailed. This results section includes many quotes, including many long, block quotes. The intent was to provide thorough detail, and to present much of the student experience from the students’ own words first, before condensing these experiences into themes in the analysis section, which follows these results.

Group A: Institution, Course, Professor, & Students

Institution A

Institution A is a public institution. According to U.S. News (at <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges> in April 2025), Institution A has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 10,000 students. Of that enrollment, approximately 60% are listed as female students and approximately 40% are listed as male students. The website reports a 22% minority enrollment with the five largest groups in terms of race and ethnicity as follows: white, Hispanic, Black, two or more races, and American Indian. U.S. News also reports that this college has an 86% acceptance rate and a 16:1 student-faculty ratio.

Course A

Course A is a 200-level general education course offered from Institution A’s English Department. The course description from Institution A’s website describes the course as research-based and focused on writing. Course A has one prerequisite course: Course A is the second course in a sequence of two.

Course A Syllabus: Assignments & Ungrading

The syllabus for Course A lists five assignment types: (1) major assignments (there are six), (2) process assignments (there are eight), (3) reflections, (4) a meeting with the professor, (5) regular in-class writing assignments. There is a heading in the syllabus titled “Course Structure,” which breaks the course down into four distinct units.

The syllabus includes an entry which considers the grading setup in Course A. It provides an overview of how assignments will be assessed. It reads:

The semester, you will not receive grades on individual assignments. There will be no points, no pluses or minuses, no checks or check-pluses.

Instead, you’ll do the work. If you do all the work in the “A in the class” row in the chart below, you’ll get an A in this class. If you miss a couple of things, you can see that you’ll earn a B, per the “B in the class” row. And there are options for “C” and “F” grades in the class.

The goal of the process grade agreement (often called “labor based contract grading,” or just “contract grading”) is that there are no surprises. You do things in this class and you earn a grade. Learning happens because of your regular involvement and writing, not because of a number at the top of your paper. You must meet minimum requirements for each assignment listed on the assignment sheets provided in class and on Canvas to earn credit. If minimum requirements are not met, you will not earn credit for that assignment. You will receive feedback from me on every process and major writing assignment; a lack of a number grade does not mean a lack of meaningful feedback on your work. If something comes up during the semester, I reserve the right to modify this grading scheme as I see fit.

This explanation of the grading setup in the course is followed by a chart which lists out what is required for each grade in the course. It lists the minimum number of assignments in each category that need to be completed for each grade. There are five bullet points in each grade bracket, corresponding with each of the five assignment types, providing this minimum number of assignments required for each.

Professor A

Professor A, Course A, & Pedagogy

Professor A identifies herself as a queer, white, non-disabled cis woman. She described her socioeconomic background as working class, and her socioeconomic standing at the time of our

interview as upper middle class. Professor A was a first generation college student. At the time of our interview, Professor A was in her sixth year as a full time instructor.

When I asked about her pedagogy, she shared how it has changed over time. Specifically, she was able to mark a significant distinction between her pedagogy before coming to work at Institution A, and after coming to work at Institution A:

Definitely has changed. I think now, my teaching philosophy is: everyone is a writer with wonderful important things to say. And most people are curious and engaged and interested in things. And my job is to push them to tap into those things, and remove barriers to that. So for me, grades were a barrier. And I think as I've gotten more confident in my teaching, and in myself, and as I've gotten further away from their age, I felt able to be sort of reactive in a positive way, grasping what students need, and what classes need and having a humane workload.

She goes on to pinpoint multiple aspects of her life which ultimately shifted her pedagogy to this current state:

Meeting my spouse and getting married, so splitting the house load and financial burden. And just maturing, and going to therapy a lot, and sort of working on myself has sort of gotten me here. But, my first few years, I was Professor hard ass, grading to the decimal point, like you will respect me. I was very, very different. And so I had a big shift, pretty much, when COVID hit. It hit, I also got this job...I moved across the state. And so it was this whole, oh, it's like fresh start o'clock. And I had time to read pedagogy books. And so it's really been- It feels very cleaved, my time before and after, starting to work here.

Thus, she describes feeling that her pedagogy has two distinct time frames: before her job at Institution A and after starting her job at Institution A. She attributes this to many factors including maturity, marriage, therapy, and COVID.

As she went on in our interview, she further detailed how this shift in pedagogy relates to shifts in her personal life. She said that she was in therapy, and was making changes to her daily life and schedule so that: "I had time to exercise, and I had time for pleasure, and I had time to cook meals that I wanted to eat." She said that these changes, and her work in therapy helped her change her relationship with teaching. She explained:

It felt very much like I was able to emotionally distance myself from my teaching in a way that was healthy. So, if a student doesn't turn something in or is sleeping in class or something, I'm not angry at them. Because it's not a reflection of our relationship, or my worth as a teacher.

Thus, these changes encouraged her to gain a new perspective on her role as a teacher, and to “emotionally distance” herself from that role in a way in which she was not responding to students’ behavior personally, or as a reflection of her “worth as a teacher.”

Alongside this, was the COVID-19 pandemic. The personal work that she was doing was already impacting her understanding of her own role as a teacher, and the pandemic further gave her the push to reflect more on her pedagogy and teaching style. She started working at Institution A in Fall 2020 and said this also gave her “access to university library for the first time in years.” She took advantage of this resource and said:

I was just like, let's learn about teaching. And so Peter Elbow proposed the "B contract" in the 80s or 90s. I was just making my way through comp pedagogy books. And so that was probably the first time I encountered labor based contract grading or what, process based contract reading. And then Susan Blum, her book came out right around the same time. And I saw everyone on, I think it's about the same time I got on academic Twitter...I was connecting with PhD students at [institution she attended for higher education] who were having these conversations too, on Twitter. And so I read Blum's book.

So between her own research on assessment, seeing related conversation on Twitter, and reading Susan Blum’s book on ungrading, she became more interested in contract grading. She went to the director of her program next spring. She said: “And then that spring, I met with the director of the composition program, and I was like, hey, I want to do this in the fall. Is that okay? Will you stand behind me, essentially?” The director expressed that he would support her use of contract grading in her classes, and also expressed an interest in the format himself.

After having this conversation with the program director, she implemented contract grading into her classes that next semester:

I started doing contract grading in fall 2021. And the framework of it was like a process agreement. Because that's sort of how I set it up in my class, it was completes, incompletes. Completes are for meeting minimum requirements. You do X amount of work you get Y grade. Not a process, as in time, but a process as in output. Not a quality measure.

Thus, the contract grading that she set up in her class, as reflected in the syllabus for Course A, is based upon assessments that find an assignment as either “complete” or “incomplete.” She went on to say about this course setup that she presented it early to students in the semester, providing the

parameters of what would be needed to earn a certain final grade. She said that most of the time students will aim for an A at the beginning of the semester, although she does not have them communicate what grade they are aiming for, to her. In our interview, she said that she checks in with students several times during the semester, to let them know individually what grade bracket they are currently in, and what they need to do in the course to maintain that level.

Since she had been using ungrading practices in her courses since Fall 2021, I asked her what has led her to continue using them in her courses. She explained:

It definitely lowers the tenor of anxiety in the room. From students, and me. And I don't feel resentful of grading anymore. It doesn't feel like a power struggle at all between us anymore. It feels like I can be a collaborator and a cheerleader and a coach, and an encourager. And that I'm not, I'm not deciding between 92 and 94.

Here, she identifies that not having to deal with the traditional grading scale, and for example to decide “between 92 and 94” on a graded assignment, lowers her anxiety. She also ties this into feeling that she can be a collaborator in the classroom. Regarding the impact of ungrading on her role as a teacher, she went on to express the perception that it minimizes teacher bias:

We don't love all of our students equally. I feel like ungrading removes that, from even me having to think about it. Because when I was teaching with points, it's like, oh, man, this student is so disrespectful to me. Well, I can't think about that right now, you're grading their paper. You have to be fair and, okay, well, let me go back and see, this student had the same problem and I gave them a 12 out of 15 on the rubric, so I have to give this student-like the negotiation took so much time to make sure that implementing points was fair.

This negotiation that she refers to is one that she feels she no longer has to deal with, due to her shift in grading practices. Thus, she here links her use of contract grading to a more fair system of assessment, and one that can minimize, if not eliminate teacher bias in assessment. Instead of having to worry if she docked a few extra points on a student's assignment due to that student having been rude to her, she only has to ascertain whether the student completed the assignment or not.

She relatedly expressed that her ungrading structure has made assessment more equitable for students in other ways. She explained:

So I think that if you look at our learning outcomes for composition, the thing that we're supposed to be doing is having students write and improve their writing. So if a student starts with not understanding what a paragraph does, and they end with understanding what a paragraph does, that student has improved their writing and their writing style.

She used this as a preface to distinguish between experiences with two sets of demographically different students that she was teaching simultaneously at two different institutions. For her, this experience highlighted why the goal of individual student improvement is important. She described the difference between the students at these two institutions:

So in [Institution #1], I had students who were 19 to 24, came from underfunded high schools, like I did as a student. First gen, like I was as a student. Almost no college prep. Really, really not sure what was going on. And then in [Institution #2], I had prep school kids who lived on the lake, and they were getting dual enrollment credit, so that they can go to [College Name], or wherever. And I was teaching the same classes on both campuses. I had the same assignments and the same rubrics. So I was just like, wow, this group of students overwhelmingly, coming into and out of my class will get an A no matter what I do. They don't have to learn anything to ace this class. Versus this group of students could struggle, and learn, and do the whole thing, and they're gonna get at best a C in this class. And that just felt really bad. Really against what the class should be doing.

She said this experience had her reflecting on student social location, and particularly class standing: “In my personal experience, it's definitely like the class background stuff and socio economic status that got me to the point of, this needs to change.” She expressed feeling that the ungrading setup in Course A and other courses that she teaches, does not penalize students for not coming into the course with prior knowledge.

I asked Professor A how students have responded to ungrading, in her experience. She said:

I would say overwhelmingly positive. I would say, both from the official sort of feedback we get from student evaluations, from conversations that they've had with me, taking more classes with me, bringing in roommates, and girlfriends, and friends. And even one of my colleagues stopped me in the hall and was like- from a different department- and was like, two of my students both have your class or had your class last semester, and they were talking about how awesome it was that you let them revise their papers...and how much they loved your class.

Based upon these different facets, Professor A's experience has been that students respond to the ungraded aspect of her course in a positive way. She went on to share her perception that one main reason students like it is due to the ungrading setup making it less stressful:

It really does just make it less stressful. And I see what might be coded as high achieving students also, for the first time, maybe in years, exhaling, feeling secure in their learning

process...And for students who are less confident in their writing, they seem to feel more now that I am running alongside them versus like only judging them.

Thus, she sees lowered stress across students, including those who “might be coded as high achieving students,” as well as “students who are less confident in their writing.” She did add, however, that students may be skeptical at the beginning of the semester, about the grading setup, due to other experiences through which they do not always have trust in teachers: “So, they don't trust teachers...I think that, at the beginning, they're like, this isn't true. Or this isn't real, or there's like a catch, you're not telling me.” Yet, as she's indicated, she perceives that most students end up finding it to be a positive experience.

As our interview proceeded, she then circled back to the idea of ungrading as minimizing teacher bias when it comes to grading. As an example, she described herself as “being pretty visibly a queer instructor,” and recognized that sometimes students will make assumptions about her, and about what she expects from students. Particularly, she said that students may believe that they will be expected to write about certain topics, and/or only express opinions in line with what they believe Professor A believes. She gave an example of what one student wrote on a course evaluation at the end of the semester. He wrote: “I liked how you did the grades, because it meant I didn't have to think like you thought.” She recalled being a little surprised with this response, and said: “That really stuck with me, in part, because we had a really good rapport, and I thought that we'd always had in the class.” She went on to say “I would assume that the student is a Republican” and that:

At the beginning, he might have been like, well, I have to get on this teacher's good side. And as we went on, I think he realized that there's not really a usefulness to that when, when I'm not giving, you know, 90s versus 92s. And then I think that we actually built an actual rapport together...you don't have to write the gay rights paper for me to like you. It makes me sad, that that's sort of the perception that they have coming into college.

Here, she is making a connection between the lack of a numerical grading assessment on assignments, and students recognizing that they don't have to “get on this teacher's good side,” in order to do well in the class. In other words, students grow comfortable in the realization that they do not have to lie about or cover up their own beliefs due to fear of an impact on their grades. She went on to say about this:

They do seem to feel that the grading system also removes my bias from grading them, which I find interesting, because I think a lot of them have been told, those crazy liberal professors are gonna make you say, God's dead for an A. And first of all, we're not doing that. But second of all, you can write whatever you want, and get an A in my class. So I think it helps. But they judge me by what I look like, and the stuff I have on my door, and stuff like that. So I think it, they know where I'm coming from. I often can figure out where they're coming from. And the class assignments are set up, and the class system is set up to where, I don't want that to be an impediment to our relationship.

Thus, as she concludes here, she has students, like the Republican student she mentioned, whose beliefs differ from her own, yet she does not “want that to be an impediment to our relationship.” One benefit she sees of the contract grading system is its ability to meet this goal, of personal beliefs not impeding the educational relationship.

Towards the end of our interview I asked her if she could distill what it is that she likes about ungrading. She said she had two answers: a teacher centric answer and a student centric answer. She explained:

I feel like my students and I are communicating well, where we respect each other, where I can feel that they take pride in their work, for being their work, and not because of the grade...I think back to my first few years of teaching and how rare it was, in those moments...Now, it's just like, oh, wow, teaching is actually good. I actually like this. And it doesn't feel awful that I'm going to do this for the next 24 years...I'm actually looking forward to that. So that's my teacher centered answer.

Thus, her teacher centric answer is based on her increased ability to enjoy her work as a teacher. She continued:

And my student centered answer. There's one particular student I have in mind. Your first semester freshman 101, 8am, like first Monday, Wednesday, Friday, his first college class ever. And he came in, and it was clear that he had been told that he was not good at school. And he was only good at sports. And so he was able to pledge to do sports. He didn't have confidence in his writing. And he also didn't, you know, he didn't seem to care about that...We do the first unit, it's an autoethnography. So it's, where are you coming from? What's your position in the world? Well, I give feedback on it, you know, complete, all good. He asked where his grade is, I'm like, well, you have an A. You've done everything. You have an A. So we go into the second unit, and it's the everyday spaces assignment, which is a rhetorical analysis of a physical space. And I tell them to do somewhere that either you've been to a lot, or you have access to here. So I get a lot of the Starbucks on campus. But this student did a park in his hometown, his city. And it was so good. And it was talking about community and gentrification, and power and money, and just all of the stuff. And his

grammar was not perfect. The formatting was not perfect. But I could not have dreamed of a rubric, which would have captured what he did. And if I was clicking on a rubric, to evaluate what he did, it would have been a huge disservice to his work.

In this example, the student who came to her class believing that he was not good at writing, and perhaps not caring about improving it, ended up writing a stand out paper. She implies here, a connection between that student gaining confidence in his writing skill, because he was receiving “completes” for doing the work, an assessment in line with the letter grade of A, in comparison with the lower grades he may have received on written work in the past. Professor A observes that if she had been using a standard grading rubric to grade this work, “it would have been a huge disservice to his work.” She continued:

It happens once or twice a semester, where a student just does something that's so much better than I thought was gonna happen. But there's no rubric could capture that magic of, you took what I told you to do, and you made something beautiful. And that's crazy. I told him, this is far and away, the best of these that I've read. This is just wonderful work, I hope that you will take this feedback to heart. And then he got a complete. After that, he seemed more confident in his writing. And then, a year later, I'm teaching 101 again, write him an email: can I use your paper as an example in class, because I do that. And he's like, thank you so much, ma'am. This just made my day for you to use my paper as an example. Thank you so much.

Here, she specifies that she saw this student’s writing improve after receiving an assessment of complete. She remarks that “once or twice a semester” she similarly receives work that goes above and beyond her expectations. Again, she is connecting these stand out submissions as directly related to her assessment structure. She concluded this example by again emphasizing how the ungrading system does not punish students for coming into her course without previous knowledge or skill. She said:

The way that the class was set up, it's only going to reward. And it's not going to punish you for what you didn't come in, not knowing. And it really honors that linguistic difference and that class difference. And the experiential differences to where, you know, my prep school students just don't get to feel better than their peers, because they took a SAT prep course. And I think that's a good lesson for them.

Thus the perception of greater equity with her course set up was a theme in our interview, and a clear reason why she became interested in, and continued to use this ungrading practice in her course.

Professor A: History of Ungrading & Institutional Response

Professor A's relationship with pedagogy, detailed in the previous section, is intertwined with her history of ungrading. As detailed there, she learned in depth about contract grading in fall 2020, approached her program director about using this in her courses in Spring 2021, and began using contract grading in her classes in the Fall 2021 semester. When she approached her program director in Spring 2021 about using this setup in her courses, he was supportive, and expressed his own interest in the approach.

When I later asked further about institutional support, she said although the program director was supportive, she did have one situation in which she had to defend her assessment practices: "I have been asked to defend the practice to my department head. Because a student was on track to get an A in my class and failed all their other classes, and the dean of students asked my boss why that was. Then my boss asked me." Yet, she said that ultimately, as a result of multiple discussions about her course set up, that she ended up having a training on contract grading: "I actually held a training for the English department on labor based contract grading, at the invitation of the works director. And it was very well received by composition instructors." She did also note that while she feels that the contract grading set up works well for her composition courses, that she does not have a strong opinion on whether it would work for other subjects.

Student A1

Student Overview: A1

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student A1 described himself as male, white, and upper middle class.⁹ He answered yes to the question, "Are you a

⁹ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

first-generation college student?” and this was confirmed in our interviews.¹⁰ He confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our first interview, he was 19 years old, in his second year and fourth semester of college, and was pursuing a major in psychology with intentions to go on to law school.

Student A1 grew up with his mom, dad, brother, and grandparents. He said he grew up on “a farmhouse” that connected two houses between his immediate family and his grandparents. His parents divorced when he was six years old. He lived with his mom after that, but his dad remained involved in life. Later, both of his parents got remarried. His stepdad died a few years prior to the time of our interviews. His mom, dad, and stepdad’s highest level of education was high school. His stepmom had earned a college degree.

When I asked about his parents’ work and household income, he said his mom was a stay at home mom and that she did not get a job until after she and his dad divorced. He reported that his dad works in the software industry. He said his dad’s income while he was growing up was around \$150,000, and that when he was in high school it went up to around \$200,000, and he estimated that his dad’s income when we talked was closer to \$300,000.

When I asked student A1 about his general relationship with school and grades, one theme that emerged was how ADHD made school difficult for him. He described this as especially stressful before his diagnosis in his senior year of high school:

When I was in high school, and had undiagnosed ADHD, that was a big struggle for me, because it was extremely hard to be motivated and get my work done. And I knew I wanted to go to college. So you know, I was always doing tons of work... I can remember specific times when I knew I'd spent all night working on some assignment. And it was like, I would feel exhausted, and I would have had a mental breakdown, or started crying or something because of how much effort it took to finish this. And then I would show up to class and then, you know, some kid, other person in the class would be like, oh, yeah, I forgot about that and I just kind of did it in an hour or two last night. And then they would get a 92. And I'd get an 83. And it was that, pretty much all the time. And so not only was I struggling with getting my work done, but seeing how much easier it was on other people was very tough... I felt like I had to be very hard on myself, and sort of tie my worth as a person to how well I was doing in school, how hard I was working. And that, I mean, it worked, that got me through high school, I had like an A/B average and all that. I took AP classes and honors mostly. But then, when I was diagnosed with ADHD and I got to college, I started taking

¹⁰ I double-checked all the questions from the pre-screening survey in the interviews, and through that process realized that some students had misunderstood what it meant to be a “first generation college student,” and did not respond accurately.

medication which made getting the work done a lot easier, which was nice. But I still had the leftover bad habit, bad habits from high school. I would still be very hard on myself and just continue to raise my expectations.

As student A1 described here, he struggled with motivation to do school work, and he can remember examples in which he would spend “all night working on some assignment,” and be exhausted, yet feel that the hard work he put forward was not reflected in his grade. He said whereas his all-nighter might get him an 83% on an assignment, he would hear from other people who completed the assignment last minute and would receive an A. The result is that he felt that he had to be “very hard” on himself and that he had to “tie my worth as a person to how well I was doing in school, how hard I was working.” He went on to further consider his relationship with grades:

I would say I had a bad relationship with grades. And seeing other people get better grades than me with significantly less effort. I mean, occasionally, it would make me internally kind of resent them a bit. Because I'm like, "must be so easy for you." But more so than that, it was almost like, you just get it in your head, "Oh, there you go. That validates it. Of course they did better than you because you're a lot dumber than they are. They're smarter. So, you know, maybe if you just work way, way harder next time, then maybe you can get a 90 or above." And, you know, it just kind of fed into not being very happy with myself mostly. So it wasn't a very inspiring thing.

Thus, especially before his diagnosis, his relationship with grades was one that led him to “not being very happy” with himself. Given that he would work hard, and yet get lower scores than other people who put forth “significantly less effort,” he internalized that to mean “you’re a lot dumber than they are.”

He also talked about this feeling being amplified in his senior year, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. He talked about the struggle of classes going all online, and that having the lack of different scenery on top of being at home with distractions like his xbox, YouTube, and Instagram, made motivation harder. He admits that, as a coping mechanism, he gave into cheating: “I picked up, if I'm being honest, I picked up some cheating habits, because it was just so hard to be motivated.” The struggle with motivation that he was already facing was amplified by courses moving online during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, and he gave into cheating as a way of dealing with that.

Yet, he says that getting the ADHD diagnosis in his senior year of high school and starting medication improved this situation, and his relationship with grades. He said: “I felt so much better

starting off college, because I was like, oh, now I feel like I'm not exhausted going through classes. And when I do spend a lot of time working, I'm much more productive. And I can actually see better grades as a result of that instead of it just seeming like it's all for nothing." Thus, he reported that his diagnosis, and resultant medication, significantly improved his productivity and grades.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Student A1 had taken courses before Course A that used ungrading. The first class he experienced ungrading in was a math class. He had also taken a course with Professor A in the semester prior to our interviews that was also ungraded. In that prior semester he had taken a 100 level composition course with her, and Course A was the next course in that sequence.

When I asked him about his understanding of the assessment setup of Course A, he was able to articulate it clearly. He explained that the course was divided into four main units and that each unit has papers and assignments every week leading up to a final paper in each. He relayed that Professor A will leave feedback on assignments to provide guidance as assignments progress. He conveyed an understanding that the assessments in the course were based on completion (that they would be assessed as either complete or incomplete), and that a certain number of assignments needed to earn a completion in order to earn a specific grade.

Student A1 described Course A as less stressful than his other classes that semester:

But with [Course A], I can kind of view that as, oh, this is a class that it's not going to be made very hard for me to succeed in... It really simplifies it and makes it easy, and you always know what you're supposed to be doing. So I don't have to spend half my day thinking about that... I have this assignment due Friday, but it's just editing something I've already written. And I know exactly how I need to edit that. So, that's not stressing me out right now. So it's more of like, I view those classes as relief, you know, instead of additional source of stress.

As he explained here, he does not view Course A as a course that will be "very hard for me to succeed in." He says of Course A that "you always know what you're supposed to be doing," and as an example gives an editing assignment he has due that week, He described the assignment as not being a source of stress because he knows "exactly how I need to edit that." Thus, he implies here that clarity of expectations is one reason that Course A feels like a "relief."

When I asked him if he had a sense of the grade he is aiming for in Course A, he said that he is aiming for a final grade of an A. He shared that he earned an A in the course with Professor A the previous semester, and believes he can earn that again in course A.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In interview two, when I checked in with student A1 about how the semester was going, he described it as “rough.” He reported that his difficulty was in large part due to feeling overwhelmed with assignments, and described this difficulty as related to issues with time management:

I get overly focused on that, and all those little assignments that take away from the fact that I have other classes with assignments, and a lot of those classes have assignments every week or two, and then also long term projects that I need to keep in mind. I'm always like, am I waiting too long to get going on that project? Because I'm getting so bogged down with all the little stuff. And so then, I'll finish a bunch of little stuff, Friday. And it's like, well, next Friday, you have this thing due, but do I start it now? Or do I take the weekend to kind of chill since I'm stressed? And so, I don't know which will create more stress. Do I need to lay it down and just push my way through it? But then there's always, you know, then if I push too hard through it, then I'll be even worse off. So yeah, I could go on forever about all the factors of it.

Student A1 describes here, the difficulty of choosing how to spend his time given the number and range of assignments he has across all of his classes. He provides an example of feeling stressed after finishing “a bunch of little stuff,” and then facing difficulty in deciding whether to then “take the weekend to kind of chill” as a means to help his stress levels, or to just push himself to keep working on upcoming assignments.

Yet, despite his overall description of the semester as stressful, he nonetheless again described Course A as less stressful than his other courses. As an example, he shared with me that on that day of our second interview, that he had missed attending Course A that morning because his phone died overnight and his alarm did not go off to wake him up in time. While he did express some frustration for that outcome, and he knew that he had missed an in-class assignment for that class, he nonetheless said that he wasn't too concerned about missing class and that assignment. He shared that, because the requirements for each final grade were provided upfront in that course, he knew that missing the class wouldn't prevent him from achieving the grade he was aiming for. He said: “So I actually missed class today. I missed the daily writing that we have to do. But you can miss like a few of those without it impacting your grade. Yeah, so I'm not too concerned about that.”

When I asked further about his experience in Course A since we had previously talked, he shared that he had received some critical feedback on a paper he turned in:

The class is going well. I've been getting all my assignments turned in on time and getting feedback on them. We just have this three week long unit. And my last aspect of that, that I turned in before spring break, which was last week, she did not say it was a very good paper, unfortunately. But it's okay, because it's still a completion grade. So it doesn't impact anything. I just, I guess I didn't exactly accomplish what she wanted me to accomplish with the paper.

Thus, he reported the course as “going well,” and said he has “been getting all my assignments turned in on time.” While he brings up the feedback on his paper as critical, he does not express negative feelings about this, but says, “it’s okay, because it’s still a completion.” He further went on to tell me about the feedback that she provided, and said that it gave him clarification on what to work on to improve in future assignments.

Relatedly, he spoke feeling that he also spends more time on the assignments in this Course A versus his other, graded courses in that semester:

I think I take more time and effort to write in this class than in any of my other classes. Just because I know her standards for what she thinks is a success. Because usually, for anything we turn in, she's communicated with us about where we need to improve and what that should look like. So I know what I need to improve on going in. And so I want her to see that I worked on the things that she told me I needed to. Whereas other classes, they usually, except for high level classes, they're not so concerned with you having the most perfect writing and amazing structure of a paper. They're kind of just checking off stuff that you needed to have brought up. So it's, you know, you need three in-text citations. And you need to talk about two readings that you did. So I'm like, so as long as I discussed two readings in depth and have the three citations, it would have to be really, really bad otherwise, to bring the grade down.

Thus, he implies here that because his other courses tend to have a check-list of things to be completed for an assignment, that these take him less time to complete versus needing to show improvement and growth in Course A. It is worth highlighting that in this interview, he described Course A as both less stressful, yet also more time-consuming than his other courses that semester.

He further detailed that even though the assignments in Course A do have a rubric, that he feels more freedom with assignments in the course. He detailed:

So I think it gives me the freedom to just focus on the actual learning, how to write better, and just go, oh, let's try something with this unit that's a bit different that I haven't tried before, and see what the feedback is, and if that was good...And I can kind of experiment with it a little bit more and use it as a sandbox for writing to just explore. Yeah, just different styles I want to try out or different approaches to the editing process. Or, I mean, there's been times that I've done completely different paper structures that are, I don't know, I've never structured paper like this. That's not how I usually try to structure and approach how I make the points. But I try it out because, you know, this is a good place to do that, where I don't have to worry too much about it if it doesn't go the way I hope it does.

Thus again, he is saying that the ungraded aspect of the course (the assessment scale of complete or incomplete vs. an A-F grading scale) is a positive for him with his work on those assignments. Here he detailed how this assessment setup provides him with “the freedom to just focus on the actual learning.” The setup allows him to try out different approaches to writing, because he has less fear of failure since, as he said, “I don't have to worry too much about it if it doesn't go the way I hope it does.” In other words, he does not fear a potential penalty for taking a risk or experimenting with something new.

Since it was the middle of the semester for Course A, and student A1 had taken ungraded courses previously, I asked if his perception of ungrading had changed at all over time. He said:

Now, I honestly think it might be at times more challenging, and it makes you do more work, because the freedom that you're given to not have to worry about the grade. And maybe that's just me, because I personally enjoy learning a lot. So, I really liked being at school already. And I enjoyed it even when I didn't know what an ungrading scheme was. But I think now that I have it, if you're a student who just enjoys learning, and doesn't mind putting work in, that it can actually challenge you more, if you are approaching school the right way.

Again is the sentiment that he is enjoying Course A even though it is more work. He links this enjoyment to his interest in learning, and states that “if you're a student who just enjoy learning,” that an ungrading setup can be a positive challenge.

At the same time, however, he did share the observation that the ungrading setup may provide ways to be abused:

I know, there are students, and I've encountered them, in [Professor A's] class, who are just not that interested in being at college because they're an athlete, or they didn't really want to go. Because [name of school] is an interesting school where a lot of students just kind of went because it's not that hard to get in... They don't care about each class. So they do kind

of try to abuse it.

Thus, while he sees that the ungrading setup can be beneficial for students who enjoy learning, he believes that it may also be abused by students who are “not that interested in being at college.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third interview student A1 reported that his final grade in Course A was an A. He said this wasn't a surprise. He shared that in his one on one meeting with Professor A, she expressed seeing an improvement in his writing. He said: “she said that, over the course of the year, my writing had improved a lot, which was nice to hear.”

As he had commented in our second interview, he again brought up in this last interview the feeling of putting forth more effort in that course:

So I think, though, with how much I enjoyed that class, I probably was putting forth a little bit more effort maybe for that class. In a way, because I wasn't worrying about the grade and it was just a completion assignment for a professor that I liked. You know, it almost felt like a moral obligation to put effort... I could goof off and just turn in something that's kind of crappy and then fix it before the final. But I feel like that's almost an insult to my teacher because they're giving us the opportunity to just focus on improvement. So it's almost insulting for them to not put the effort forth, since they're making it so easy to succeed.

As he did in interview two, he is expressing here the feeling of putting forth more effort into Course A than his other courses that semester. Yet, here, he is also linking this effort to an “obligation” to Professor A. He acknowledged that while he “could goof off and just turn in something that's kind of crappy,” he feels that this would be an insult for Professor A, especially since she has made the effort to give students “the opportunity to just focus on improvement,” and is supporting student success.

Another theme he reiterated in our last interview was the feeling that he could take more risks, and experiment with his work in the ungraded course:

I think that just not having the worry of a numerical grade attached to every assignment gives you more freedom to try stuff out and take sort of-I feel like this might just apply to writing but taking more risks with your work, because there was times that I was like, especially early on between units, I was completely changing the whole writing process that I was used to, to something totally different. And you know, if one of those didn't really turn into a good paper, then I would get feedback that, you know, okay, that one that didn't really work. But it wasn't a big deal because you know that it was still a good completion grade. So

it just gives you more, it's almost like a sandbox type of situation where you can just try more stuff out without feeling like you could derail your entire semester, if one risk doesn't pan out the way you want it to.

As he did in interview two, he describes the assessment setup in Course A as a “sandbox” that allows for trying out different approaches, to take risks, without fear that it “could derail your entire semester.”

When I asked him how he would describe the teacher, his description was positive. He described her as “easygoing” and “chilled out”:

She was a very easygoing professor. So, she is different from other really good professors that I've had, because usually a lot of professors are super over the top and eccentric, and she's more like, chilled out, and not really over the top. But I kind of appreciated that because it was a more relaxing experience. With a lot of professors, that was stressful to be in their class. And they're just kind of being a little overwhelming. But her class was more slow paced. And she gave a lot of one on one time to all the students. That was specifically built into the course with the one on one meetings. And then with a lot of assignments, she would give us a lot of time in class to work on stuff. And then she would call people up and talk to them about their assignments, and just make sure that everyone was on the right track...I appreciated her as a professor, because she cut out a lot of the stuff, that she seemed she had simplified her courses a lot, so that it was just really cut down to the stuff that was needed and the stuff that was beneficial. So I think that's the stuff that I really liked about having her.

Thus, he maintained a positive view of Professor A throughout the semester. He described her as “easygoing,” and her course as “more slow paced” and “simplified.” He also expressed appreciation that she provided individualized attention to students, and that this was built into the course through one on one meetings.

Student A2

Student Overview: A2

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student A2 described herself as female and white.¹¹ She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of the interview, she was 20

¹¹ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

years old, in her second year and fourth semester of college, and was pursuing a major in Emergency Medical Care. She did not answer the socioeconomic background question on the prescreening survey, but in the interview process, said that she considers herself middle class. She shared that her mom and dad both work for the Navy, with her dad making six figures, and her mom making around \$95,000 a year. Both of her parents have a masters degree. She grew up with her parents and an older sister who also graduated from college. When I interviewed her, she had a part time job at a Boba shop, where she had been newly employed for about two months. She said the job had a lot of downtime, and that her boss would encourage her to work on her homework during these times.

In our first interview, she disclosed having an ADHD diagnosis. She shared that around second or third grade that:

For every test, I would get violently sick, like projectile everywhere. And we just kind of knocked it up as anxiety, which I do have, I have GAD [Generalized Anxiety Disorder]. And later on you're like: Oh, maybe this isn't just that. Because I failed my driver's test three times. And I was like, I've studied for hours, I know it ... We got me tested. And they were like: Alright, so here's the deal: You have severe ADHD, and dyslexia, along with your GAD.

Thus, in addition to having been diagnosed with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, she was also diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia.

In the summer previous to our interview, she started taking Adderall. She said it changed things drastically for her in terms of concentration, and that things felt easier to her now. This also changed her relationship with school and grades:

It has definitely made a difference, because I would be studying for five, six hours, and I would get maybe a C. And I would be so disappointed because I was like, I know this stuff. And I still carry on those techniques and the study habits I formed. I still study for a ridiculous amount of time. And now it's showing. Because for my medical term test, I studied for five, six hours...And I got a 98 on the exam. I got the highest grade in the class...And it's that feeling of you work so hard, and you finally got it, is just so awesome. Because just all throughout high school, I never got that feeling. It was just, you put your whole back into this and you don't get anything out of it. And it was stressful because I would always put so much pressure on myself, like you're not doing enough, you're not doing enough. And there'll be times when my mom will bust down my door at 3AM thinking that I'm on the phone with someone or doing something. And she would knock the door open, I would be sitting there, all these textbooks splayed out on my bed and she's like: Go to bed. And I'm like: I have to study. And that's one thing that she noticed she was like, you

definitely have gone back to more like being yourself, not as swimming in work as you used to be. Of course, you're still studying, but you definitely have more free time to kind of do what you want to do and not feel so inclined to study to make sure that you're with the rest of the group and not falling behind.

She expressed here that in high school, she could put her “whole back” into an assignment and “not get anything out of it.” She described experiences of “studying for five, six hours” on an assignment and getting a C grade. She compares this to the change she has experienced since starting medication for her ADHD. She shares earning a 98% on a recent test, and the feeling that her hard work is now being reflected in the grades she is earning.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Student A2 had previous experiences with ungrading, because she took two other courses with Professor A that also used this approach. Course A is her third course with Professor A. She took a 100 level composition class with her, which was the precursor to Course A, in addition to a creative writing class with her. When I asked her about her classes with Professor A, she described her use of ungrading as less stressful, and less punitive, as compared with other courses she’s taken:

I like her approach when it comes to grading. I really, I feel like it's not as stressful. Because a lot of research papers and all these others things that I had to do, like bibliographies, or rhetorical analysis, back in high school, I would get crucified on because my format was wrong, or I didn't put enough effort in, or they would just destroy my paper. And with hers, it's just more, let's talk about it more. It's not as negative. Because I feel like I can express how I feel about certain topics, and I can talk about certain things without being reprimanded for it. Which is definitely a huge draw. I wouldn't keep coming back to her if I didn't think that her classes had any value for me. I think they do. Because I feel like it helps me with a lot of stress. I just feel like it clicked better for me because there wasn't so much stress about being robotic with my paper, because it wasn't like: Here's all the layouts, this is how you're supposed to lay it out, you need five to eight sentences in each paragraph, and all this other stuff. It was just: Tell me how you feel, I want to hear your thoughts, I want you to feel like you're heard. And I feel like that's more inspiring and more empowering than: Oh, you know, you wrote this in nine sentences, not five, and like completely miss everything I'm saying for technicalities.

Thus, she describes Professor A’s approach to grading as less stressful than other courses. She describes the assignments as being less rigid in expectations than other courses, which she

describes as “inspiring” and “empowering,” because she knows that she will not be deducted points for “technicalities.”

She also said about the assignments in Course A: “All of her assignments I do enjoy. None of them seem tedious. They all have a good purpose.” Further, she was able to explain to me how the class functions in terms of the assignments being counted for completion versus a letter grade, demonstrating that she had a clear understanding of this setup operated in the class.

Yet, she did also express initially having criticisms for this assessment setup, because she felt that the effort she was putting into her work was not being recognized as distinct from the lesser efforts of other students:

I was a little unsure about it, because I'm someone who takes immense pride in their grades. And it just tickled me wrong that I took hours on a paper. And then this one girl who sat behind me. I know her, she was in one of my other classes. She was like: Oh, I took five minutes. I just typed 12,000- or 100 words, 200 words, however long it was, she's like: I just did it the night before, I'm just turning it in. And I was like, how am I getting the same grade as her?

So, while she took hours to complete a paper, and another student “took five minutes,” they both were accepted as “completed” assignments. Because student A2 is someone who “takes immense pride in their grades,” she expressed initially feeling unsure about the contract grading setup.

Yet, she says that she brought this concern to Professor A during class. She asked her if she felt that this setup would encourage people to slack off because they only have to complete an assignment without consideration for how well it had been done or how much time has been spent on it. She said that Professor A responded in saying that she can still tell when people put forth the effort, and when they don't, and that ultimately, those students who do not put in the effort will not gain the skills that she is aiming for them to practice in the course, that would help them in other courses and beyond.

Student A2 went on to agree with Professor A's sentiments. She described this as she continued to consider the example of the student in her class who got the same completion that she did, and detailed how she came to reconcile her own views to accept this outcome:

Yeah, we both got the grade [completion]. Yeah. And I was just, and the more I thought about it, the more I got enraged. I was like, I'm taking hours. I was like, Why should I try? And it just kind of buckled down to who I am as a person. I was like, I can't not try. That's not who I am. I'm not gonna slander my name for working hard, because some other girl isn't.

Because in the long run, she's gonna rely on: oh, you know, I'll just weasel by, I'll get by the bare minimum. And I'm not that kind of person. I thrive on excelling. And if I don't, then I get really upset. I was like, I'm not the one who's going to come out of this without any good tips on my belt. Because she- In her head, she's thinking: Oh this is an easy A. And in my head, I was thinking: You know, this is a way I can express myself without being docked for it. So it was very empowering.

So, as she described here, although she initially felt critical of the assessment setup, she realized that even though another student may put in less effort than her and receive the same assessment of completion that she did, that she will be the student who will complete the class having gained useful knowledge instead of just "an easy A." She relatedly went on to also say:

Because at the end of the day, if you're gonna put in work, then you're gonna get out as much as you put in. And if you're not gonna put anything then, you know, that's on them. And the same girl is actually in my biology class right now, or my anatomy class. She's constantly asking you for answers and notes and stuff like that. And I'm like, you're not gonna make it, if you're gonna piggyback off of people the entire time. I was like, I work hard, I work hard for my process, I work hard for my grades, I'm not going to enable you. You have to put in the work. And that's what I told her point blank.

Thus, she further observed of this same student who had received the "completed" assessment in Course A with little effort, that she was struggling in her other courses.

Student A2 went on to describe the experience of being in an ungraded course as a "detox from worrying." She related this to not having to worry about getting questions wrong and her grade dropping, and also to her perceptions of the instructor:

For me at least I feel like it's a way for me to kind of detox from worrying about: Oh, you know, if I don't get this amount of questions right, then my grade is gonna drop. It's more of: You know, you're gonna do this assignment, because I'm not one to slack. And I'm gonna get better at writing, because that is something that I am passionate about. And I feel empowered to know that no matter what I write, I'm not going to be told that my opinions are wrong, or how I'm putting out my statements is wrong, because that's how I could feel in the moment. I feel like I can express my opinions freely without feeling judged for it. Which I think is very important, because at least nowadays, there's a lot of judgment going around...And at least in my case, most of the time, it's the teachers. Because I have said, hey, you know, I question this question on the exam, it's very, very misleading. And they just dock it up as you don't know what you're talking about. You don't study hard enough. You

don't know what you're talking about. Later to find out that its word for word from the study guide. And what I put was right, and then they would have to change it later on because enough people were like, Hey, this isn't right. I mean, no one likes being told that they're wrong. And of course, some people are more like understanding and be like, Okay, well, let's talk about it. And some people are going to be more headstrong and be like, Absolutely not. You're not telling me I'm wrong. So kind of being able to feel equal to my teacher is a great feeling. Because it's like we're both mutually getting something out of this. She wants us to grow. It's not just, you know, turn in an assignment, I'll grade it, and you get what you get. It's more of how can we make this better? How can we make this stronger? And I feel like that's a better way of learning than the fear of my grades gonna drop and there goes my GPA.

Thus, she reports a more vertical than horizontal power dynamic with the professor of Course A. She observed: "being able to feel equal to my teacher is a great feeling." She sees that relationship as mutually beneficial, because both parties care about the student's improvement and growth.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In interview two, she continued to express positive sentiments about the experience of ungrading. She again described the lack of letter grades on assignments as less stressful:

I've always been more hard on myself to get perfect grades. But with [Professor A's] class, it's just not as much like you write a paper, if it's crap, you're gonna get a D. Instead it's "Hey, this is what you did bad. Let's fix it." Which that's what I like the most... I still work hard, I still do the work. It's just not like, "your work is not enough." I'm not trying to compete with a number scale. I'm competing with myself, on what I can improve on. Not, oh, well, the school wants me to get a C to pass this. I like it better. It's less stressful.

Here she is aligning the lowered levels of stress she experiences in Course A with the course's focus on improvement and instead of grades. She also implies that there is a sense of judgement (i.e., "your work is not enough") with the A-F grading scale that isn't present with Course A. She further describes Course A as motivated by a sense of competition with herself, and her own improvement, instead of a grading scale.

She did, though, express some frustration with the flexibility of the assignments in Course A. She said of one of the writing assignments:

Now we're doing a writing in your field report, which is like we're talking about the different forms of written slash not written communication. And it's not difficult, it's just, sometimes her layouts can be a little confusing to me, because I'm one of those people, like, very straightforward, like, hey, you know: Here's a poem, write about it. This is more like: Okay, well, you pick what you want to write about. And you have to find all these genres and these texts that apply to it. And I'm like, just tell me what to write. Like, I can do it. Just tell me.

So, while she has many positive assessments of Course A, she does here also express that she has found frustration with the open-endedness of some assignments, and wished that there was greater structure and guidelines.

Yet, she goes on to say that she brought these frustrations up with Professor A, and that they have spent time talking about them:

I'm pretty high strung when it comes to academics, because I like knowing that I'm doing things right. I like knowing that, hey, you know, this is what they're looking for, I'm giving them what they looking for... But when it's kind of like a free for all, like, hey, you know, you pick what you want to do...in my head it's like, Okay, I feel like I just got thrown into a ball pit. Because now I've no idea what I'm doing. I don't know if I'm writing what she wants to read. But I've talked to her about it. And she's like, that's the mindset that other English teachers have kind of drilled into your head, you have to realize that you can write about whatever you want, and still be interesting. I was like, that is true. But I just like having structure. I like knowing that things are set. I like knowing that things are in control. Because when I'm not in control, that's when I start freaking out. And I'm like, Okay, well, there's no stability in this, I have no idea what I want to write about. I don't know if what I'm writing about is what she's looking for. And I don't want to risk getting a bad grade. But she was- That's one of the things I really like about her classes. She's like, you know, your topic is interesting to you. And it'll be better because it is interesting, or an interest of yours. So don't think that you're going to get a bad grade for something that you're voicing your opinion and interest in. And I was like, I've had her for- This my third class with her and I'm still learning it. I talk to her all the time. I'm like, I'm still learning, because I'm trying so hard to get out of that mindset.

So, while she has faced frustrations with the flexibility of assignments, it is an issue she has been able to talk about with Professor A. Professor A gave her perspective that the mindset of wanting specific guidelines and detailed structure is an expectation that is standard in many English classes, but one she wants to encourage students away from in her course. Student A2 concludes that she is still adjusting to this aspect of the course, and that she is “trying so hard to get out of that mindset.”

In further talking about the ungrading format as less stressful, student A2 uses a comparison between the assessment setup in Course A and another, graded course that she was taking that same semester:

The biggest positive is probably the amount of stress that I have during this class [Course A]. It's minimal, at most. I go in, I do what I need to do. And then that's kind of it. It's not like, Okay, well, I have to write a paper, and it has to be exactly how the professor wants it, or there's no chance I'll even get a C...In my religious class, I have to write a paper. And he was like, I'm just letting you know that none of you are gonna get an A on this. And I was like, why would you say that? He was like, none of you will have a paper that I think is worthy of an A. Maybe a B, maybe. But most likely a C. I was like, so you're already telling us from the get go you're gonna give us Cs? And this is like, this piece that we have to do for that class is 20% of our grade. And I was like, That's not okay.

Thus, to demonstrate how Course A is less stressful than her other courses, she brings up this experience in a graded course in which the teacher has told students that they will likely get a C on the assignment before they have even started.

She goes on to talk about the more negative experiences in that specific course, with that specific teacher:

I asked a question in class the other day, and he was like: "Are you serious? Is that a legitimate question?" I was like, "Yeah, it was. Thank you, though, I didn't realize I was being foolish." And he was just like, "No, no, I was just wondering, have you been reading your stuff?" I was like, "Yes, I have. It's just a difficult concept. There's a lot of different variants." And he was just like, "Okay, well, you know, just try to read a little bit better"...And he just rips everyone to shreds. And it's just like some people fuel off of negative energy.

She brought up this example to continue in her description of Professor A as having a different approach. After this example, she contrasts that with: "[Professor A] is more like, I want to hear your opinions. I want to see your perspective because it might change my perspective." This aligns with student A2's earlier comment expressing that she feels a sense of equality, instead of authority, in her relationship with Professor A.

She went on to say how Professor A's feedback is helpful, especially when compared with "other professors" who will tell students not to do something, or tell them that an answer is wrong, without providing commentary on why or how to improve:

With our paper, my last paper, I went through it again. And she had notes at almost every paragraph talking about, hey, this is what you can do next time, and how you can improve on it. Because one of the passages I wrote I ended it with a quote, which I didn't know that was a no, no...it makes it feel unfinished...But I know that other professors would have just been like, don't do that. Not tell you why, just "don't do it." She gives a lot of feedback. And I feel like that's important because it's trying to improve. It's trying to make us grow as writers when other classes I have too, it's like, I take a quiz. They just say it's wrong. Don't tell you why it's wrong, or don't give you the answers that are right. So I'm like, How am I supposed to learn? How am I supposed to know this information for next time?

She here reiterates another theme in my interviews with her about Course A: that she appreciates Course A because of its focus on improvement, and that she appreciates Professor A for providing helpful feedback towards that improvement, instead of other courses where answers may just be marked as wrong without any feedback that provides a rationale or that provides insight towards improving in the future.

She did however, also mention how she feels that the ungrading format, with the use of completion versus a letter grade, can encourage some people to put forth less effort: "I feel like with ungraded, it opens a door for people to half ass." This concern is one that she also expressed in our first interview.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

By the time of our third interview, student A2 had completed her semester. She reported earning straight As for her grades that semester. I asked her how she would now describe Professor A's teaching style, being able to look back at the entire semester. She said.

She's very passionate, but she's also honest at the same time. Sometimes she'll come to class and just be like: Alright, guys, I'm really not feeling it. I just had a few meetings. So we're going to kind of just work on our pieces. We have workshop days where we would write. And if we had any questions, we would go up to her. But having that little downtime, she was like, you can, if you've already finished, like some of our stuff in this class, feel free to do stuff for other classes...She's just very accommodating that we have other classes. She's even said that point blank, she's like, if you have other stuff to do, and you've already finished, like what I have required you to do, then feel free to do other things.

Here, she describes Professor A as passionate and honest. She gives an example of how Professor A will come to class and share that she is "not feeling it" on that day, and she will have class time be used as a work day. The example implies student A2's appreciation for Professor A's honesty, and

also demonstrates her appreciation for Professor A being “accommodating” to the fact that students have courses, and coursework, outside of Course A.

For her concluding thoughts, A2 shared again her positive experience with ungrading, while also upholding her identity as a hard-worker:

So just about ungrading, I think that it definitely provides an opportunity to kind of release the stress of the daily kind of things when it comes to college. Again, the amount of essays I've had to do was ridiculous. And kind of knowing that some of these are not as detrimental to my grade definitely reduced a lot of stress. I didn't mean that I didn't work hard. It didn't mean that I didn't spend hours working on these assignments just because I got a complete instead of a letter grade. It just means that I wasn't going to be so heavily deducted for my spelling, or, you know, if I miss a period here and there. It definitely was one of the best classes. And I tell her this all the time.

Thus, while student A2 expressed minor concerns about the assessment setup in Course A throughout the semester – namely, the challenge of open-ended assignments, as well as the perception that students could take advantage of that structure to slack off – her overall experience in the course was a positive one. She concludes here with describing Course A as “one of the best classes.”

Student A3

Student Overview: A3

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student A3 described herself as female, African American, and lower class.¹² She answered yes to the question, “Are you a first-generation college student?” and this was confirmed in our interviews.¹³ She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our first interview, she was 18 years old, in her first year and second semester of college, and was pursuing a major in Emergency Medical Care in order to pursue Institution A’s EMT program.

¹² The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

¹³ I double-checked all the questions from the pre-screening survey in the interviews, and through that process realized that some students had misunderstood what it meant to be a “first generation college student,” and did not respond accurately.

Student A3 was raised by her mom and her grandma. She said that her mom worked three jobs while she was growing up, and that her grandma was often the caretaker. She shared that her dad was not in the picture when she was younger (due to him “making really bad decisions”). Her grandmother passed away when she was 11 years old, and said that sometime after this, that her dad “started coming around.” She shared that her mom dropped out of high school and that her dad earned a GED. She has an older brother, who did not attend college. With being the first in her immediate family to attend college, she said that does not tend to go to her immediate family with questions or concerns about college. As an example, she said that she did not go to her immediate family for help with completing the FAFSA, that instead she sought out the help of a cousin who attended college.

Student A3 was not working at the time of our interviews. She said that she did work throughout high school, and that she wanted to get a job while in college, but that her parents did not want her to. She said: “And recently with me going to college, my mom and my dad had been trying to make me like the priority. Even though I tried to get a job here, they just didn't want me to.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Student A3 reported positive experiences with ungrading in course A with Professor A. She responded on a prescreening survey that she had never before taken a course that used ungrading, and that this was her first experience of it. In our first interview, when I asked about her understanding of the use of contract grading in the course, she reported that the teacher explained it very clearly. She was able to reiterate to me how the contract grading worked in the course, and for example, the number of assignments that she knew she needed to complete in order to earn an A (which was the grade she was striving for). In her description, she reflected upon perceiving this use of ungrading as positive, particularly for its transparency in terms of the required final grade:

I believe [Professor A] explained it in the best way possible. And now that I've been told that this is how she grades, I've been thinking, why doesn't everybody do this? It's so much easier. Like, you know that if you do this much work, you're getting this grade. So now it's not like, at the end of semester, you're fumbling to bring grades up, or do extra credit work. It's just, you know, you did this, so you know what you're getting.

This theme, of appreciation for the transparency of the final grade, was reiterated throughout my first interview with her. She appreciated that, in the event she might feel stressed out, and lack the time and/or motivation to complete an assignment, that the contract grading setup would be a benefit in that she would know in advance how not completing an assignment would impact her final grade. Student A3 talked about how in her first semester, she would have moments of feeling stressed and tired and overwhelmed with the amount of schoolwork, and have times in which she wouldn't feel like completing an assignment, and knowing that even if she did, that she would not "get the best grade." Yet, with the format of contract grading, she reported less stress, knowing upfront how it would impact her grade: "I think knowing what the consequence is, and what I'm going to end up with, if I don't do it, is way better. And it takes a lot of the stress off."

She also reflected on how this dynamic could benefit students juggling multiple responsibilities. She explained:

Some people work, some people have families to take care of, and knowing that you can't do all the work because you have other things going on, being able to basically look at what you can do and get the highest grade that you can ... I don't have any extra curriculums and I don't work. So being able to get that A should be very easy, because I know I can do all these assignments. But as far as somebody with a job, and a kid, they might not be able to stay up all night writing eight hundred word essays. So it can be easier for them to say, hey, you know what, I'll skip this grade, just so I can get like a B and still pass.

Thus, a benefit that student A3 sees of the assessment setup in Course A is that students can have a sense of how not completing an assignment might impact their grade. She sees this as an aspect that could be particularly beneficial to students who are juggling multiple responsibilities such as working a job, or care-taking for family.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In interview two, student A3 reported continued positive experiences with ungrading in course A with professor A. In this interview, she specifically mentioned positives in regards to the teacher's feedback, the scaffolding of assignments in the course, and minimized stress over the possibility of making an unintentional mistake in an assignment.

Regarding the teacher's feedback, A3 found her feedback to be helpful, and found that it guided her to specific aspects of her work that she was then able to improve upon. Through the scaffolding of assignments, she was able to see this improvement across drafts:

[Professor A's] feedback is amazing. So when I get her feedback, I'm able to look through it and see what I could have done better on. And I can say from- compared to my first final draft, to the one that we've had recently, I think I have done better, it's just I need to work on draft quotes and stuff like that. So it is better.

Student A3 is here expressing appreciation for the fact that the assignments are scaffolded in the course, meaning that the assignments include drafts and/or pieces of larger assignments that students work to improve, based upon Professor A's feedback. Student A3 went on to emphasize how helpful the scaffolding format was, stating that it's a strategy she plans to try to bring into work with other courses: "And that's something that I'm probably gonna take into all my work, which is like taking my work and separating it into smaller pieces. So that when it's time for the big project, that it is already basically done."

Regarding the value of feedback over grades, and relatedly minimized stress over the potential of making a mistake on an assignment, this came up when I asked her if she has noticed any difference in how she feels when she is working on assignments in the ungraded course versus her other, graded courses. She responded:

Most definitely. Because I did just write a paper for my history class, and I have to go see him today. I was like, "Did you grade it? Did you read it? What was the feedback?"...I have noticed it takes longer for professors who are grading to return feedback and grades, rather than [Professor A] because she's able to get it done and usually within a week. And they usually have about the same amount of students and I think when it comes to grading you are trying to basically see mistakes and things so you sometimes have to double read and stuff. So for them they read, and then they take points off and then they have to come to a concise grade. As for her it's just, okay she read it, this is what she thinks and this is her feedback. So most definitely...Because I noticed a lot of professors, they will provide the grade with little feedback. And so she provides a lot of feedback so that there's no need to worry about a grade. It makes me feel better, like on the inside, when I get the feedback, because it's like I'm not being judged for my work, I'm being helped with it. So I think I love ungrading. I wish for the rest of my college career, that it's ungraded.

She says here that regarding Professor A's feedback, that she tends to return feedback to students more quickly than other professors, and that this feedback tends to be more detailed. She observes

that it is probably quicker for Professor A to provide that feedback, since she is not grappling with a determination of points. When student A3 receives this feedback in Course A, she feels that it is intended to be helpful, and not as a judgement. She concludes, "I think I love ungrading."

When I asked her to reflect on whether she felt her learning process would be any different in Course A if the assignments were graded, she responded with further commentary about having more stress when grades are involved, especially due to the fear of mistakes significantly lowering the grade:

If I know I did my best work on this assignment, and that if I did something wrong, [Professor A] is not going to give me a bad grade for it ... knowing that I did try my best and that even if it's not good enough, I'm not going to feel like I'm put down for it, if that makes sense. As compared to other assignments, where I stress more, because there might be a mistake that I'm not aware of. And that drops my grade like 20%. And it's more stressful.

Thus, she is again expressing here that with the assessment setup in Course A, that she does not have to worry about unintentionally making a mistake that then significantly drops her grade on an assignment. It's worth also highlighting here that she feels with Professor A's use of contract grading, and an emphasis on feedback instead of grades, that even if she "did something wrong" on an assignment, that she is "not going to feel like I'm put down for it."

I asked her if she perceived any negatives in terms of ungrading. She responded:

I feel too safe. I feel like I know if I don't do this assignment I say can still pass with this grade. I feel like that could make students feel... I guess it can make them not try as hard to make sure that they do assignments. But I guess that's also kind of a good thing. I just think it's a double edged sword.

So, while student A3 sees the setup of Course A as resulting in less stress, she can also see how this could make students feel as though they don't have to try as hard as they might with a course that has graded assignments.

In this second interview, she expressed still aiming for an A, but said that she felt the work she had done up to that point could end up putting her at either an A or a B, depending on her

completion of future assignments and rate of attendance. She said, “if I get a B+ I'm pretty good with that.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third and final interview, student A3 reported that the final grade she earned was a B. Yet, she shared that this was not a surprise to her, as she was able to calculate her grade throughout the semester, based upon the number of assignments she was completing. When I asked her if she felt that the grade of B was a fair reflection of her work in that course throughout the semester, she responded: “Most definitely...I think it definitely reflected my work. I feel like my work was pretty good. And had my attendance done better, I feel like I could put out an A.”

When I asked A3 if she would recommend the course to other students, she responded: “Yes, most definitely...I tried my hardest to give her the best feedback on like course evals...I absolutely loved the grading. It was amazing. The class was amazing too, not just because of the grading situation, but her as a professor.”

I then asked her how she would now, at the end of the semester, describe the teaching style of Professor A. She said:

I don't think of her as a teacher per se. I would say a colleague or mentor, because of how chill and laid back she is. When I think of professors I think of people who really, really, really love the doctor in front of their names. But with Professor A, right, she's just amazing. She's so chill and relaxed. And like I said, she was understanding that it was at 8am. And that some people wouldn't want to talk. There was days where, if somebody didn't get it, she wouldn't mind spending another 10 minutes on re-explaining it to them in a way that they understood. She was actually really cool and really understanding.

Thus, A3 describes the teacher as chill, laid-back, understanding. When I asked A3 if she could share any further examples that are good at conveying what type of teacher teacher A was, she responded:

I can say that she doesn't really call people out. She thinks of the class, like as a whole. There was multiple times where she would, it would be like after a draft day, or maybe a final day, she'll come into class, and we'll go over something. And she'd be like, I've seen this in a lot of papers, I want to go over this...And it wasn't like: “Some of you guys did this and this was wrong.” It was more of a: “I see why you guys did this and this is probably what you've learned. But as of this point forward, this is what you should start doing.” And

she never really minded repeating it or re-saying it. I know my problem was the drop quotes and what was it, to-do verbs. So, we went over that maybe five times in the class, and she never sounded aggravated about it. She was always cool and understood that it was just a bad habit that needed to be broken and that we needed time with it.

Here, student A3 described Professor A as a teacher who “doesn’t really call people out.” She said that when themes came up in terms of mistakes that students were making, that Professor A would take the time to review this information with them. She said that Professor A “never really minded repeating” material and that “she never sounded aggravated about it.” Instead, she again described Professor A as understanding.

Student A4

Student Overview: A4

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student A4 described herself as female, Hispanic/Latina, and for socioeconomic background entered “Household income around \$65,000.”¹⁴ She answered yes to the question, “Are you a first-generation college student?” and this was confirmed in our interviews.¹⁵ She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our first interview, she was 18 years old, in her second year and fourth semester of college, and was pursuing a major in Stage and Screen. Regarding her relationship to grades, student A4 articulated that: “I know it’s not good. I know. But I’m very much like, grade oriented.”

She grew up with her mom and dad, and also has an older brother, who is about 19 years her senior. She shared that her dad grew up in Mexico, and immigrated to the US when he was in his 20s. She said that he only speaks Spanish, and that his highest level of education was elementary school. At the time of the interview he had been working with a furniture store for many years. Her mom speaks English, and she had been working at a clothing retail store.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

¹⁴ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

¹⁵ I double-checked all the questions from the pre-screening survey in the interviews, and through that process realized that some students had misunderstood what it meant to be a “first generation college student,” and did not respond accurately.

Course A is student A4's second class with Professor A. She was introduced to Professor A's use of ungrading practices in her previous semester with Professor A. In our first interview, when I asked student A4 about how she felt about these ungrading practices when they were introduced to her, she said:

At first I was like, I wonder how this works. And then as we went through the semester, I was like, okay, that makes sense. She will always clearly list out what are the goals that you are required to meet. And if you do all of them, it's a complete... When I first heard of it, it was like, Okay, this is nice. This is great. It's gonna be a lot less stressful.

Thus, student A4's initial impression of the ungrading practices in Course A was that, due to a clear list of expectations earning a complete, the course and its assignments would be "less stressful" than other courses. She went on to further explain that the assessment scale of complete vs. incomplete yields less stress than a 100 point grading scale, because small mistakes with the 100 point grading scale can add up. She said about Course A's assessment scale: "It took that stress away, because I've always thought of English as minus five points, minus this, minus that. And it's like, if I'm not super careful with my paper, then I could easily screw up my grade in here." The stress of point deductions is not present with the assessment scale in Course A.

Student A4 also conveyed a clear understanding of how the contract grading system works and Professor A's use of contract grading. She expressed that it was explained clearly to students, and that they were given charts about what all needed to be completed in order to earn a certain final grade. She shared, "It was on the syllabus, I could look on canvas and the table would be there, like what qualifies as an A, B, C, or D."

The absence of letter or numerical grades on individual assignments was a theme she brought up on multiple occasions in our first interview. Student A4 also expressed appreciation for the feedback that Professor A leaves on assignments:

It's also her feedback, whenever she gives us feedback, she always starts off with, Thank you for sharing with me. And she'll give us two or three points that we should really focus in on. It's not like she goes in and marks down like every, you added a comma here, minus five points. It's not like that. I like that more, it feels more like there's freedom for creativity. And I feel like students feel that too. They feel that comfort with her. And so that contributes to the comfort within the classroom.

Student A4 is again expressing appreciation for the fact that Professor A's grading system does not involve the docking of points for mistakes, as she's experienced with most other classes. While she connects that to a lessened sense of stress with the assignments, here, she is also connecting this with a feeling of having greater "freedom for creativity" in her assignments.

In this first interview, she also highlighted that the ability to revise work in Course A also helped to diminish stress with the course:

Whenever I get a notification from her class, it's either incomplete or complete, right. So if it's incomplete, I know that I can like resubmit it, right? So if totally I just messed up, like I'm dumb, I didn't read X, Y and Z, I need to just resubmit it and whatever it is, right? With other classes, my heart races a little because I know it's a numeric grade. So I'm like, oh my gosh, what did I get, I think I did good. But most of the time when I think I do good, I don't do as good as I think I did. So it's less stress, I guess. It's less like, oh my gosh, oh, my gosh, what did I get? I still get excited. Just because I do like seeing her feedback. It's always nice. I don't know. I like the way she structures her feedback. It's just like, this is nice. I don't know how to explain it. But yeah, it does differ. One is like, the stakes are, for her, the stakes are less high. You know, it's okay, even if I do get it incomplete. I know, I can most likely resubmit and turn it in. And that's fine.

So, here, she also attributes Course A having less stress than her other courses to the ability she has in that course to revise and resubmit her work. She knows that if she does receive an assessment of "incomplete," that she can redo that work.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In our second interview, the theme of Course A being less stressful for student A4 continued. She again mentioned the stress and anxiety of waiting for grades to show up in Canvas, but that the fear of getting points docked is not present for her assignments in Course A. She said about Course A:

The only stress that I kind of receive is like, Oh, what is she going to say? What are her comments? Which I know that it's not as bad. I would much rather have comments as to: here's what you can improve on than: You got a 70 or whatever... I feel like it's more constructive. It allows me to learn better than just like, you know, cram everything and then like, throw it out on an exam and push it off. I feel like with her class... I feel a lot less stress.

She describes the feedback in Course A as “constructive” and as supportive to her learning, which she again connects to diminished stress.

She went on to further highlight that the lack of numerical grades on assignment assessment emphasizes learning:

Since I don't have to focus on a number, I can focus more on how can I improve? I actually have that want to improve. It's not just, Oh, I got a 98, I did so good. Versus with not receiving a grade it's like, okay, I know, I completed it right. It's gonna be a complete if I met the minimum requirements. And then I can actually focus on the learning aspect. Because I feel like grades suck out the want to learn in a lot of students, I know, at least it does for me. It's more just like, I need to get that grade, I need to either memorize or I need to like cram or whatever it is, right? ... [In course A] it's definitely more like I can actually learn. I'm actually eager to learn more and how to fix certain stuff in my writing and whatnot. And I like that aspect. Like, not having that number there gives me less anxiety. It's not like, I'm looking at Oh, my gosh, I got five points taken off for a comma.

So, not only does she feel that the assessment setup in Course A encourages learning, on the flipside, she feels that the standard grading scale diminishes the desire to learn. She again expresses here that when the standard grading scale is used, she tends to focus more on cramming and memorization rather than the goal of learning.

In this interview I asked student A4 if she perceived any negative aspects to ungrading. She said no. She shared that while English is not her favorite school subject, that she saw nothing negative about the ungrading practices in Course A.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third and final interview, she shared that she earned a final of grade of A in Course A, which is the grade she had been aiming for. This was not a surprise to her, as she had been keeping track of the contract format, as Professor A encouraged students to do:

Throughout the semester she would always tell us, keep track, because we had our syllabus. It's like to get an A, you have to do all major assignments and this, and that, and that. And I turned in every single assignment and got a complete on it. So from the start, I knew I was going to get an A.

Thus, given student A4 found the grading breakdown easy to understand, and because she received an assessment of “complete” on all of her assignments, she knew that she would get an A in the course.

When I asked student A4 how at that point, at the end of the semester, she would describe Professor A’s teaching style, she responded:

She was very helpful as an, as a professor, as an instructor, gave us a lot of resources, made class- like she was very friendly with us. Obviously, she's my professor, I still respect her, but a very casual kind of relationship. And yes, the fact that there were no grades, that was a lot better just because for me, every single like, if I get a grade on an essay, it stresses me out, because I missed a comma and I got five points taken off.

Here, she describes Professor A as helpful and friendly. She connects this to an aspect of the course that she brought up numerous times in our interviews: that Professor A’s assessment setup meant that she wasn’t docking points for things like missing a comma. Student A4 went on to say about Professor A:

She's quirky in a good way. I know, when people say quirky, sometimes they don't mean it well. I mean it well. She's quirky, she's like, I don't know, very English teacher-esque. Like you think English teacher in a cardigan, like that's her. She's really sweet. She's super sweet...She's very sweet. She's funny. She can make a little joke... Like she would do notes based off of what she saw we're kind of struggling with. Like, you guys are kind of struggling with this topic, let's have a day where we take notes and whatnot on it. And yeah, she was very sweet...I liked her. Yeah, a lot.

Thus, here she goes on to describe Professor A as quirky, in a good way, sweet, and funny. As an example of her teaching, student A4 brought up that when Professor A noticed that students were struggling on a concept, that she would take a day to review material to help students with what they were struggling with.

Group B: Institution, Course, Professor, & Students

Institution B

Institution B is a public institution that, according to US News (at <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges> in April 2025), has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 74,000 students. Of that enrollment, approximately 45% were reported as male

students and approximately 55% were reported as female students. U.S. News reports a 75% minority enrollment with the five largest groups in terms of race and ethnicity as follows: Hispanic, white, Black, Asian, and two or more races. U.S. News also reports that this university has a 79% acceptance rate and a 13:1 student-faculty ratio.

Course B

Course B is a General Chemistry Laboratory II course. Institution B's website (in April 2025) describes Course B as a "chemistry laboratory for science majors" and lists a previous course and a lecture course as a prerequisite/corequisite. In this course, Professor B used a type of alternative assessment called "specifications grading," or "specs grading." An important note about this educator interview: In our interview Professor B distinguished between the terms "ungrading" and "specifications grading." As considered in the literature review, in this project I am using a definition of ungrading that encompasses specifications grading as an iteration of this practice (see Figure 2 from Johanesen et al. 2023). Thus, for this section: Results B, it is important to keep this distinction in mind, especially in quoted material from Professor B.

Course B Syllabus: Assignments

The full syllabus for Course B required an account with Institution B to log in and access. To provide me with syllabus information, Professor B copied and pasted into an email a couple sections from the Chemistry Lab syllabus: an "Assignments" section and a "Grading and Course Requirements" section. During our interview she also shared a "grade tracker" chart that she was using in Course B.

The assignments section in the syllabus clarified that the written work in the course would comprise of three types: (1) datasheets "that organize data collection and calculation," (2) short answers to questions from the platform Chem21Labs, and (3) non short answers which include "calculations, multiple choice, dropdown menus, etc" in the platform Chem21Labs.

The section "Grading and Course Requirements" specifies that: "Overall course grading is based on the activities in the following categories" and lists eight activities. Those activities are: (1) datasheets, (2) non short answer, (3) short answer, (4) safety, (5) clean up, (6) tech skills, (7) check in & out, (8) reflections.

Course B Syllabus: Ungrading

The assignment section in the syllabus detailed that, “A **specifications grading rubric** for each assignment will be posted on each assignment outlining the expectations for that assignment, and you should use it to guide your writing and also to ‘pre-grade’ your assignment before submitting it.”

In the “Grading and Course Requirements” section of the syllabus, it is again reiterated that: “this course is designed around a specifications grading scheme.” It goes on to detail how the use of the specifications grading would be used in Course B:

In specs grading, learning outcomes for a given assignment are listed on a rubric, and the grader assesses whether or not the assignment demonstrates mastery of each learning outcome. To pass an assignment, you will need to demonstrate mastery of a given number of the learning outcomes. Similarly, you will need to pass a given percentage of all assignments in the class to earn a specific letter grade, as explained in the Student Grade Tracker.

That Student Grade Tracker chart had eight rows that corresponded with the eight entries from the “Grading and Course Requirements” section of the syllabus: (1) datasheets, (2) non short answer, (3) short answer, (4) safety, (5) clean up, (6) tech skills, (7) check in & out, and (8) reflections. The last row was titled “Add A Plus to Your Grade” with the criteria listed as eight or more “reflections satisfactory.” The other rows, for assignments 1-7, are broken into three columns that show the minimum of what needs to be accomplished in each to earn a C, earn a B, or earn an A.

At the end of the “Grading and Course Requirements” section, there was an entry on the use of “tokens” in the course: “This course has a “token economy”, where you can earn tokens by performing various actions and redeem them to improve your scores on certain assignments. A document explaining the token economy can be found here.”

Professor B

Professor B, Course B, & Pedagogy

On Professor B’s website, she describes herself as female and Black. In our interview, she shared that she had been diagnosed with ADHD. Professor B started teaching in 2014 as an adjunct.

She came to Institution B in 2017 in a tenure track position. When I asked her about her pedagogy, she first mentioned that once she was no longer a TA, and had control over her own courses, that one aspect she was interested in bringing into the classroom was games. She said, “I want to bring games in the classroom, polling, low stakes, competition, that kind of stuff.” She also said that she makes an effort to “connect classwork,” instead of students having assignments where “you did an assignment and then never looked at it again.”

She emphasized that her perspective further changed when she got to institution B. At Institution B she became more concerned with accessibility:

Then I got to [Institution B], and that's when my focus aggressively shifted towards accessibility, because I want to say, within my first year, I had someone who was definitely on the spectrum. And I had no idea what to do to help that student, and neither did the TAs, and the department. And I was like, well, We can't keep doing that, because this is why you don't see these students after this first class. I had hard of hearing students, and I was like, This is why you don't see those students after this first class. I've got students who have seizures, and it's like, this is why you don't see them. So anyway, so I got really big into that and and trying to really lean into that.

She went on to give further information about the specific circumstances that some students at Institution B face:

It's a commuter school. It's pretty aggressively non traditional. But you've got your first generation, so the first in their family to go to college. You've got, they're working full time, but also full time in school. They're caretakers of various types, either kids, siblings, parents, all that kind of stuff...The one big revelation was, they have court cases. Court does not care if you have class, the court says you should be here, or you're going to jail. You know, there's a whole former inmate, inmate program at [Institution B]... I had a student whose girlfriend died the last two weeks of the semester, and they had been together for like, eight years...So I got really big into like, how can we allow students to have lives and teach them?

Thus, with these two passages Professor B is detailing how being at Institution B has changed some of her thinking about teaching, largely based upon the students and their experiences. She first talks about her shift “towards accessibility,” from having the experience of having neurodivergent students and students with disabilities in her class. She goes on to express sympathy with a variety of student circumstances and hardships, like working full time or having court dates, that led her thinking about how to pair teaching with acknowledging student challenges and responsibilities outside the classroom.

As mentioned, Professor B talks about ungrading and specifications grading as separate concepts, which will be important to keep in mind when she is quoted using those terms. This project considers specifications grading as a type of ungrading. In the semester of our interview, Spring 2023, Professor B was using specifications grading in Course B. It was the first semester she was using specifications grading. Previously, however, Professor B used different iterations of ungrading.

When I asked her how she heard about specifications grading, she shared that she learned about specifications grading from another educator who she got to know through Twitter. In making the decision to incorporate specifications grading into Course B, she names another educator, Stephen Mang,¹⁶ as someone whose ideas she used to adapt the practice into her own course. She said of his work: “I took that and then just adapted it to what I was doing. And I was like, it's already done. He's tested it. He's published it all the fine detail like, the rubrics are already there. My workload is just to figure out what the lectures are going to be.”

Professor B expressed feeling that using specifications grading in the lab makes things more simple:

I think specs for my lab class is just, it's just a lighter lift, because it's like, here's a checklist. There's a checklist. Based on the checklist, figure out what your grade is with the TAs. I can be like, here's a rubric. It's a one point rubric, either they hit it or they didn't.

Here she describes specifications grading as providing a “lighter lift” due to the straightforwardness of checklists and the use of simple assignments rubrics where students either meet the goal of the assignment, or not.

When I asked Professor B about the specifics of the assignments and assessments in Course B, she first mentioned datasheets and pre-lab assignments: “I introduced data sheets because I don't do lab notebooks. Those are graded satisfactory, unsatisfactory based on a rubric...They don't see that rubric...I have, there are pre labs, but the pre labs give them tokens. Because they're just calculation based for the most part.” She then expressed that it would be easier to talk about the assignments if we were looking at the grade tracker together, so she shared her screen with me in order to pull up that document. With the tracker on the screen, she continued to explain to me each facet of the eight assignments on the syllabus and grade tracker (I have added in the corresponding

¹⁶ She did not refer to any specific material from this educator, yet, here is a resource that I found about his use of specifications grading: <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/abs/10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00859?source=cen>

number of the assignment to match with the list I presented in the syllabus section):

The (2) non short answer is called non short answer because some of it's multiple answer, multiple choice. So that's graded. That is graded on a points thing. They get three chances per question. I don't take off points if they miss the first trial...Then in each lab, there are (3) short answer questions, and so, those get graded high pass, low pass, needs revisions...I do give them a rubric for that...And then I don't necessarily tell them which part of the rubric they didn't get right. I have comments I make that hint at it, but I don't explicitly say...High pass is one level. Low passes, they have so many out so many. And then needs revision is anything below the low pass. So that's how I do those. And then, yeah, (4) safety is TA. (5) Clean up is, it's they do it or they don't. (6) Tech skills, like I said, is graded. (7) Check in and check out, is just, they have to do it. And then I have (8) reflections that are for each week, and that is how, if they want a plus grade, that's how that's determined. Because the reflections are like, How did lab go for you this week? What did you do to prepare for lab this week? What would you what are you going to do differently next week based on how things went this week in terms of your preparation? It's a lot of metacognition stuff.

Thus, she reviewed each of the eight assignments on the grade tracker. She first brought up the (1) datasheets, which are assessed as either satisfactory or unsatisfactory, (2) the non-short answers which are items like multiple choice, which get graded, (3) the short answers which get assessed as high pass, low pass, or needs revision, (4) safety, which is assessed by the TA's (and as per the tracker is assessed as satisfactory or unsatisfactory), (5) clean up that is marked as complete or incomplete, (6) tech skills which is a graded assignment, (7) check in and check out which is marked as either "check in complete" or "both complete", and (8) reflections as an opportunity to "add a plus to your grade" if eight or more as assessed as satisfactory. As mentioned in the syllabus entry, each of these rows is divided across three columns to indicate what minimum is needed for each, in order to earn a grade of C, B, or A.

I asked her about how students have responded to the specs grading in Course B, she said:

So with specs right now, a lot of students say, it's like 50/50, students that get it, and then the students that, "I don't understand." And I've been holding off on explaining it, because I want them to have grades so that I can say, "Okay, go to the checklist and now put in what you have and this is how it works." Because if I try to do it in the abstract, they're like, "Oh, there's like, seven columns, what do I do?" So I haven't tried explaining it to anybody yet because until you have something to look at, I'm not bothering with it. It's a waste of time.

Thus, Professor B's approach to explaining the use of specifications grading outlined in her syllabus is to wait until students have had the experience of completing a few assignments. As she says, once

they have completed some assignments, it is easier to show students how to plug those into the grade tracker document.

Professor B shares that students are likely only experiencing ungrading in her course alone, and that this yields some challenges:

In terms of student response, they generally like it, if they can remember it exists. Because I'm one class out of five, and it's like, they kind of forget that..And because of the software I use, the software still has points in it, and I can't take the points off, or else it doesn't work properly. So they forget and they're like, Oh, well, this says I have that. I'm like, but that's not what those points mean.

As she describes here, when students forget about the setup of the course, they may also become confused with the software used in the course which does use a points system that does not solely reflect the final grade in the course.

Another important aspect of Course B is that Professor B is assisted by a few TA's in the course. Thus, they also have an impact on how students understand the ungraded aspects of the class. As Professor B highlighted about the perceptions of students in Course B: "A lot of it has to do, at least for lab, has to do with how the TAs present it. If the TA doesn't understand it and doesn't present it, or they're angry because they're like, that's not hard enough, student perception changes." Thus, as explained here, the perceptions of TA's in the course, and their interactions with the students in the course also impact student understanding of the ungrading aspects of the course.

Given this significance, I asked her if she could say more about the response of TA's in her class to her use of alternative assessment models. She described a mixed response:

So a lot of them think it's interesting. They don't get it. They have a hard time hanging on, figuring it- because they're like, I have to explain it, so I need to get it...I talked to my TA three hours ago. So this is all in my head still. He was saying that they preferred not having a training about it and rather just doing it because they were like, it took me two labs, and then I figured out what was happening. And I figured out how to change my pre lab talk. They talk about their interactions with students are much better. It's less of the "I have to get the perfect answer, the right answer." It's a lot less adversarial. The environment is lighter... There's always one TA who's just like, "I refuse to engage." And they kind of do traditional grading anyway. Or they kind of just phone it in.

Thus, the TA who she spoke with expressed a preference for the assessment aspect to be explained after a few assignments were completed. In retrospect, I believe that this TA was a TA for Professor

B in a previous semester because when I asked Professor B about the response from TAs in that current semester to her use of specifications grading, she said: "As far as specs grading, I haven't asked them yet, because I was waiting for grades so I could explain it to everybody...so I don't know yet."

In our interview, we also talked about how the social location of the educator may impact how students perceive ungrading. Professor B mentioned that she had brought up a similar point in a recent panel that she sat on:

That's the thing I brought up at the panel a couple weeks ago where I was like, if I'm the one giving the feedback to this student with these identities, how do they interpret my feedback? Because some students would be like, you don't know what you're talking about. I got a whole PhD, which doesn't mean I know what I'm talking about, but I at least have done this longer than you have... That's also the reason I do, when I do ungrading, the reason I do my grade conversations the way I do is because of that. Because I used to meet with, like let them just meet me one on one during the lab period, and I'd get cornered by a student who was just insistent that I was wrong...So [now] all of my grade conversations are in the comments section of Canvas...I think it does bring into question, like I said, my knowledge, like how competent am I in chemistry because of who I am? I think it gets seen as political because I identify with a couple of marginalized identities. And so people would be like, Oh, you're doing this because it's supposed to be equitable, and it's equitable.

Thus, because she identifies "with a couple of marginalized identities," she sees that people may then perceive her interest in ungrading as resulting from the belief that ungrading is an equitable practice, implying the assumption that someone who occupies marginalized identities would necessarily be interested in equity. She is also saying here that she has experienced her knowledge and competency being questioned due to her identity, and particularly, her identity in a science field, in addition to having the experience of physically being cornered by students insisting that she is incorrect.

She goes on to also describe how her physical presence is not "intimidating" in the classroom, and how she relatedly interacts with students in the lab classes which are large classes:

I'm also small. I'm five two, I'm not particularly tall. I'm sub 100 pounds. I am not an intimidating force whatsoever...In lab, I am the voice of doom, and I cultivate that personality. I purposely don't, I don't spend a lot of time in the room, and when I do come in, I'm usually just yelling, "Put your safety glasses on. Spit out your gum. Put your bag in the corner. Why is there a water bottle on my bench? What are you doing? Why are you still here?" It's like I tend to be a little bit of a jerk because there's 300 students, and I'm like, I can't be- You got to set a standard, because if my TAs are all like, "Oh, I want you to feel

good because I'm student too," and I'm like, "No, no, no. You need to do what I'm telling you." But then when I get into like, like my chemistry writing class, because I have a student who's in both of them right now, I'm a lot more personable.

Thus, as Professor B conveys here, she adjusts her level of stern-ness, dependent upon the nature of the class. In some classes she feels able to be "more personable," yet with the large lab classes, she focuses on cultivating a personality that students will respond to by following her directions.

Professor B also brought up an interaction with a student in Course B that she sees as reflecting the influence of her social identities, as well as the context of ungrading:

I have a student right now who's very pissed at me. Their comment after the first week was - I'm still trying to deal with it - was, "I've taken astrophysics and microbiology, and yet I cannot understand what's happening in gen chem two lab. And I work in a chemistry lab as a career right now, and I cannot figure out what's happening in this class. The only feelings I have about this class are embarrassment." I was just like, would you have said that if I was a white man? I'm pretty sure the answer is no.

She went on to say that there is a structure in place for students to ask questions if they need clarity, implying that there is a route that student could have taken, but didn't, and concludes with a reflection of how this response may also be tied to ungrading practices more generally:

If you have a question about how the grading system works, you need to ask. As opposed to just being like, I don't get it, and therefore it is too- you just need to ask. But you don't want to ask because I'm not seen as whatever. Because then it's also like, my inbox is stupid. So, you have to go through your TA and your head TA before you get to me. Because they will flag it as: [Professor B] you need to pay attention to this email. Because everything else I just send off to the TA...There is that. The vitriol is a little- or the feelings are a lot more intense around ungrading

Thus, Professor B attributes the student feeling comfortable in communicating with her in this way as linked to her own identity ("Would you have said that if I was a white man?") as well as the context of ungrading ("The feelings are a lot more intense around ungrading").

Professor B: History of Ungrading & Institutional Response

The Spring 2023 semester during which our interview took place was the first semester that Professor B used specifications grading, although she did use other forms of ungrading previously. When I asked how she first heard of ungrading, she reflected that she learned about ungrading

generally on Twitter (in addition to also learning about specifications grading on Twitter). In Spring 2020 she came back to teaching after time off from having a baby, and used contract grading in her courses. Then, with the COVID-19 pandemic causing schools to go online in Spring 2020, she ended up having to further modify her courses as they went online.

After some experience with ungrading, through the use of student self-assessment and lack of assignment grades on the A-F scale, she did end up questioning claims of the practice as equitable: “I got stuck in like, is ungrading actually equitable? Because I had some students who were minority, ethnic minorities, who were very hard on themselves” She went on to mention challenges for some students based on their culture. She continued:

Culturally there was, the culture they come from, somebody tells them if they did it right. And they were really uncomfortable taking that control from an instructor, from a perceived superior...And then, your neurodivergent people and, and that was like, Okay, is it really working for them? Because people don't know where they stand, and the TAs couldn't answer the question, so I was only one that could. So it got so, I don't know if this is actually accessible, equitable, inclusive. I think it can be, but I was like, but there's definitely elements of - this isn't quite doing what I want. Students are having a hard time because I'm the only class that's doing this.

Thus, here, she identifies several potential challenges with ungrading: minority students who “were very hard on themselves” with self assessments and perhaps assessing themselves lower than they should, students with cultural backgrounds that lead them to feeling “uncomfortable” with self-assessment due to perception of that practice taking control “from a perceived superior,” and the overall struggle of all students who have to keep up with her ungrading structure when it is likely the only course they are experiencing that in. She went on to provide one more example of students who faced challenges with ungrading:

I have a couple students, who, their family is tolerating their being in college so they can go to med school as long as they do well in the class. So if they don't have a grade to hand back to their family, the family's like you're wasting your money and time. Quit school so you can help with the family business or whatever...Those people tend to be very like, can you please give me something so I can take this back to my family, and they know that I'm doing.

Thus, in each of these cases, she is providing examples of reasons as to why she started questioning if ungrading is truly an equitable practice.

Yet, she did also mention that some students have approached her to express incredibly positive experiences in her course:

But then I also get that the students with marginalized identities, especially Black girls, Black women, but also some Middle Eastern women will make a point of coming up to me and being like this is the best class ever. Or like, I thought I sucked at chemistry now I want to get a minor in it. Or, I really enjoyed this experience that I had heard was going to be terrible, and it's not, and so. And it's because of the grading. Because when I was traditionally grading, that didn't happen. But when I did ungrading, or when I do something different, that's when those comments started to come in, or at least increase in frequency.

So while on the one hand, she has experienced students facing difficulties with ungrading, with this sometimes being linked to their own social identities and/or cultural background, she has also had this experience, in which “students with marginalized identities,” and especially “Black women,” have expressed having a positive experience because of the ungrading setup.

She also mentioned seeing a difference in her own teaching when she uses ungrading versus traditional grades:

The TA I was talking to today noticed this, it's like when I do ungrading, I'm very much more like, we want to encourage the student. We want to remind them that they're capable. All they have to do is try, and as long as they get better, it's okay. And my flexibility policies are a lot more like: It's fine, we'll figure it out...But then when I'm doing traditional grading, I'm a lot harsher.

Thus, as she expresses here, using an ungraded setup allows her to focus on being flexible and encouraging students, whereas with “traditional grading, I'm a lot harsher.”

A few other observations that Professor B shared with me about ungrading had to do with class size and type of class. Specifically, she did express concern for the use of ungrading with larger class sizes, and with “lower level” courses. She detailed that: “I don't think ungrading is something that should be done in classes over 30 students and definitely not 50...I think that's just because of the emotional toll on both sides...everybody's like, we should all move to this. I'm like, no, we shouldn't.” She also said, “I don't think students think that much about what the grading system is supposed to mean for it to benefit them, especially at lower levels. For me I have first years for the most part. They're just adjusting in college. They don't really care that I want them to learn how to think about learning.” Thus here, she is referring to the use of student self-evaluation as an

ungrading practice, and expressing concern that this can be difficult in large class sizes, as well as to use with students in their first year of college.

One of the final conclusions that she shared with me had to do with further reflection on using ungrading in an institution that otherwise relies on the A-F grading scale: “You know what it is. I don't know if ungrading is worth it in a vacuum. I think if you're the only one, if you're the only class out of five they're taking, I don't know if there's actually a benefit, especially if you're a low credit class.” The difficulty of using ungrading in a course when students' other classes will all use the A-F grading scale was a theme that came up several times in our interview.

Student B1

Student Overview: B1

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student B1 described herself as female, Middle Eastern, and middle class.¹⁷ In our interviews she specified that she identifies as “Egyptian in a specific sense, in a broader sense, I would be categorized as Middle Eastern.” She also stated that she “would identify as not disabled.” She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our first interview, she was 19 years old, in her first year and second semester of college, and was pursuing a major in biology. Student B1 speaks English and Arabic.

In our interviews, she provided this further description about her family's socioeconomic status: “I would say my family's middle class, we're comfortable. To be completely honest, thankfully, money has never really been a problem for us. So that helped me focus a lot more on my education and give a lot of my time to studying rather than the pressure of finding a job.” Student B1 shared that she grew up in a household with her mom, dad, and three younger sisters. She said her dad owns a business and “some properties” and that her mom is a stay at home mom. Her dad's highest level of education is a master's degree, which he earned in the United States, and her mom's highest level of education is a master's degree, which she earned in Egypt.

Interview One: B1

¹⁷ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

Before the semester of our interview, student B1 said she had not previously taken any course that used ungrading practices. When I asked student B1 about her general relationship with school and grades, she provided some detailed descriptions about the influence of cultural norms from her family. First, she shared:

So I'm sure you can tell from my last name that I'm Egyptian or some kind of Arab. And let me tell you, I mean, Arabs take grades very, very seriously. And it's very enforced in the household. And as are other immigrants, I have a lot of Asian friends, a lot of Indian friends that say, quite the same thing... And that's mainly because of the family pressure, since you were young. You have to succeed. You have to get an A. You have to become a doctor. You have to do this. And to be quite honest with you, I have had that a little bit, in my experience, ever since I was a child. But at the same time, my parents were very lenient with: you don't have to become a doctor if you don't want to, just get a good job, and we'll be happy... But I've always had really good grades since I was young, because of that pressure, that standard, that expectation. And also because I didn't want to disappoint my parents. And I also wanted to honor their sacrifices. So I've really tried my best with studying.

Thus, as student B1 conveys here, the cultural background of her family has heavily influenced her relationship with school and grades. She reports that she has always strived for “good grades” because of cultural pressure, and her desire to not “disappoint” her parents. Yet, she says though, that her parents “were very lenient” in terms of supporting her career goals, which she implies is not necessarily standard for her culture. Relatedly, later on in our interviews, she shared a joke:

This is kind of a funny joke. It's not just Egyptians, but a lot of different cultures have this joke: Your parents tell you when you grow up, “Oh, yeah, you can become anything you want. As long as it's a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer.” That's how, that's it. the three options you have.

At another point during our interviews she further detailed that these pressures come from the culture in Egypt. She specified that: “Over there as well, grades are a very big deal. It's super emphasized. Having a career is a really big part of your social status. So all in all, education is a huge deal over there.” Relatedly, she explains that being a first generation American with immigrant parents adds to that pressure:

I know some other students I grew up with, in primary or high school or whatever, that weren't really first generation. And I can see there's a considerable difference, there isn't as much of a pressure...And a lot of other first generations that I know, feel exactly the same way, like, "Oh, I have to honor the sacrifice." I have to make sure all this time, money, effort has been worth it...I know a lot of people, school is just their entire identity. There is no you outside of school, which I think is very unfortunate. But it's really easy to get consumed by it when you feel so pressured to succeed and to do well in school.

She then did speak with me at length about her own struggles, and becoming "consumed" by school.

She shared that: "because of that cultural pressure and everything, I could definitely tell you that a lot of validation and self worth comes from those A's." She went on to describe how the pressure of grades ended up taking a toll on her mental health in high school:

A lot of my mental health or how well I was doing with mental health depended on my grades. If I was doing great, if I had great teachers, if I have had all A's at the time. I'd feel great. I'd feel happy, not stressed. If I didn't, then I wouldn't feel so great. I'd feel anxious. I'd feel stressed. I'd feel upset. I talked down to myself sometimes.

However, she did ultimately work on challenging these negative responses. She said that she learned "how to deal with that and balance that, especially in college."

When I asked her about achieving that balance, she said that self-affirmations, the support of friends who felt similar pressures, and religion, were all factors in adjusting her relationship with grades. She detailed:

Me and my friend group, and a lot of the community that I grew up in, we're Coptic Orthodox. A lot of that was, make sure to pray the prayer before the exam, and make sure it's prayed before you go to sleep. And, of course, no one's saying that, Oh, if you don't pray, you're not gonna pass or anything like that. It was more to comfort yourself more than anything. It was more of, it's okay. I'm not alone in this. God's holding my hand through this. I'll be fine. I'll get out of it. I'll get through it. So a lot is definitely from a religious perspective as well, just the comfort, in your own faith is, I'm going to be fine. At the end of the day, God doesn't care if I get an A in this class or not, so it's okay.

Thus, her religion was one aspect that helped her to not be so hard on herself about grades. She said that she can now accept that getting a B on an assignment, or even a C, "isn't the end of the world."

Towards the beginning of that first interview with student B1, I asked her (as I did with all of my student participants) if she could tell me about her favorite class in college so far, as well as her least favorite class. I intended for this question to help us ease into our conversation about college

and experiences in college courses. In student B1's case, her answer ended up also being directly related to her perception of Course B. Student B1 said that precalculus and her General Chemistry Lab One course were her two worst class experiences so far. I did not initially realize it, but Professor B taught that General Chemistry Lab One course that student B1 had taken in the previous semester. Thus, student B1's relationship with Professor B extends back to the semester before our interview. Before I realized that it was Professor B who taught that course, student B1 provided some examples about what made the General Chemistry Lab One course one of her worst college class experiences:

The problem was, it was very vague and very disorganized. I mean, I remember the first week a lot of people were very discouraged... And we were freshmen, so we didn't really have that many technical skills beforehand. I just don't think we got good foundations. There wasn't thoroughness in the procedures. And it wasn't a very good environment to be in because the teacher assistants were constantly being yelled at... And there was a lot of, there was just a lot of negativity around the room... it was just very disorganized, and just not a very healthy learning environment.

Thus, student B1 expressed multiple reasons for feeling that the course was "not a very healthy learning environment," from vagueness and disorganization, to the teacher yelling at TA's.

She went on to say that the TA's being yelled at was frequent: "They got yelled at every week... She did use some unprofessional language, yelling at the TAs in front of the class as well, which was also very unprofessional and a terrible learning environment to be honest." I asked her what the TA's were being yelled at about and she said:

One of them, I think was moving a beaker, to the other side of the table just to get it out of a student's way. And she would yell at them for that. But mainly, she'd usually yell at them for helping students because as I explained, the procedure was very vague. And they wouldn't help us in terms of a practical where we're not supposed to talk or anything like that, during normal labs, if they just would like to clear up something, she'd usually yell at them for that. Or she yelled at them for explaining too much of the calculations. Mind you, they were calculations we never did before. So it was, it was very much, it was very demeaning, which I feel bad for saying, because that's where I got this opportunity from, but it's the truth.

So, for student B1, Professor B yelling at the TA's was problematic for several reasons. In addition to being "unprofessional," student B1 felt that the TA's were being yelled at when they were trying to "clear something up" for a student, due to the assignment/instructions being "very vague." She

expresses “feeling bad” for sharing these experiences with me, since Professor B’s course is the reason she learned about the opportunity to participate in my study. Yet, she says about her descriptions, “it’s the truth.”

After sharing this detail, she immediately asked: “But just to make sure, this is anonymous, right?” I assured her that what she was sharing with me would not be shared with anyone. I told her that Professor B just shared the flyer with students, but would not even know who signed up to participate, let alone what they said. She responded: “Thank you. It's just because I have the whole semester left. So I didn't want my grades to be in jeopardy or anything.” Thus, while student B1 did not appear to have reservations in sharing these negative experiences, this was one moment in which she expressed concern that sharing these experiences could negatively impact her. It is also worth noting that student B1 never turned on her camera during our meetings. I believe it may have had to do with the concern about confidentiality that she expressed here.

It was at this point in our interview that I realized that the teacher she was talking about from the General Chemistry Lab One was Professor B. I was curious why student B1 would take another course (Course B) with Professor B, given these negative experiences, but she said there were no other teachers that teach that course: “it was either you don't take gen chem lab at all, or you have to take it with her.”

In that previous semester’s course, student B1 did earn an A grade, yet she questioned: “I ended up with an A but at what cost? Three hours of belittlement every week. It's terrible.” She mentioned hearing that many students rated that class poorly on the course evaluations: “I know a lot of people did rate the class very poorly, just based off of how bad the environment was, a lot of people were like, it was very anxiety inducing, very confusing. It made me feel stupid. It made me feel terrible. It was more of an emotional thing.”

She even expressed feeling that the disorganization of the course resulted in unsafe conditions. She felt that when students aren’t sure about what they are doing, or how to use equipment, and the TAs are yelled at by the professor if they try to provide guidance, that student can get hurt. She provided this example:

I know what it is, conceptually, in theory, with calculations, everything, it's just when you go to do it, sometimes you need a little bit of help operating machinery you've never seen before. I mean, I nearly burned my hand on a hot plate in the lab because I don't know, they didn't really explain how it works. They just put us there. They said, plug it in, do the lab.

That's it. So I could see some of it being a safety hazard as well.

Thus, student B1 not only finds the course frustrating, but even describes it as a potential “safety hazard.”

I segued into asking student B1 about her experience in Course B, in the current semester. She reported having similar experiences with Professor B in the current semester as she did in the previous semester. One difference was the use of specifications grading. Student B1 said that Professor B did not use specifications grading in the previous semester. She said:

This semester, she's doing something called specifications grading. But to be completely honest with you, I've talked to several other students also in the lab, we don't really understand it. She wasn't very thorough about it, she didn't really talk us through it, or ask our opinions or ask for a vote or anything. It was just, hey, we're doing this for the semester. Yeah, we're just going to do it for this semester, whether you like it or not. So I'm not really sure how it is.

Her description of the vagueness and lack of clarity around the specifications grading setup is similar to her descriptions of Professor B's course in the previous semester.

When I asked her if Professor B said anything to the class at all about specifications grading she said: “Oh, not at all. She didn't even explain it like on canvas or anything. It was just in the syllabus, hey, we're doing specifications grading for the semester. That's it.” Yet, student B1 did note that the students had been provided the grade tracker document: “I mean, to be fair, the rubric for that grading system is up. It's just very vague, and it definitely requires a lot more explanation. But she didn't get into it in person. So it was hard to understand.” So, where specifications grading was mentioned in the syllabus, and the grade tracker was provided, student B1 again feels that the descriptions are “vague” and require “more explanation.” I asked her if she had a sense of how the ultimate grade in the course would be determined at the end of the semester, she again expressed confusion:

I wish I could tell you specifically, but from what I know, she is going to give us a general numeric grade at the end. It's not just a letter grade. But I'm not sure how she's calculating it. She's calculating it with a point system and with percentages. But again, she didn't explain it. So I'm not really sure how that works.

So, overall, student B1 is confused about the specifications grading in the course, including how to understand the grade tracker, and how the final grade will be determined.

She does, though, express having at least a general understanding of how the platform Chem21Labs works: “We use Chem 21. And it requires a calculation and it's a bunch of tables that you have to put your data in. So you just turn it in that way and marks it for you automatically. And you have three tries to do it. And if you don't get it right, you get the points taken off. If you get it right, you get the points immediately.” Thus, there are at least some aspects of the course assessments that student B1 does understand, despite being unsure overall.

I switched gears from talking about specifications grading generally, and asked student B1 if she could tell me about any assignments she'd completed already in the course. She shared:

So this week was the first week we actually did a lab. And once again, I have the same commentary as before, very vague. But more so, I would say it's even worse this time, because she kept mentioning at the beginning of last lab and this lab that - I'm expecting a lot more from you, I'm not going to help you at all. But as I explained in the beginning, there wasn't a good foundation. She didn't help us the first time. So this time, there's more expectations, there's more pressure, and with even less help.

As she experienced last semester, she expressed again that the lab work in Course B is “vague,” yet that this it is worse with Course B because the expectations are higher and student B1 does not feel like she was given a “good foundation” of knowledge from the previous course.

Student B1 mentioned that Canvas is the Learning Management System (LMS) used in the course. I asked her if Professor B uses Canvas with the class. She said that she “uses it for weekly announcements, which are usually very passive aggressive.” When I asked student B1 if she could tell me more about this observation, she said:

Usually, it's: “You should have had- you should already know how to do this. Don't ask me about it. Don't ask a TA about it.” Or, or oh, one of them. It was actually the very first impression we got of her, first week of Gen Chem One Lab. She asked us to put, everyone to comment at least one song, so she could put a playlist together for the first week and just play that. And then in the next announcement she was like, “Since clearly none of you know how to follow directions, we're not going to be playing any music at all, because a lot of you either didn't comment a song, or commented more than one song.” So it's very belittling side comments like that.

While this example was one that stood out to her from the previous semester, she nonetheless described Professor B's announcements to generally be “very passive aggressive.”

When I asked her about whether she has a sense of how other students are experiencing Course B, she said that she does know some of the other students in the course, and that they have talked about the course. She said about their perspectives:

It's generally much of the same consensus. But I would also like to note that a lot of the students I asked- Because I wouldn't lie to you, some people do complain about a professor just because they're not trying and their grades aren't good. So for the pool of people that I really talked to and asked about this, they're all straight A students, all 4.0 GPAs. And all thrive with professors like [names another professor], professors that know how to explain and they just, they don't make it easy for you to get an A, but if you study like a good student should, an A should be no problem. So a lot of people with really good study methods really, high intelligence and everything, said generally the same thing about her. I honestly, not to be pessimistic or negative, I really haven't heard one student say any good things about her. I really haven't. And a lot of students before us, they would always warn us. Oh, she always yells at the TAs. She only lets the TAs talk to you. You'll never see her. She's never in the lab. She's always in the room. And things of that nature.

Thus, here, student B1 is sharing her observations that others share her perspective with Course B and Professor B: both with students in the course currently, as well as students who have taken courses with her in the past.

Interview Two: B1

When I spoke with student B1 in interview two, one of the first things she mentioned was that one significant change in Course B from the first time we talked was that students in the course were now doing their lab work with a partner or small group (instead of alone). She described this as making a positive difference: "it's been a little bit more relaxed, because we've been doing more partner work and whatnot. So we've been partnered up with people, and it makes the labs itself easier." She went on to say, in terms of her overall assessment of Course B at this point in the semester:

I would say, it's somewhat improved. It's not as hectic as it was in the beginning of the semester. I would mainly attribute that to being able to work with a partner, and in groups of threes. That definitely helps take the load off of it. But in terms of organization and whatnot, hasn't changed too much. I guess, it hasn't changed, but once you get used to it you stop complaining about it because there's other things to focus on, there's other classes. So it's not that it's improved in terms of that. It's just that we've gotten used to it, you know?

Thus student B1 does see some improvement in the course, attributed to the fact that they can now work with other people on the lab assignments. Yet, she says, other aspects of the course have not changed, but she's just "gotten used to it."

When I asked her about the assessments of the course, and her understanding of the grade tracker, she expressed still not feeling entirely clear:

So I don't know, we're still pretty much confused with the grading. I know, we got numerical grades back and the data sheets need to be satisfactory enough to have high passes. But honestly, no one's really sure how we're doing so far this semester. We're not really that sure. But I don't know so far, for me, personally, I've been getting good numerical grades back. And I've also been getting high passes. So I'm just assuming that I'm in A range right now. And I think that's what a lot of people are doing. We're just making assumptions based off that.

Thus, although she still is unclear about the specifications grading setup of Course B, since she has received positive assignment assessments, she is "just assuming" that she is on track to get an A in the course.

She expressed though, that she wished that Course B would use grades, like Professor B did in the course she took with her the previous semester: "I feel like it would be better if we just use the grades like we did last semester. The point system just made sense. You could calculate that easily."

Based on what she told me in our first interview, I asked her if Professor B was continuing to yell at TA's during class. She said:

Funnily enough, right after we had that interview, I think a couple of weeks later, she posted an announcement. And I was like, I'm sure other people have complained about it, because she mentioned that. She said, "A lot of you have been-" it's something along the lines of "A lot of you have been upset that I've been yelling at the TAs. And I'm not upset at your TAs. If I was genuinely upset with them, you guys wouldn't know." But, you're really yelling at them right in front of us. It's hard to say that you're not upset with them when you're yelling at them like that. But I think a lot of people were upset about it or complaining about it, because she had to bring it up. So yeah, I think a lot of people got upset about that, actually.

Thus, it sounds like Professor B somehow found out that students had been talking about her yelling at the TA's. She then also observed that: "we never saw much of her to begin with, to be honest. So, not much has changed in that category. But I have realized she hasn't been yelling at them as much." So, after somehow hearing about students' perceptions of her yelling at the TA's, student B1 observed this behavior decreasing.

Interview Three: B1

In our third and last interview, student B1 reported still feeling frustrated with Course B and confused about the grading system:

No one knew what was going on, especially towards the end...Everyone was very confused because a lot of people didn't know that you had to do certain things because she never cleared that up in the syllabus to begin with. So everyone was pretty confused with that. I thankfully got a bit of an idea from one of my TAs, so I knew what was going on. I didn't need any extra credit...I ended up getting an A. So for me personally, it was fine. But in terms of the entire class, everyone was kind of like what's going on. And a lot of people were frustrated and most of the class got like C's and F's because they didn't fulfill a couple of requirements. And she had to keep changing and updating...So it was super disorganized towards the end.

Thus, although student B1 was happy with her final grade, she observed that others in the class did not feel that way. Further, as she mentioned here, she talked about Professor B “changing and updating” grades at the end of the semester.

She then explained that Professor B sent confusing updates about final grades towards the end of the semester, and that she changed the grades, at least once. She said they then got a final email about their final grades in which Professor B said: “She was like, if anyone has a problem with your grade, you can take it up with the department.”

When I asked student B1 how she would describe Professor B as a teacher, in this final interview, she said:

I would say very unorganized. I think that would be the top thing that I would be able to say. I think the two top things are unorganized and unhelpful. Unorganized because no one knew what was going on at all times. And a lot of mistakes. She'd make a lot of mistakes with grading. If you did everything right sometimes she'd just miss stuff and you'd end up with a B because she missed some stuff.

Student B1's assessment of Professor B as unorganized was consistent throughout all of our interviews.

She went on to give some further examples: “She made a mistake on like a whole class' scale once. Like gave us all the wrong grade one time. So definitely unorganized. Unhelpful because, it's your grade, you're working hard for it...She was very unhelpful and sometimes very, very rude.” She

again mentioned the email in which Professor B said to the students “Oh, you have a problem, take it up with someone else.” She concluded by saying about her overall assessment of Professor B as a teacher: “Yeah, I think honestly below average professor, I would say that.”

Student B2

Student Overview: B2

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student B2 described themselves as non-binary, and listed their economic background as “lackluster.” They did not provide a response for the question about race.¹⁸ In our interview, when I asked how they would describe their race, they described themselves as a “pale person.” They confirmed in our first interview that they were 20 years old and had already taken eight semesters in college. Yet, because they transferred to Institution B from another school, and some of their credits from that previous institution did not transfer, they still needed to take more classes to graduate. It is worth noting that student B2 expressed needing to retake some intro level courses, like Course B, due to this issue with transfer credits.

They were double-majoring in Integrative Biology and Geoscience. They were at the time also working as a research associate with an institution that (according to that institution's website in April 2025) describes itself as a scientific institution and natural history museum. In our interview, when I asked about how they would describe their socioeconomic background they said: “Working class. Decidedly. Definitely still working class for me.” They shared that at the time they were on food stamps. They also shared that they have student debt, and transferred to Institution B because Institution B offered a scholarship that would allow them to avoid having to take out further student loans.

Student B2 was raised by their grandmother and uncle for the first few years of their life. They then resided with their parents. They described their upbringing as tumultuous and difficult, and their parents as unsupportive. They said that both of their parents earned an associates degree, and that this was their highest level of education achieved. They also shared that they have a younger sister.

¹⁸ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

Interview One: B2

In our first interview, student B2 brought up a little about their relationship with school, and with grades, and tied it into why they opted to participate in my study. They made an observation that: “I really, really love learning. I am decidedly less fond of school.” They went on to say that:

That explains why I wanted to opt into your study, because I have been an A/B student for my entire life. But at the same time, I absolutely hate the grading system, because it is not an accurate reflection of people's skill, it is not an accurate reflection of what they know. And sometimes you get individuals who know exactly what they're talking about, and get like, straight C's in the class. And it's like, That is not fair. It's not accurate. It is not scientific. It is not a truthful reflection of these individual skill levels...You can get people who get solid, straight A's through the entirety of their educational career, and have no idea what they're talking about.

Thus, for student B2, grades do not necessarily reflect learning or knowledge. It was their interest in this distinction that motivated them to participate in my study.

Towards the beginning of our first interview, I asked student B2 how the current semester was going for them. They provided a short summary of their classes, including Course B. They said about that Course B:

Unfortunately, the lab section of the general chemistry two class that I am taking, the professor who opted to be part of your research is leagues from a good professor. She is late to all of her classes, and has left a little under five minutes after they've begun, each and every time, and left everything in the hands of her TAs. Also, me and every other student I've talked to in that class has had a stroke reading the syllabus and every single assignment. And it's like, I work in a chemistry lab for my job.

As student B2 shared here, they already had a negative impression of the course and Professor B in our first interview. The negative impression began with reading the syllabus and trying to understand the assignments. They reiterated in this quote that they have a job working at a chemistry lab, implying that, given their experience, it should not be difficult to understand the setup and assignments in a chemistry lab. They shortly thereafter again reiterated frustrations with understanding the syllabus: “Reading it feels like I'm trying to process something while I'm having a stroke. Aside from blatant typos, it's just not constructed well.” Student B2 has such a strong reaction to reading the syllabus that they afterwards decided to drop the course and take it with

another instructor. Yet, they ended up finding out that Professor B was teaching all sections of the course:

Once I read her syllabus, and finished recovering from my stroke, I was like, Okay, we're not doing this. And I went back on the registrar. And I was like, there has to be another section at a convenient time that works with my schedule. And no, there are six sections. They all happen at eight in the morning. And they are all taught by her.

Thus, although student B2 searched options, they ended up realizing that in order to take the course, which they needed for their minor, that they would have to take it with Professor B.

They shared several experiences with the lab work so far in Course B that left them feeling frustrated and confused. For example, lab work they had in Course B just the previous day:

Like, not to rag on, but yesterday, when I had a session of the lab class, I was almost in tears, because it was a dilution. And the day prior, I was at work, dissolving deer stomachs in a very complex buffered solution that I had to make myself and I'm like, I was able to do that, and have time to do other things. And it felt like something that I'm used to. And here I am now in a general chemistry two class performing a dilution and I feel like I want to cry and I have a mental breakdown. There's very clearly something wrong.

Here they shared frustration with a lab assignment in Course B, frustration which is exacerbated because they feel they are able to finish similar but more advanced work at their job with relative ease. They went on to provide further detail about what was frustrating about the assignment:

It's just constructed so weirdly. And at one point in the dilution lab, they were asking us to calculate concentration. And I calculated it and I put it in and the auto moderator for this online paper was like, No, your answer's wrong. I was like, okay, so I ran the numbers again. Nope, checked out same number. And I was like, Okay, this is weird. I was like, You know what, maybe, maybe I'm just stressed out of my mind, and I'm not understanding. So I pull up a concentrate calculator on my computer, and I plug in all my numbers and it spits out the same answer. And I put it in the systems like, no, it's wrong.

I had already heard of the Chem21Labs interface from Professor B and other students in the course, so I asked if it was this program that they were entering the mentioned data into. They said yes.

I asked them if there was someone they could talk to about the issues they were having. They said that they didn't reach out to the TAs because they said that: "All of her TAs just kind of seem to be disorganized and disoriented, which isn't their fault. They're not given any instruction." So student B2 reached out to Professor B about the problems they were having in the lab: "I emailed her, I was like, Hey, this is wack. And she just referred me to one of her TAs and didn't even

respond. And her TA didn't seem to understand." Thus, ultimately, student B2 was rerouted back to the TA who was unable to help with their problem.

When I asked them if Professor B explained the use of specifications grading in Course B they said, "It is listed on the syllabus, but it is encrypted." As they said several times, they found the syllabus difficult to understand. They did also refer to a "data table," which was the grade tracker used in the course. They said:

There's a data table, but it's incomprehensible. I described it to my roommates as looking something like the score requirements for a video game. The field X, Y, and Z, but not alpha and beta, because if you fulfill alpha and beta, then X, Y, and Z will be degraded but alpha and beta are conventionally things that you want to fulfill...And there's a token system in her class that I don't understand where you can give yourself extra time on assignments...And it's like, I don't want to play a video game. I can do that on my own time. if I so choose. I came here to take a chemistry class.

As they describe here, student B2 felt that the grade tracker was "incomprehensible." They likened the grade tracker to a video game with various components and goals and challenges to meet in order to achieve a certain score. They also expressed confusion for the "token system" used in Course B and said about it: "I would ask [Professor B], but she doesn't have office hours."

I asked them if they had any sense of what track they were on in terms of the grade tracker's parameters, and they said: "I have no idea what my grade is. Again, because I can't even begin to interpret her grading system." They went on to forecast: "I'm gonna go through this entire semester not knowing that what my grade is, I'm gonna find out that I got like a C. And I'm gonna go to the dean." So, with just a few weeks into the semester, student B2 was already seeing the possibility of a negative outcome in the course.

Interview Two: B2

At the beginning of our second interview, a little over a month later, I asked student B2 how the semester had been going for them since we talked last. They said they might be feeling a little "senior-itis," but that they overall felt good about their grades except for Course B. They mentioned having a B in one class, and an A in another, but then said: "And I have no idea what I have in the chemistry lab." They again shared some sentiments they had expressed in our first interview, in terms of the syllabus and assignments being unclear:

I wish I could get an impression of what my grade was. But again, the syllabus for that class, when I read it, I feel like I'm in the depths and throes of a fever dream...And the software is just catastrophically poor. There aren't any clear instructions on virtually anything. It insists on using its own calculations of your data, which would be fine, if it could do them correctly. I'm not sure how you wind up with a negative reaction rate. That's a little beyond me.

As they expressed in interview one, student B2 still found the syllabus confusing and had continued to have problems with the software being used in the lab. They feel that the software is utilizing incorrect calculations.

Since I had not actually seen the full syllabus for the course and student B2 brought it up several times, I asked them if they wouldn't mind sharing the syllabus with me, so that we could look at it together. They were unable to track down a copy of the full syllabus, but they did find the grade tracker (which I had seen before). The grade tracker showed rows with different assignment names. To further consider what student B2 understood about each assignment, I went through each row with them, to ask what they could tell me about each. For example, they expressed a lack of clarity with most of the assignments listed. When I asked them about the "short answer" and "non short answer" assignments they said, "I would imagine those refer to the portions of the lab work in the software," although they were not entirely sure. When I asked about the "safety" entry they said: "I'm not sure. I assume that's like generic lab safety." When I asked about "check-in and check-out" they said: "We're not checking anything. So I have no idea. Not a single clue."

As we talked further, student B2 also expressed concerns about the conditions of and equipment in the lab. They said:

A lot of the lab we're in is subpar. We don't have actual volumetric pipettes with the handheld mechanical portion. We're instead using rubber stoppers, which is actually unsafe, in my opinion, especially when you're working with acids of moderate power. Because if that spills, that's going to burn you...Sometimes I'm a clumsy motherfucker. And there was one time where I dropped 20% nitric acid on my hand because I wasn't being careful. And I paid the price for it. But that was when I was still taking safety precautions, it could have been worse. And here, we're just using little rubber stoppers with acid and it's like, wow, that's not cool.

As they expressed here, student B2 feels that the labs in Course B utilizing equipment with rubber stoppers, while working with acid, is a safety risk. They recall having an accident in a lab that could have resulted in an injury, but did not because of safety measures. They imply concern that a similar

incident in Course B may not avoid such injury. They went on to further talk about the equipment and conditions of the labs in Course B:

And those balances themselves aren't super clean, or well taken care of. And I move to wonder what else in the lab might not be up to snuff. And I'm not gonna complain about a student lab, for not having end of the line software. You're doing this for demonstrations to provide context to what you're learning in lecture, you're not performing any actual research, so that's fine. But if you aren't treating the equipment that you do have properly, and if you aren't taking the actual safety precautions that you're supposedly hankering on everyone for, it's an excellent way to really uninvest your students. Namely me.

Thus, student B2's concerns for Course B's labs include concern for the upkeep of the equipment as well as safety concerns. They connect these facets to "un-investing" students in the course, particularly themselves.

I also asked them about Professor B's interactions with students. I asked if Professor B had given any feedback to students, whether on assignments or through announcements or email. They said:

I think the one time she reached out in email was to say that we weren't having a lab class one week. And instead, it was just a reflection of how we were doing in the course. And it's like, how do you think you're doing in the course? And, well, quite frankly, I have no idea.

Student B2 conveyed here not having much communication from Professor B, with this again tying into their repeated sentiment about not feeling sure about their progress in the course according to the course standards. Yet, all the students were asked to write a reflection on that very question in lieu of lab one week. I asked if they could say more about what they wrote on that reflection. They said:

I was like, yeah, no, I genuinely have no idea. It's embarrassing. This is literally my job. And I show up here, and I feel like I have no idea what I'm doing, literally the day after I was at work. So it's super humiliating. And it just doesn't feel great. And I don't feel like I'm learning anything. And if I was doing something wrong, you know, I'm more than happy to figure out what that was and then do it right. But it doesn't seem like I'm doing anything wrong. Seems like your software is bunk.

So, student B2 approached this assignment with negative feedback. They used this assignment to express not feeling as though they are learning anything in Course B, being confused about where they stand in the class, and having issues with the lab software.

When I asked them if they were concerned about what their ultimate grade might end up being in the course they said: "At the end of the day, I'm not super concerned, because I just need to pass the lab. I don't need to get a super great grade in it... But as long as I can get a B minus, I'm not going to complain." Thus, although student B2 isn't clear on where they stood in the course, they express here not feeling terribly concerned about that.

Interview Three: B2

Yet, in our third interview, at the end of the semester, student B2 knew the final grades for several of their classes, but did not know the final grade they received in Course B. They expressed: "I need to figure out what's happening there. Because for all I know, I could have an F, I could have an A, I have no idea." They attributed this confusion to multiple facets. One was that Professor B changed the parameters on the grade tracker document twice during the semester. Student B2 said:

Did I mention that the professor changed that twice over the course of the semester? And that the second update- not in either of the first two iterations, but the third iteration on the second update, included, not an ampersand...The asterisk. It included an asterisk with an addendum that was, like, "grade rubric, maybe subject to change" after she altered it twice.

Thus, this was another aspect of the course that added to their confusion about their final grade. Another specific point of confusion for student B2 was the course's use of a token system. They said: "I think I mentioned that she had a token system in place. I tried using that, but I don't know if it worked." They completed the work that they were told would earn course tokens, but they could not tell if this had been applied to the calculation of their final grade. They further explained:

There was a Google Forms page where they were tracked. I guess that you could use to submit them for certain aspects of different things. But you see, the funny thing about that is, I tried to use it, and I got an email from the Professor. It was one of the few times she actually emailed me, and she was like, "Oh, the Google Forms isn't working. Can you just email me about this?" And I emailed her what I'd use them on and what they were for, and I was like, "This is how many it told me I have. So I assume that's how many I have. So this is what I'm using. I mean, one here, one here, one here, raise each of these. Don't know how

this is gonna affect my grade, but maybe you can tell me that.” No response, nothing.

Here student B2 expressed that the token system in the course was setup so that once students earned tokens, they could cash them in so to speak, for different options in the course, such as boosting an assignment’s score. Since the Google Forms page that was set up to track these tokens was not working, they followed Professor B’s direction to email that information to her, in terms of how they would like to apply their earned tokens. Yet, they never received a response from her, or confirmation that these tokens were applied to the calculation of their final grade.

They also talked about a “bonus assignment” being made available to students. They said:

There was also what I had understood to be an optional assignment after the fact, to boost your grade after the final practical. And I was like, You know what? What the hell, I'll take any option I can to raise my grade. And I showed up, and it was like an additional final practical...And I was like, Okay, so is this a bonus assignment? Or is this a redo of the final practical? And no one seemed to be able to answer my question. And I'm not even sure what it did for my grade, if anything. I don't even know what I got on either of the final practicals. I don't know what my grades are for the vast majority of anything in this class whatsoever.

Thus, they express here again, an overall lack of clarity in terms of assessments and grades in the course. Student B2 grew increasingly anxious about this towards the end of the semester, and closer to when final grades would be submitted.

Due to this lack of clarity on grades, and wanting to ensure that their extra work, and tokens had been applied to their final grade, student B2 reached out to Professor B via email for confirmation. They said they emailed Professor B several times for clarification but did not receive a response. Thus, they said they felt they would need to drive to campus to see if they could find her in her office to talk about the final grade.

When I asked them what grade they thought they had earned they said: “Based strictly off the information that I have from the professor's point of view, I'd grade myself with like, a B, just based upon things that I got strictly right and wrong.” Yet, they said if they were grading themselves from their own point of view, that they would give themselves an A:

I'd give myself an A. Because, as far as I am concerned, the number of things that I did correctly and properly drastically out measure the number of things that I know I fucked up on. And I turned up for every class and I did every single assignment, even the redundant, extra ones, because I was like, well, no idea what my grade is. I might as well do everything.

Thus, whether based upon the teacher's expectations, or their own perspective, they believed that they had earned an A or B in the course.

When I asked student B2 how they would describe Professor B's teaching style, now that the semester was over, they said: "Non existent. There wasn't any teaching to be had there. There were no lectures. Everything was delegated to TAs, if it was delegated at all," and went on to ask, "How do you rate someone's teaching style or capabilities if they never actually do anything?" Student B2's perspective of Professor B's limited engagement with the course was consistent throughout our interviews.

Interview Four: B2

Student B2 is the only participant in my study who I conducted a fourth interview with. Since they did have their final grade back in interview three, and were still trying to get a response from Professor B in our third interview, they offered to meet for a fourth interview. In this interview they said that a final grade was submitted for them, but that they did not believe the grade was accurate. They said, "There was a C put in. But if you look at the grade requirements, by my best interpretation, if you look at the grade requirements to get a B, I have met those numerically." Thus, based upon their "best interpretation" of the grade tracker, they expressed feeling that they had earned a B in the course.

They further expressed reluctance to believe that this grade was accurate, based upon Professor B changing all of the students final grades in Course B at the end of the semester. They said that:

Also, apparently, there was a problem like, prior to the final exam, where somehow everyone's grades had been shifted over one cell due to the addition of another student halfway through the semester. And the fact that this wasn't noticed earlier, one, is terrifying. Two, it continued to be a problem. She's like, everyone's final grades are wrong. I need to recalculate them all. And it's like, cool. Let me know when you've done that.

Basically, student B2 said here that the excel spreadsheet where Professor B was keeping all of the grades, was incorrect due to an error that was not caught until the end of the semester, when Professor B realized this, and that final grades needed to be recalculated. Thus, student B2 expressed a lack of confidence that the final grade entered for them was correct: based upon their own interpretation of the grade tracker (which had been changed multiple times through the

semester), the miscalculation of final grades as shared in the previous quote, and the Google Forms sheet that calculated “tokens” to boost students’ grades not working and not receiving confirmation from Professor B that this work they completed was applied to their grade.

In response, student B2 continued to try to reach out to Professor B: “I emailed her intermittently and kept trying to show up at her office, which she was never at.” They said they did receive some unclear responses. They said:

So the first time she delegated to her TA and her TA was like, Well, you could use the tokens to do this, this, and this. And I'm like, I already have, that's exactly the trouble, nothing's changed in the grade tracker. And I didn't get a response. I didn't get a response to any of the more recent emails I've sent the professor either. But the one response that I did get, I said, "I just checked my grade, it still hasn't updated in correspondence with how the tokens in your system were applied." Yada, yada, yada, yada. And she responds, “What's on Canvas is not how your grade was calculated.” And I didn't mention canvas. She proceeds to say that they were updated in an Excel spreadsheet.

Thus, student B2 continued to have issues with the token system, and continued to feel that the work they had done for these tokens had not been applied to their final grade. Student B2 said that she went on in this email to say: “She says she's already offered everyone a chance to meet with her to discuss grades. I have no recollection of this. She says if I want to appeal my grade, I can email the department chair.”

They said that Professor B eventually stopped responding to email, thus they said, “So I'm speaking with- trying to speak with the person in charge of the chem department there.” So, they did take the direction Professor B suggestion. At the time of that interview, student B2 had emailed the department head and was waiting to hear back. That email had been sent less than 24 hours prior to that interview and student B2 was still waiting on a response.

I followed up with student B2 through email a week later to inquire about what happened with their grade in the course. They responded: “I never did get the whole issue with that class sorted out, and eventually more critical things popped up on my radar so I hit the bullet and ended the course with a C+.” Thus, it sounds like they ended up just accepting the final grade that Professor B had given them.

Student B3

Student Overview: B3

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student B3 described herself as female, white, and middle class.¹⁹ She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of the interview, she was 18 years old, in her first year and second semester of college, and was pursuing a major in Biology. She identified as straight and “not disabled.”

She grew up with her mom, dad, and little sister. Her dad works as a wine salesman and her mom works at a daycare. Both of her parents attended college in Cuba. There, her dad earned a masters degree, and her mom earned a bachelor’s degree. They had looked into further education in the United States, but because of issues with transfer credits, they decided not to.

Interview One: B3

Before Course B, student B3 said she had not previously taken any course that used ungrading practices. In terms of her relationship with school and grades, she said:

I've always had a good relationship with school. I like learning, I've never really had issues with a certain class...I've always had a good relationship with school. And like I said, I'm good with my time management skills. So I always make sure that I'm caught up on anything that I need to do. And that helps with not being stressed. So I've never looked at school negatively.

She described having this positive relationship with school before college, and said this has maintained for her since starting college. In terms of her relationship with grades specifically, she said:

I've always been a good student, I've always gotten pretty high grades. So that just comes from studying more, making sure that I'm taking good notes and going back and reviewing my notes. Yeah, I've always done really good. I've always gotten high honor roll. I've gotten As.

Thus, as she stated here, it is common for her to get “pretty high grades,” and she has always made the honor roll.

¹⁹ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

Course B is the second course that student B3 has taken with Professor B. She also took a course with Professor B in the previous semester, although that course did not use the specifications grading format. When I asked her about her experience in Course B so far, she said: “we've done one lab so far, and it was something that we had done last semester. So people already knew how to do it. Like I said, it wasn't very stressful. And I actually got to finish the lab an hour early since I already knew what I was doing. So pretty good experience so far.” Thus, so far, student B3 found the lab work in the course to be a positive experience, and not stressful.

I asked her more specifically about how the specifications grading aspect of the course was explained to her. She said:

So through reading the syllabus it was basically made so that it's easier for students to be able to track their actual grade...And there's also something that she calls tokens. So you're able to get tokens, depending on certain assignments that you do. And those tokens can be used to increase your grade on a certain assignment.

As she explained, the specifications grading aspect of Course B was presented in the syllabus, and she reported an understanding of the use of tokens in the course, as well as the intention of the grade tracker to make it easy for students to track their grade. She went on to further talk about how the syllabus emphasized the use of specifications grading to make it easy for students to figure out their grade:

I do know that she just placed an emphasis on the fact that it's easier for students to know what their grade is using this new system. And it's also helping them out because as I said, using the- our tokens, it's kind of like extra credit, because whatever tokens you do gain, you're able to place to an assignment that maybe you didn't do so well on. So at least on that level, I know that it's just easier to interpret what your grade is.

So, she feels that the grade tracker is being used to make grade determination easy, and she sees the use of tokens as a type of extra credit, since they can help improve a score on an assignment.

When I asked her if Canvas is being used in the course, she said that it is, but that it is not used for grade determinations:

[The work on the labs] doesn't go into Canvas, it goes into the website, Chem21Labs, and that's where I would see it. I also know that she does weekly reflectment assignments. So you're just supposed to write on your experiences in the lab, and she normally has questions that you're supposed to answer. So that's completed on canvas. But it's not graded on Canvas, because she said that the way Canvas grades, it isn't the way she wants to grade it. So I guess we just don't use Canvas for grading.

Thus, according to student B3's understanding in our first interview, Canvas is used for the submission of some assignments, but is not used to provide grades in the course. This quote also conveys her grasp on some course assignments, such as the lab work being entered and assessed in the website Chem21Labs, and the reflections being completed in Canvas.

When I asked her about the interaction between Professor B and the students, she said that this interaction mostly occurs through email:

She interacts mainly through email. She'll send out an email, it's a notification that you also get on Canvas, regarding what we're going to be doing in lab. We see her in lab, she kind of goes from place to place. So we mostly have interaction with the TAs, not necessarily with her. And she says if you have any questions, she is able to respond to them. But it's probably faster if you communicate with your TA, since they're likely to get back to you sooner than her.

So, while student B3 does see Professor B in the lab, she says the majority of communication for Professor B comes through email. In the lab, the TAs in course B are the direct point of contact for students. I asked her how she was feeling about the specifications grading aspect of the course so far. She said:

I'm feeling positive, because, like I said, I'm able to keep track of what my grade is on Chem21Labs, and before a lab - so I have labs on Wednesdays - before my lab, I'm able to go into the website, and kind of take a look at what the procedure is, and what I'll be expected to know and do during the lab. So that helps me just know what I'm doing. And if I know what I'm doing, I'm going to get a better score. So I feel pretty positive right now with the class.

So, at this point early on in the semester, she felt positive about the grading system and the clarity of instructions on assignments.

Interview Two: B3

In our second interview, student B3 reported that she ended up realizing that there were aspects of the specifications grading system that she didn't understand in our first interview - but that she hadn't realized this at the time. She said

Before, I didn't really understand how it worked. I actually understand it now. So the way that it works is, we have our chem labs. For each lab, we have the short answer responses

we have to answer. And there's three types of grades we could get on them. One of them is a high pass, which means you don't have to edit anything. The other one is a low pass, which meant you answered the question, but you could have added more things to it. The third type of grade would be something called needs revision. So the way it would work is, after your lab is due you have a certain deadline to revise any of your short answer questions if you need to. So I actually didn't know you could do that before. I just didn't know how it worked.

So, while student B3 expressed a decent understanding of the specifications grading setup in Course B in our first interview, by the time of our second interview, there were parts of it that had become further clear. As she mentioned here, she had come to better understand the opportunity to revise work that had been labeled “needs revision,” and that this work could be revised and resubmitted within a certain time frame. She shared that she recently, just the day before, had used this option to revise and resubmit an assignment. Yet, she also told that there had been one assignment of hers earlier in the semester that had been assessed as needs revision, but that she had missed the deadline for resubmission because she had not fully understood the parameters around the work that could be revised and resubmitted.

Relatedly, she said she also gained a better understanding of the token system in the class. She shared that, although she missed the deadline to resubmit her work earlier in the semester, she learned that she could resubmit after this deadline with tokens. She explained:

The tokens are basically like extra credit points that you would get for every pre lab assignment that you do. So because before, I didn't understand how it worked, I ended up getting a needs revision on one of my short answer questions and the due date passed for it. And to end up revising that after the due date has passed, you get to revise it for a total of four tokens. So you'd have to give up four of your tokens to revise it. And you get one token for every pre lab, and there's five pre labs in the course in total. So at the end of the semester, because I missed that one deadline, I would use four of my tokens to basically revise the short answer question and get the higher point to get the A in the course.

She went on to explain to me that there are a total of eight opportunities to earn tokens, thus students can earn up to eight tokens during the semester. Four of those tokens are specifically earned from completing the pre-lab assignments. As she shared here, she intends to earn and use four of those tokens in order to revise an assignment, so that she can fulfill the requirements to earn an A in the course. She went on to express how the tokens are beneficial to help achieve this goal:

It was a little confusing at first, because I didn't get what the point of it was. And then I looked at a document that the professor had shared with us, which was a grade tracker. So it was to see what grade you'd currently have in the class and what the requirements were to get that grade. And the reason why those tokens are beneficial is because to get an A in the course, you need to have, out of 25 short answer questions that there are, you need to get 20 of those questions with a high pass. And you can't have any "need revisions" for those short answer questions. So the reason why they matter, why the tokens are used or beneficial is because it helps you maintain that A.

As she said here, she perceived the use of tokens in Course B as beneficial towards her ability to reach a grade of A in the course. I asked her if she then had a clear sense of what she needed to do in order to earn an A in the course, and she said that she did, because she was following what was provided in the grade tracker.

I asked her what accounted for the shift of her now understanding the grading structure better, and if this was helped by input from Professor B, or the TAs, or her own revisiting of the grade tracker. She responded:

I had to do it on my own, because she published some documents that we could look at in terms of how to figure out what our grade is or what the requirements were. But I just didn't understand them, even as I was reading those documents, until I had done a couple labs, then I understood what they mean, and how you could apply certain tokens or grading requirements to each lab.

Thus, she said that while further documents from Professor B on the specifications grading were confusing, that after completing a few assignments, this helped her to understand how to use that document.

When I asked how she felt about the assignments in the course generally, she reported feeling positive. She said:

I feel like it's positive. Honestly. I like the work that we're doing. I think the labs are cool. Right now, our next lab is actually going to be a practical. So we have two practicals in the semester, and it's basically like a mini exam where you perform a lab, but you get no help whatsoever from your classmates or your TA. So you're supposed to do everything by yourself. And the practical that we're going to do is basically, we have certain acids and bases and test tubes. And when we mix them, we have to determine which acid in which base is actually in that test tube. So we're not told what it is. We're only given a list of options. And we have to say, Okay, well, like this test tube has this and this mix together, this test tube has this and this. Which is kinda cool.

Thus, she is feeling good about the work, and is especially enjoying the labs. Her description here suggests that she has a firm understanding of the setup of practical in the course. I asked her if the practicals made her nervous at all, in terms of not being able to ask questions or ask for guidance, but she said no. She said, in a previous lab that students “were also instructed to take like really detailed notes.” In response, she did, and said: “I took really good notes. I went over the procedure one more time. So I'm feeling good.” This aligns with sentiments she expressed earlier in terms of taking thorough notes in her classes, and this helping her review the material.

I asked her if she felt that working on the assignments in that course felt different because of the specifications grading setup, she said no. She shared: “honestly, I don't feel too much of a difference. I think the benefit would be being able to revise your work. It's normally not something that you get the chance to do for other classes.” So, for student B3, the setup of the grading system did not necessarily make a difference generally in how she felt about the work, although the aspect of being able to revise work did.

She then shared that a negative aspect of the specifications grading setup was the time it took to understand it. She said:

I think the only negative would be just getting used to the way it works. Because it did take a little bit of time to actually understand how the course is set up. And what requirements you need to get the grade that you want. So for me, I feel like it was a little unclear at first, but I got it now.

So, while she saw the benefit of being able to revise some of the work in Course B, she did find the time it took to get a clear understanding of the specifications grading setup in Course B to be a drawback. She also relayed that, based upon conversations with, and comments she had heard from other students, that she felt that many other students were still fairly confused with the setup.

Interview Three: B3

Student B3 ended up getting a grade of B plus in Course B. She earned an A grade in all of her other courses that semester, and shared that she was frustrated with that final grade in Course B. She felt frustrated both because she was one point away from earning an A, and because of confusion about an assignment. She said: “I got a B plus, I was like, one point away from an A which hurt a little bit.” She elaborated that she did not earn an A due to missing one assignment. She said

that there had been a strike on campus towards the end of the semester. Relatedly, she said: “I didn't do one of the assignments, because during that week, there was a strike. So we didn't actually go to class. She made an announcement saying, we're not going to have class, there's a strike going on.”

She further shared that Professor B had to cancel the lab assignment that week, since class was cancelled. Since the lab assignment was cancelled, student B3 understood that to mean that both the pre-lab and the lab assignment would be cancelled. However, she said that Professor B posted an announcement on a Wednesday, the day after the pre-lab assignment was originally due, to tell the class that the pre-lab was still a required assignment. Student B3 expressed frustration for receiving that news the day after the assignment was due. She said:

She sent that out the day after our class' pre lab was already due. And I asked a bunch of my friends. And they're like, “No, I didn't do it, I thought we didn't have to.” You know, it makes sense to assume you wouldn't have to do something for a class that you won't be attending. So, I don't know. It was a little frustrating because she sent out the email after the due date had passed. If I would have seen that the day it was due or before, then I would have done it.

As she shared here, she talked with friends in the course who also did not complete the assignment, as they held the same assumption, that it had been cancelled along with the lab assignment. She expressed frustration for the fact that the clarification about the assignment being due was sent after the due date of that assignment. She thus reached out to Professor B to ask if she could possibly get an extension due to the confusion. She said that Professor B never responded. Though, she did say that Professor B updated the grade tracker to account for one of the lab assignments being cancelled. She also said: “she did adjust the grading rubric so that it was more in our favor. But we still needed a certain amount of points for pre labs to get an A, and that wasn't changed.” Thus, because the pre-lab assignment was not changed, she was not able to get the A grade.

When I asked her if she felt that her grade of B plus was an accurate reflection of the work she put in in the course, she said:

I feel like I could have gotten the A. And I feel like my work reflects that. It's, again, that one mistake, but I feel like it's kind of logical to assume if you don't have a lab, because of a strike, you wouldn't have to do the prelab for that lab, right? So I don't know. I feel like, if that wouldn't have been a thing then I would have had all the requirements for the A. So I don't know. I feel like it's a little, maybe not the best reflection, because I did put in all the work.

Thus, as she shared here, she felt that the grade she received was “maybe not the best reflection, because I did put in all the work,” especially given that the assignment that she missed, was one that she felt it was “logical to assume” was no longer required.

I asked student B3 if Professor B communicated with students about what their final grades would be, or if students were expected to figure that out on their own with the grade tracker. She explained:

She did send out an email letting us know what our current grade was based on things that we completed, that were requirements, right, for our grade. So we have our course tracker, which tells us what the minimum requirements are to get a grade. And then she would send out an email attaching that course tracker and tell us our letter grade. And then every aspect that we had to do like the pre labs, or our lab grade, or everything that needed to be completed, she would tell us what our individual grade was for each and then the overall grade in the class.

Thus, Professor B did reach out to students to let them know what their final grade would be based on the grade tracker.

Student B3 also shared that Professor B ended up sending a second email with an updated grade. She said that after Professor B sent out the first email about final grades, that she shortly thereafter posted an announcement to Canvas, letting the class know that the grades that had been sent out were incorrect. She said: “She made a mistake the first time because I think she did it on a spreadsheet and she was off by one person...So then I was freaking out when I saw it. But then she corrected it and sent out another email and that one was correct.” So, while student B3 was originally “freaking out” in receiving the wrong final grade, this did end up getting corrected.

When I asked student B3 if she would recommend the course to others, she said that people taking that course have it required for their majors or minors, so it is not an optional course for the people who take it. She said, in terms of the experience of the course, that this is heavily influenced by who is assigned as your TA:

I guess it would depend on who your TA is. Because some TAs are more helpful than others, like they're more willing to help you or guide you to get to an answer. So it would depend on that. I don't have a problem with [Professor B] at all. I think she's a great professor. So I'd like to say I'd recommend the class, it's just you have to be careful with due dates and making sure that if you have any confusion to ask beforehand, because again, I just assumed we wouldn't have to do the pre lab. So, the overall class experience wasn't bad. I'd recommend it. I just let people know certain details not to miss.

Thus, at first she says, "I'd like to say I'd recommend the class," but then mentions the caveat of needing "to be careful with dates" and to ask questions when clarity is needed. Then she ends up saying, "the overall class experience wasn't bad."

Yet, she is not consistent in saying she would recommend the class. When I asked her if she would opt to take another course that used ungrading practices, she said no. She explained:

I feel like the confusion and learning how it works delayed everyone in how they would do their work, right? Because I know a lot of people at the very beginning were really confused on how the grading system worked. And because of that, they wouldn't understand what work they needed to do, or complete, in order so that the course tracker wouldn't mess up their grade. And I feel like because a lot of people didn't know what they were doing that impacted their grade in the beginning, which may have made it difficult to come back or try to do anything to better whatever work you didn't do before because you didn't understand what you're supposed to do. I feel like that's why I wouldn't recommend it. Because if you don't know what you're doing, or if you don't understand it, it's really hard to know what things you need to complete and when and how and all that.

Thus, here she expressed that the confusion around the grading structure, especially towards the beginning of the course, would lead her to not recommend a course with ungrading practices. This does not entirely line up with her earlier quoted sentiment that she would recommend the course, with some caveats. It sounds like, while in the earlier quote she emphasized not having a problem with Professor B or the course in general, in this quote, she is more focused on the specifications grading aspect being the aspect of the course that she would not recommend.

When I asked her how she would describe Professor B's teaching style with the semester now being over, she said:

She's on top of things when it comes to emails. She'll let us know, give us announcements, heads up, that kind of thing. But in terms of being in lab, it's mostly the TAs who you'll see more of than her, right? So if you have a question, you're more likely to get the answer from your TA than you would her...she's told us if you have a question, it's better to ask your TA because their response time is usually faster than mine is, which makes sense. But basically, in terms of teaching, she doesn't do the teaching, the TAs do.

Thus, she explained that while Professor B keeps up with the students through emails and announcements, it is the TAs who actually take on the teaching responsibilities in the class. This

aligns with her earlier comment about how a student’s experience in Course B will be heavily influenced by who is assigned as their TA.

Group C: Institution, Course, Professor, & Students

Institution C

Institution C is a private university that, according to U.S. News (at <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges> in January 2025), has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 3,300 students. Of that enrollment, approximately 45% are male students and approximately 55% are female students. U.S. News reports a 69% minority enrollment with the four largest groups in terms of race and ethnicity as follows: Asian, Hispanic, white, and international. U.S. News also reports that this university has a 95% acceptance rate, and a 14:1 student-faculty ratio.

Course C

Course C is a part of Institution C’s core curriculum. It is focused on writing and reading. It is a second course in a sequence of two courses that all undergraduate students are required to take as a part of the core curriculum. The precursor course to Course C is focused on problem solving and oral communication. As per the university’s posted class schedule listing, 49 sections of Course C were offered in Spring 2023, and four were taught by Professor C. These four courses all used ungrading practices. In our interviews, he reported that in the Spring 2023 semester, three of those sections enrolled 19 students, and the fourth enrolled 21 students, for approximately 80 students total. He shared my flyer for student participants in all four sections of this course.

Course C Syllabus: Assignments

Professor C taught these four sections with a theme of “ghost stories”. In the opening of his syllabus, he introduces ghost stories as more than just entertainment, but also a reflection and reinforcement of cultural norms. The syllabus of the course lists the following three assignment groups for the course: (1) Weekly logs, (2) Formal essays, and (3) a Final Portfolio. The weekly logs are described as an informal means to help students keep track of their learning throughout the semester. Four formal essays are listed, each with some relation to a ghost story. The syllabus lists

papers two through four with 4-6 bullet points after each, detailing the main questions and skills that will be the focus of each paper. The Final Portfolio is stipulated as a requirement to pass the course. It is described as a project that will be built over the duration of the course that is meant to demonstrate student growth and learning throughout the semester. The course calendar also shows two days at the end of the semester labeled as “portfolio presentations,” and the last three days of the semester labeled as “Final Conferences.”

Course C Syllabus: Ungrading

Ungrading is mentioned in three places on the syllabus. Two entries in the course syllabus address the use of ungrading in the course. The first, an entry in the syllabus with the header “This Class is Ungraded” reads in full:

What does it mean to be in an ungraded class? Does it mean I won't get a grade at the end of the semester? Does it mean I can put in less effort?

Ungrading is kind of a weird term since there are grades involved. What is most important in an ungraded class is the learning. Sadly, grades can get in the way. The way this class works is that you will do a lot of reading and writing. You will get a lot of feedback from your classmates and from me. You will have a lot of opportunities to revise work, think about the reading and writing you are doing, and try things out. The difference is, I won't give you a grade on the individual pieces you work on throughout the semester. You have the opportunity to try things out, to work on your skills, and grow without worrying about what grade will be assigned. This is particularly important early on as you shouldn't be "downgraded" on early work since you are still learning. (That, after all, is why you are in this class.)

You will get a final grade in the class. You will develop a portfolio throughout the term and make the case for the grade you have earned based on your work on the course outcomes. Please look ahead at the assignment description for that portfolio. Start thinking now about how you can keep track of your learning gains. At the end of the class, you and I will sit down together and discuss the learning, work, and growth from the term. Together, we will figure out what grade matches that learning, growth, and effort. Everything you do in class will build to that final portfolio. This does mean you are in charge of your progress. You will need to be present, do your best work, and carefully consider the choices you make. That way you can meaningfully discuss your learning at the end of the term.

As this entry indicates, while grades will not be used on individual assignments, a final grade will still be submitted to Institution C. Professor C describes this grade as a result of the final portfolio, which

students are to use to show their learning throughout the semester, as a means to “make the case for the grade” that they believe they have earned. Each student will meet with Professor C at the end of the semester to discuss the portfolio and the student’s final grade.

Another part of the syllabus contains an entry with a heading called “Grading” that also addresses the use of ungrading in the course. This entry reads:

I truly hope your writing and reading skills develop throughout the term. In fact, that is the main goal of this course. Since that is the case, I want to be sure that growth doesn’t hold back a grade by counting early work and projects meant to help your development as much as later work where you show it. For this class we will use a technique called ungrading. This is a form of class that focuses on the learning rather than the grade. This means you will not receive a grade on individual assignments. You will, however, receive a lot of feedback from me and your peers. You will have the opportunity to continue to revise and grow. You will have the opportunity to reflect on that growth at the end of the term. There is a final grade but we will determine the final grade together. This may sound a bit scary. Please know, though, that I will do all I can to help you be successful. It will be important for you to put your best effort into the work as we go. If you successfully meet the learning goals set for the course, you will be successful in the course.

Thus, here, Professor C further details that individual assignments won’t receive a grade, but that they will receive “a lot of feedback from me and your peers.” This feedback is intended to help students focus on the “learning rather than the grade,” which will then be used to help student and Professor C “determine their final grade together.” The topic of ungrading appears a third time in the syllabus, on the course calendar, and is listed as a topic for the first day of class.

Professor C

Professor C, Course C, & Pedagogy

Professor C identifies himself as a cis-gender, heterosexual male. In terms of ability, he describes himself as “mostly abled, but I am bipolar.” At the time of our interview, he had been teaching in higher ed for about 25 years total. He said this experience also included “a stint” as director for a Center for teaching and learning. The three degrees he has are all in English, and he tends to teach courses focused on writing or communication. At the time of our interview, Professor C was still relatively new to Institution C: the Spring 2023 semester was his second semester teaching there. In his first semester, the previous fall semester, he had taught sections of the precursor course to Course C. He mentioned that a number of students in his Course C that spring

had taken its precursor course with him in the fall semester. He did not, though, use ungrading in that fall course.

When I asked Professor C how he would describe his pedagogy, he answered with a focus on encouraging student inquiry and questions:

Teaching philosophies are, those are hard to pin down, because sometimes they change from day to day. A big part of my philosophy has always been around ensuring that students ask questions...So it's always very much been kind of an interactive thing, you know, where I try not to assume that I have all the answers, because I know I don't. But that's the beautiful thing about a writing class, is each piece is its own piece, and the student knows where it needs to go. I don't. And so that lends itself to that...I need to revise my teaching philosophy, the actual statement, that it's all about inquiry, about understanding the questions asked, not searching for answers.

In this quote he directly emphasizes student inquiry as important to his pedagogy. He also implies the importance of giving power and responsibility to students as well in asserting that he recognizes that he does not have all the answers and that each student will be more in touch with the best flow of their own writing than he can be.

After he provided this description, I asked him if could say a little about how he sees himself implementing these perspectives in the classroom. He responded by giving an overview of how he starts the semester, and how he guides it to unfold. He began by talking about how he coordinates the first day of the semester for Course C:

...some folks have the traditional syllabus day. I don't do that. The first day that we start class, we play a couple of games that involve a drawing game, we play a clapping game. You know, these things where we talk about how writing is about trying to take something that's in your mind and verbalize it and how hard that is, and what that means...I try and contextualize my classes from the very beginning around, it's not about a set of strict practices. It's about, you know, what can we do to try and figure out what we want to say and how we can best say it to someone else.

Thus here he is rejecting what he refers to as the “traditional syllabus day,” implying the syllabus review that happens in many courses on day one of the semester. Instead, he uses interactive “games” that he intends to kick off discussions around writing.

He continued in his description to talk about then using day two of the semester for a “syllabus negotiation” with students:

And so then the second day is our quote, unquote syllabus day. But that day is spent, the entire day is spent negotiating the syllabus... So the second day where we talk about the policies, is all about: "What's your voice? What are you thinking? How do we negotiate this? How do we find a space that fits your needs, my needs, and the needs of everybody else in this room?" So that's very much again, based on: your voice matters, the questions we ask matters, that it's not just me telling you what you need to think. Then we move into, we move into the actual kind of writing portion of the class.

When I asked for further details about this syllabus negotiation, he detailed that he puts students into small groups, and has a powerpoint presentation of different policies in the syllabus that he asks them to discuss. He provides to the class his own rationale for including the policy as he wrote it, yet lets them know that as a class, they may choose to adopt more lenient, or stricter policies, if they collectively so choose. He mentioned the attendance policy and late work policy as being two popular policies for negotiation. He shared that while students will sometimes opt for more lenient policies, or to keep the policies as he has included them originally, that often he finds students actually opting for stricter measures.

This syllabus negotiation correlates with his emphasis in our interview about the importance of student voices, including their own recognition of this importance. He explains wanting to set up his course to open in this way, with the syllabus negotiation, because he hopes that it demonstrates to students the sentiment that:

You can ask questions, and your voice does matter, and you can empower yourself in that way. And it is your education. It's not someone else's. I try and reinforce a lot also, that students should never have someone tell them what they've learned. They should be telling their professors, what they've learned... So everything we do early on is based on, specifically based on: You have a voice. I'm asking you to use it, and I'm constantly repeating the phrase, if you don't speak for yourself, someone will speak for you, and you do not want them to do that. It opens a space where it's expected that we are going to be negotiating, it's expected that they are going to own- that this is just as much their class as it is my class, and that questions and inquiry and these structures are the base of what we do. And then from there, it becomes a very easy and natural part of the writing process.

Later on in our interview, he reiterates some of these themes around the importance he sees within this syllabus negotiation:

This is all about trust... That's also why it's so important to negotiate the syllabus at the

beginning, to negotiate those assignment sheets, is to say, I'm not playing a trick on you. I'm not gonna suddenly turn around and say, haha, you fail. Because this is all about truly, this is a practice, this is something we're doing together, and I'm not, I'm not messing with you. Trust me. And that's a big ask, but trust me, and we'll get there together.

Here Professor C is contextualizing the syllabus negotiation as an intentional start to the course as a means to demonstrate to the students that he values their voice. As he indicates in the previous quote, he recognizes the importance of demonstrating his trust of students early on in the semester. Later in our interview, he went on to say that this early negotiation, and wanting students to feel comfortable with their own voice, also aims to set students up for the final portfolio project in which they are essentially making a case of their learning and growth through the semester.

Before getting to the end of the semester portfolio assignment, the bulk of the semester revolves around the four essays in the course. These essays, and the (potential) progression of skills demonstrated within them across the semester, are the main evidence of the students' final portfolio as a means to show improvement. The first essay in this sequence is assigned right away: "Their first paper is assigned on the first day of class, it's due after the first weekend. And it's a one sentence prompt. And it's meant to be very weird and confusing. I mean, just analyze this and turn it into paper." He assigns this first paper right away, before teaching anything about writing in the course, so that students can use this initial paper as a kind of baseline to gauge their improvement throughout the semester:

But that first paper I have, they do right away, and I give just kind of a general bit of feedback. I talk to the students and say, these are some of the things I've noticed. Reason for that is we constantly return to that paper, and so I don't tell them what they've done. I don't want to influence the way that they see it. I want them to see it as we move along through the lens of the course.

Thus, as described here, he holds back on too much individual feedback on this paper, as he instead hopes that students will learn how to evaluate it on their own, based on what they learn throughout the semester.

Then, in preparation for the second paper, he spends the next several weeks reviewing aspects of writing with students, and providing them time in class to apply the information that he is teaching to the development of their second paper. He also utilizes writing groups for each of the student papers. Students have a different writing group, composed of their peers in the course, for

each paper. Time is set aside in class for students to complete peer reviews of each other's work, as they are developing the components of their paper. These peer reviews are submitted to Professor C, who provides feedback on these peer reviews. Papers two, three, and four follow a similar trajectory in terms of class time to develop paper components, and class time to work with peers towards improving those pieces, to ultimately put together a complete paper.

These papers, and especially the fourth paper, are a main piece of the final portfolio assignment, used to show growth throughout the semester. In addition, students are also asked to include in their portfolio answers to several additional prompts including: “how they will translate the skills that they’ve learned in this class to a discipline and an external writing situation,” “a letter to their first day self” in which they tell themselves as a student on day one what to expect from the course, and a letter to future students in which they address “Okay, this is what I’ve learned in this class... And this is what you need to know coming into this class.”

The students compile this final portfolio, and then in the last week and a half of the semester, Professor C meets with each student individually to talk about their portfolio and collaboratively decide on a final grade to submit to the university. Professor C describes his emphasis on the student voice as leading up to this culmination of the semester:

Which fortunately leads up to that final portfolio day when I sit down with the students and ask them a series of questions about their writing and say, clearly, your voice matters. It's been valued throughout this entire time. So let's have a meaningful discussion about what you've learned, a meaningful discussion about why this is important, and then we'll translate it into the grade that they want us to translate it into. The learning is what's important. The questions are what's important. And it becomes a really fun conversation, and it's awesome. It's rejuvenating, yeah.

Thus, Professor C sees this final meeting with students as a collaborative approach to determining their final grade, and sees this collaboration as a reflection of the student voice mattering.

Professor C: History of Ungrading & Institutional Response

When I asked Professor C about how he became familiar with ungrading, and what led him to adopt these practices, he traced this trajectory back to when he first began working in higher education and was “running a writing center,” that heavily emphasized “peer to peer activity and seeing the power of that” as well as an “understanding that I was not the center of their writing

class universe.” He said that while working in the writing center he had the opportunity to work with international students, and that this “gave me a really clear view of the cultural aspects of writing, and just how, you know, how the American argument is not the end all, be all.” He described these sentiments as paving the way for him to adopt certain practices and policies in his courses, particularly the negotiation of the syllabi and writing assignments. He shared: “I haven't had an imposed rubric in years. It's been for a very long time. So it's always kind of built up and built up and built up. And there was like, Yep, we're going all in on this one, you know.” The “going all in” referred to him going all in on using ungrading, and not using individual assignment grades.

In regards to institutional support or pushback along the way, he shared that in an early position at another institution, he “had a lot of privilege” because he was the director of the institution's writing center. Even at Institution C, he expressed feeling that he has a decent amount of flexibility and freedom with how he runs his courses. He said he is one of the few people there with the specific degree he has in writing, and that therefore, “if I want to try this with my writing classes, they're like: Okay, go for it. Have fun. Do whatever you want to do.” Thus, Professor C seems to have a fair degree of freedom within his courses, to use practices like ungrading without criticism.

Student C1

Student Overview: C1

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student C1 described herself as female, Chinese and Filipino, and middle class.²⁰ She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of the interview, she was 18 years old, in her first year and second semester of college, and was pursuing a major in Pre-Pharmacy. She grew up with her mom and dad, as well as two brothers: one younger and one older. Her dad works in marketing and her mom is an electrical engineer. She said that both of her parents have a bachelor's degree, and her older brother is a junior in college. In our interviews she described the household, financially, as “on the more well off side.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

²⁰ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

Before the semester of our interview, student C1 said she had not previously taken any course that used ungrading practices. In terms of her relationship with grades, she said: “I am pretty hard on myself when it comes to school. So throughout my years, I've always been like, school comes first, I have to get those good grades kind of thing.” She identified the pressure for “good grades” as coming from: “most likely, my parents. Because they're just like, they've kind of been like school is your way to the future kind of thing. You get good grades in school so that you will do well in the future.” She did, though, give an example of an AP Stats class that she took in high school, in which she earned an A+, but did not pass the relevant AP exam, ultimately leaving her feeling like she didn't learn anything in the course, despite the grade of A+. Thus, while she strives for “good grades” she recognizes that grades don't always reflect learning.

Regarding her initial thoughts upon hearing how Professor C would be using ungrading practices in Course C, she shared that: “When I first heard about it, I honestly didn't, I don't like it. I didn't think I would like it at all. Because like I said, I based everything off of grades. Now, I don't know if I'm doing really well in the class, if I'm not doing well in the class, if I need to try harder, if I don't need to try harder kind of thing.” Her concern with feeling uncertain of how well she is doing in the class without the marker of assignment grades, was a theme throughout our interviews. At another point in our first interview, she reiterated these feelings about the lack of grades on assignments:

Because it's not really based on how you did in that class, as in points wise. Like essays, you don't get a grade on those essays. You really don't know how you did on those essays... Getting that grade kind of puts, like a scale on whether you should really try harder or if you're doing really well in that subject. So now, I don't know if I'm doing well, or if I need to try harder.

As she shares in this quote, the lack of grades on assignments caused her stress. Later in our interview she again similarly expressed: “I feel like that also leads to more stress with it. Because I don't know how I'm doing.” While she largely connected this concern with the essay assignments in the course, she also said that, with shorter weekly reflection assignments, that the lack of a grade led her to put forth less effort: “I feel like since I'm also not really getting a grade for it, it kind of feels like, like I can just B.S. it to be honest.”

In addition to her connection of stress to the lack of assignment grades in the course, student C1 also expressed concerns with the ungrading practice of self-evaluation in the course. These concerns largely had to do with her perception that she was being asked to brag about herself. She felt that this self-evaluation would disadvantage people who are more “timid.” About the self-evaluative aspects, she explained:

I think I don't really have a positive look on it. Just because I also see it as in like, there's some people who can obviously just brag and brag and brag about themselves. And then there's some people who are really timid and really just don't want to go for what they really want in that class, or what they even think they deserve. Like, say you really deserve an A, but since you're like a timid person, you can go and say, I don't want to brag, maybe I should have a B instead.

Thus, her concern is that students who don't feel comfortable bragging about themselves may give themselves a lower grade than they deserve. In our first interview, she shared that, because the professor had to turn in early grades to the institution, he recently asked students to self-evaluate and provide the grade they believe they had achieved so far. She conveyed that he told them the highest they could claim for themselves at this point in the semester was an A-. She shared that she opted for a B+. About this choice, she said: “I was very, like, timid when I was saying it... because I didn't want to say, Yeah, I deserve this A-, because I'm also scared that he'll be like, No, you don't.” So, here, she is demonstrating that the more general worry she expressed about timid people ranking themselves lower than they deserve, has already played out for her. Elsewhere in our first interview, she brought up her feeling that the professor should be giving the evaluations, because of his expertise. She said, “I don't get advice from him specifically, who is the professor and has the PhD in writing.”

These were two prominent themes in our first interviews: (1) her concern with ungrading in that the lack of grades left her feel uncertain about her standing in the course, and (2) that the self-evaluation aspect would be a disadvantage for people who are not comfortable bragging about themselves, alongside the feeling that the Professor has better knowledge to be the evaluator. A third theme that she expressed was the feeling that the ungraded structure in Course C would create more work for her. A main aspect of this for her was having to put forth work in evaluating her own work and progress:

I feel like in other classes where you get your grade, it's kind of done for you. In a way of, you're seeing that grade, you know, you should be working harder. But now, you're doing that for yourself instead of having your teacher kind of grade you off of it. But I feel like, that's also a harder thing to do. Because now you don't know how your teacher is thinking. And again, as I said, your teacher is the one with those PhDs, the knowledge in that subject that you're in. But now you who doesn't have any knowledge in that subject, or you who's just being taught, is now grading yourself kind of. And it's just, you don't know where you should be because you don't have that. You just don't have that knowledge to base your improvement and base your actual work on.

As she articulates here, she also positions the professor-as-expert *not* giving assignments grades as shifting the work onto the student (*who doesn't know as much*). Shortly after this quote, she talked about how, in other, graded courses, once an assignment is done and she gets a grade, she often doesn't have to worry about it anymore, whereas that does not seem to be the case for this class.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

The themes of interview one carried onto our interview two which came at the halfway point of the course..... Student C1 again expressed feeling lost without the goalposts of grades. She said the ungrading format left her without “knowing my progress, and like visually seeing that, the grade. Right now, I can't.” She shared that, particularly due to the busyness of pledging with a fraternity in this semester, she missed some classes, but felt uncertain as to how this has impacted her grade: “So then, it's just me thinking: what has that done to my grade? But, not being able to see that.”

At the time of my second interview with student C1, students had been recently asked to fill out a mid-term self evaluation. Like sentiments expressed in our first interview, she expressed feeling that the self-evaluation was stressful, and additional work:

It had to be a really detailed writing, and basically saying, stating why I deserve this grade, when, I have a lot of other stuff to do... It was just adding on more stress to me...I feel like I don't really entirely feel like I want to, in the whole ungraded thing. I don't really like it in general.

She reported feeling that the mid-term self evaluation was lengthy, that the questions were repetitious, and that she ended up copying and pasting and just modifying some of her responses. Similar to sentiments she expressed in our first interview about the weekly logs, she said of this mid-term evaluation:

I'm kind of making up B.S. just to get a higher grade... I know, for a fact I'm going to say I'm going to, I think I should get an A. And if he decides: No, I don't think you should. Then that's when I lower it. But I'm always gonna start with the higher one. Just to see if I can, kind of almost haggle my way into it.

Thus, she's revealed that she feels she can "BS" to get a higher grade, and that, relatedly, she feels like getting the grade that she hopes to get from the course is at least to some degree about "haggling."

She also again, like in interview one, reiterated an observation that grades are not necessarily a reflection of learning:

...into the past, the reason why I worked so hard, I believe, is for the grade, which really isn't good... I don't feel like it's a good thing either to do because now you're not really working to learn. You're more working just to know that knowledge instead. And I probably lost like half of what I've learned, just because I used it for the class, I got that grade, and then it just went out of my head because I wasn't interested.

So, here, while she is decoupling grades from learning, and giving examples in which she's felt she has received a "good" grade, yet has not actually learned materials or skills she will retain, she is not describing this as positive. She talks about this as not "a good thing," because "you're not really working to learn."

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third and last interview, student C1 shared that her ultimate grade in the course was a B. She expressed disappointment with that outcome. A major theme in our third interview was the negative experience she had with Professor C at their end of the semester meeting, which she referred to as their "grade negotiation."

In this final meeting, students meet one on one with Professor C to review the final portfolio assignment as a means to discuss and decide upon the student's final grade. Student C1 shared that their final portfolio assignment included an "analytics paper" in which students evaluated their own progress throughout the course, specifically about meeting five core requirements that were posed by the professor. In completing this essay, she said: "[I] feel like that one was definitely rushed. I think I did that in a day. So it didn't really turn out that well, just because of that."

The portfolio also included a “letter to future students,” in which students wrote a letter to potential future students of the course. I asked her what she wrote in her letter and she said that she advised students:

...to make sure that they're okay, they're ready for a lot of writing to happen really quickly, like a slow start, and then a speedy end. And then also, to be ready for ungraded because, yeah, I wasn't ready for that. And that I also don't think that ungrading is for me...If I were to tell a student, like if they came up to me and was like, Oh, is he good? I would tell him that he's good, but he's also ungraded and I just didn't like that.

These were some of the components of the portfolio that she discussed with Professor C in their final meeting. Even though she felt that she rushed through some aspects of the final portfolio, she expressed feeling confident going into this meeting because she felt that she had made improvement in her writing through the course of the semester. Although she admitted to missing some classes, she said she turned in all her assignments on time, and she felt that she incorporated the professor's feedback on assignments as they progressed throughout the semester.

Yet, in terms of how she felt the meeting actually went, she described it as argumentative, and expressed feeling that Professor C was unprofessional. She spoke about this in detail, including the following descriptions:

I didn't like how that went. Because I feel, I felt like he kind of went in already knowing what grade he wanted to give me. So I was like, I didn't feel like I was really negotiating too much...But apparently, I did negotiate pretty well, still ended with a B...I felt like I did deserve an A because I did put in a lot of work. I did turn in all of the assignments on time...it really felt like he was using one of my papers, which is the analytical paper and just used that against me the entire time. So yeah, I really just, didn't really like that... just felt so terrible about myself afterwards too. Because he was like, Oh, I was going to give you a C, but you negotiated that to a B. And I was like, Oh. When I thought that I deserved an A. And then he even was like: oh, like, what do you *actually* think you deserve? And I was like: oh, so you really just don't think I deserve this.

She particularly spoke about feeling negative about his tone, like with his question of “What do you actually think you deserve?” She felt he could have worded things in the meeting differently. She described some of these comments as “backhanded” and not direct:

I feel like there were a little bit more kind ways to say, a couple of things that he did say. Like how he kind of said: what do you actually think that you deserve? Like, that kind of just felt like a little bit backhanded instead of just flat out saying something. I feel like I'm more of a straightforward person. Instead of giving me these side comments and making me say things

that you want me to say kind of thing. So I would rather him just be like, I think that you kind of deserve more of a B instead of an A minus.

Thus, although she did not agree with his assessment of her grade, she expressed wishing that he would have been “a little bit more kind,” and more “straightforward” about his assessment.

She went on to express further frustration after walking with other students in the class about their own final meetings with Professor C. She felt that there were other students whose work she was on par with, who did receive an A grade:

I talk to other people in this class, and they all got A's, and then mine was just like: you didn't do this, you didn't do that. But they missed the same amount of classes... So it was, it kind of felt like he just took that and just was using that against me for a lot of different reasons that I didn't think was super reasonable. So I definitely did argue a lot with him during that meeting.

Shortly after this quote, she added even more detail on how she felt about hearing other students' experiences as compared to her own:

I felt kind of bad about myself, and then listening to other people's conversations with him I felt kind of almost even worse, because they will be like, oh, yeah, I got an A, I didn't really have to argue anything, I just said I deserve an A, and he said: Okay. And then their meeting was five minutes long and mine was almost 30.

When I asked her how she would describe Professor C, she again brought up her perception of him treating other students differently than her. Specifically she brought up hearing that he had reached out to other students when they missed class, but that he hadn't reached out to her:

I would say he was very kind of hands off for a lot of people. So he did reach out to a couple people. I remember them telling me, oh, yeah, he emailed me asking if I was, if they were okay. Or like, why they missed so much class. That was one thing that was kinda, kinda weird for me to accept too during the meeting is how he said: oh, you should reach out to me. And then he reached out to other people? But he never reached out to me specifically saying, Oh, are you okay? Why are you missing all this class? But he did for other people who missed the same amount as me.

She remarked that she felt that these students who had reached out to, were students that he had for the precursor of Course C, in the very previous semester, so they were students he already knew.

She went on though, to say that while she does believe that Professor C cares about his students, that it was her final meeting with him that was a main source of her negative feelings towards his teaching:

I know he does care about his students. He would do like the check sometimes, it's basically like, how are you doing? Mentally physically? What's going on in your life... I think, just as a professor, I didn't, I didn't like the ending of it. Throughout the entire thing I was okay with him... But at the end, I think, after that meeting, it was really hard for me to like him as a teacher, just because he, it just felt so kind of harsh to me, some things that he said. So I was kind of like, I don't really like the way that he talked to me about a couple of things. So it was just, I didn't really like him as a professor, as a professor and the professionalism inside that meeting.

Thus, as can be seen through the trajectory of her three interviews, her negative view of ungrading remained consistent, and her dislike of the self-evaluative components, and the final “grade negotiation” were heightened at the end of the semester. When I asked her if she would take an ungraded class in the future, she said “I don’t think I would.”

Student C2

Student Overview: C2

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student C2 described himself as male, Asian, and for socioeconomic background entered, “Average [sic] - good.”²¹ In our interview, when I asked again about socioeconomic background, he was uncertain at first, and reported “near high.” He elaborated feeling that his family was poor while he was growing up, and then moved to middle class, and is now what he would consider upper class. He confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our interviews, he was 19 years old. He was in his first year of college, second semester, although, due to AP credits, he was technically a sophomore. He had declared computer science as his major. English is not this student’s first language, and he speaks six languages total.

Student C2 grew up in India. He said that he grew up with his mom, dad, three brothers, a sister, and grandparents. His mom is a stay at home mom and his dad owns a factory. Student C2 plans to return to India for his summers while he is attending college in the United States.

²¹ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

In our first interview, student C2 shared that he is new to the American education system. Prior to coming to the United States for college, he lived in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). During his educational experiences there, he attended some schools that used a “British curriculum” and other schools that used an “Indian curriculum.” The majority of his educational experience in UAE was with the British curriculum.²² He described this curriculum as not having weekly assignments and homework. He explained that for a majority of these courses “our whole grade was based on one exam.” He observed that, under this system, he focused on school work while at school, but did not feel the need to be concerned without school outside of school hours. This has not been his experience in his first year of college in the U.S., and he has struggled with that adjustment. In his first semester, he turned in many assignments late, and at one point in that semester, his grades were all Ds and Fs. Yet, he reached out to his teachers to share his struggle adjusting to an American curriculum, and many were able to provide support, which enabled him to bring his grades up.

One of those teachers from the previous semester was Professor C. Course C is student C2’s second class with Professor C, but his first experience with ungrading (which Professor C did not use in that fall semester class). Student C2 said that in the previous semester, the course with Professor C used grades, and was also not focused on writing. He expressed a positive perception of Professor C, and said in the previous semester that Professor C “really helped me out,” and provided him with extensions when he struggled getting assignments in on time. Student C2 also took a writing course in the previous semester, but it was not taught by Professor C.

Student C2 expressed concern with his writing skills generally, stating that he does not feel that writing is his strong suit. The writing course he had in the previous semester used grades, and he said that was helpful as a means to gauge his improvement throughout the semester. In this first interview, he expressed concern about how the writing course this semester would go, without using assignment grades, and what that would mean for his ability to gauge whether he is improving or not.

When asked more about his perceptions of with ungrading so far, he also expressed uncertainty with how to prioritize facets of the class, without knowing their point value:

²² He specifically referred to “CAIE” which is the Cambridge Assessment International Education.

So, to be honest, it feels really weird in the class because it's ungraded. And at this point, I don't know, how will the grades come out. How will we come out to a common ground to find our grades? Because, the grades doesn't consist just about the paper, they implement the attendance, class participation, and there are a few more things that should be considered... So depending on the score, we could prepare, like if it's like something for 50 marks or 100 marks. So I would be like, Okay, this is very important, more than the one which is for 10 marks...So it's difficult to see what is what should I prioritize first and not get the penalty in that.

He also shared that this uncertainty regarding grades causes him concern about his GPA. He said “I don’t want to ruin my GPA... So it’s a bit scary.” Despite this uncertainty, he did express curiosity for the course’s potential focus on improvement: “But it sounds interesting, like, because this will, this course will be graded, according to our improvement, not like the skill set you already have.” When I asked him what grade he wants to aim for in the course, he replied that he is aiming for an A because he earned a B in the writing course the previous semester, and feels that he can improve upon his writing skills even further this semester.

Towards the end of this interview, when I asked about disability status, he shared being diagnosed with ADHD. He said that having ADHD has caused him issues with school since high school, such as difficulty staying focused and struggling with turning assignments in by their due date.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In our second interview, student C2 reported that his semester had had its “ups and downs.” He pinpointed Course C, the writing course, as his most stressful course so far. Yet, as we talked, he pinpointed the reason for that stress as something that he also liked about the course: a focus on improvement. He connected a focus on improvement to increased stress, because he perceived the goal of showing improvement (vs. the goal of obtaining a certain grade) as requiring more work. Yet, when I asked if he had the opportunity to take another ungraded class, if he would consider it, or avoid it, he said that he *would* take another ungraded class if he had the chance. He said that Course C’s focus on improvement is a focus that aligns with his own learning goals. He shared: “because to be honest, one of the reasons I've come to U.S. is to make connections and to explore my skills, like to enhance my skills. And I think ungrading is a way that I could enhance it.”

He reiterated this combination when I later in the interview asked him what he would identify as positives and negatives of ungrading. In terms of positive aspects of ungrading, he reiterated his perception of Course C as more focused on learning. He expressed that this focus gives him the motivation to improve his skills, whereas he doesn't necessarily find that motivation when assignment grades are present. As an example, he said with his previous writing class, if he received a score of 90-95% he would likely just be happy with that, and thus not feel motivated to improve further, whereas this is not the case with Course C. Relatedly, he also expressed appreciation for knowing that a minor mistake would not potentially yield a deduction of points, whereas in an ungraded class, he doesn't have this same worry.

In terms of negative aspects of ungrading, he again said that the course requires more work. He also reiterated a sentiment from our first interview: anxiety because the lack of assignment grades leaves him feeling uncertain about his final grade. He again expressed concern for how this would impact his GPA. In this interview, he added that he is attending college on a scholarship that is based on his GPA. If he does not maintain a certain GPA, he could lose his scholarship.

Relatedly, student C2 shared confusion about Professor C's assignment of "early grades." Professor C explained to the class that Institution C requires the submission of early grades for students, in the form of a letter grade on the A-F grading scale. This is the first and only grade that student C2 could see in the learning management service's (LMS) Canvas site for the course. The grade that was entered for student C2 was a C, which was confusing to him:

So to be honest, that class has been like, it's pretty confusing. Like, sometimes I feel like okay, this class, I'll be graded on my improvement. Like how I was before and then how I am right now. But then I see a C on my gradebook, like, AGHHH"

When I asked student C2 what grade he felt reflected his work in the class, he responded that, in terms of his work and effort he felt he deserved an A+, but that if it was only about skill that he would say closer to a B.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third and final interview, student C2 had completed the semester and expressed views of ungrading consistent with our earlier interviews. He again shared the feeling that he had to work more in Course C than his other courses that semester, because of Course C's focus on

improvement. In this third interview, he also brought up that other students he knows, including some in Course C, have started relying on ChatGPT for their assignments. He shared that he once expressed struggling with writing to a friend, and that they suggested to him that he use ChatGPT to write his papers for him. Student C2 expressed not wanting to do that. He was unsure of the quality it would produce (and consistency with his previously submitted work), and furthermore, reiterated that he does want to improve his writing skills, which would not be helped if he cheated.

However, despite the perception of Course C as requiring more work, he again expressed appreciation for Course C's focus on improvement. He said he wishes that more of his classes were ungraded because of this focus:

So definitely, in the [writing] class, I had worked more than other classes. So, way more than other classes... But it was based on the improvement... I don't feel bad now because I have completed the course. I have improved. I scored a good grade. So doesn't feel bad. It was a good class. And I would, to be honest, I would really like more of my classes to be ungraded... I mentioned that, classes like computer science, there are a few classes, we can get information online, but we still have to memorize concepts and all of that. If it would be ungraded it would include something about more skills than memorizing.

He went on to say that he disliked the expectation of memorization in his computer science class because he would be docked points on assignments in that class when he couldn't regurgitate certain information from memory. He expressed that the types of things he would get docked points for are things that, on a job or in other real world situations, he could figure out from a "google search." Thus, he felt like memorization (and penalties around it) does not reflect the skills he needs in "the real world."

His final grade in Course C was an A-. His final meeting with the professor took about 30 minutes. Student C2 mentioned that in his portfolio, he had to answer a question asking how he would grade himself and he had written down that he did not know how to grade himself. In the meeting, when he was asked by Professor C what grade he thought he had earned in the course, student C2 said between an A and a B. He shared with me his reasoning for this assessment: that he turned in a lot of work late, and sometimes opted to go to parties when he could have been studying, yet he also felt he put in a lot of effort, including not using ChatGPT on his assignments. In this meeting, he also brought up having ADHD to Professor C:

While in the conference, the final conference, I mentioned about this thing, on top of so many things, I had ADHD as well, but I still stuck to academic honesty. This is

one of the reason I should be getting this grade or something like that. So that validated my point. Apart from that, having ADHD, if I think- if I didn't have ADHD, I would be able to do much better in my assignment. I would have done my assignments much faster.

In describing the Professor C, student C2 described him as nice, reachable, and motivating. He described Professor C as reachable because he said he always emphasized that students could come talk with him, and he encouraged students to come to his office hours. Student C2 also reflected that Professor C also took students on a “field trip” to his office early in the semester, so that students would know where to come for his office hours. He described Professor C as motivating because he shared that whenever he attended his office hours, Professor C was always encouraging about his work, expressing his confidence in student C2’s abilities, and telling student C2 that he had good ideas. Student C2 also mentioned about Professor C that: “he was not so strict about deadlines. So like, you can submit two/three days late, but make sure it's good quality. He was not so focused on quantity.” As a student who sometimes struggles turning assignments in on time, student C2 appreciated this flexibility and focus on the quality of the work over deadlines.

Student C3

Student Overview: C3

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student C3 described herself as female, Latina, and middle class.²³ In our interviews, she elaborated that, “most of my life, I’ve been low income, but recently we moved up to middle class, I guess.” Also about her family’s socioeconomic status, she said that while she was growing up: “We were struggling financially.” She answered yes to the question, “Are you a first-generation college student?” and this was confirmed in our interviews.²⁴ In our interview she confirmed that she was 19 years old, in her first year and second semester of college, and was pursuing a major in psychology.

²³ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

²⁴ I double-checked all the questions from the pre-screening survey in the interviews, and through that process realized that some students had misunderstood what it meant to be a “first generation college student,” and did not respond accurately.

In terms of her upbringing, she grew up with her mom, dad, younger brother, and years later, a younger sister. Her dad “has always been in construction work,” and up until COVID hit, her mom had been a “housewife.” In terms of her parents’ education, her mom dropped out of high school, and later earned her GED. Her dad grew up in Mexico and came to the United States when he was 17. She said that he “paid to get his high school diploma.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Student C3 had Professor C in the previous semester for another course. That course was not ungraded and was not a course focused on writing. In talking about her initial perceptions of Course C, she expressed feeling less stress in that course, in part due to Professor C’s teaching style: “Because he’s really understanding. And I feel like he doesn’t put a lot of pressure on the grade itself, but instead on the learning.” When I asked her if she could tell me more about why she feels less stress in Course C, she went on to say:

I guess since at the end of the semester, we’ll get to discuss what we think we deserve as the grade. That makes me feel like I can put the best effort that I can do, and tell him, this is the best I could do, and this is why I think I deserve this grade. Instead of having a teacher determine whether or not what you did was the best or not. Because I don’t know, it just, it’s not as much pressure because I knew that the best for me, will get me a grade I feel like I deserve.

So, here, she is connecting her sense of less stress in Course C to her participation in the final grade determination. As she stated, “instead of having a teacher determine whether or not what you did was the best,” she is able to instead put forth what she perceives to be as *her best*, which she feels “will get me a grade I feel like I deserve.” This sentiment of feeling less stressed and “not as much pressure” in Course C (as compared to other courses) was a theme across our interviews.

Another theme in this first interview was student C3’s positive perceptions of Professor C. At one point in our first interview she gave this description of Professor C:

I think he’s a good professor. He really cares about his students. He always, at the beginning of every class, he asks us if we have any questions about the class, or any past assignments or anything at all. And I really appreciate that. I don’t usually have questions, but I do appreciate that he asks in the beginning of every class and at the end of every class. It just makes me feel more comfortable with asking questions if I do have one. Yeah, and I just feel like the environment feels more safe, if that makes sense.

She talks about him here as caring, and the classroom context as comfortable, providing the example of Professor C making time in each for student questions. Later in our first interview, she again brought up Professor C, again describing him as caring:

He's really caring. He's really nice. He has, I guess, a calming voice. He makes sure that everyone is okay. He talks to us. I don't- I've never heard him raise his voice or anything...I feel like his personality is really calming. So it makes the classroom feel a little bit safer. I know, he's also mentioned that in the class that he would like everyone to respect each other, and that it's a safe space, and if we ever needed to, like talk about something. So yeah, I really appreciate that.

Here, she is connecting Professor C as “caring” and “nice” to not raising his voice with students, and feeling that he puts forth effort for the classroom to be a safe space.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In our second interview, Student C3 again expressed feeling that the assignments in Course C were less stressful, and less pressure, than the assignments in her other, graded courses. For the sake of comparison, she provided an example of a graded course she is in, in which there is a quiz every class period that will result in 25% of her total grade. She described those quizzes as stressful. Generally, she described the use of points and percentages on assignment grades as stressful: “in other classes, there's like a percentage of certain assignments and quizzes and tests and exams and stuff. And missing, maybe one or two points on one thing could drop your grade, like, a lot.” Comparatively, she reported not having this as a source of stress in Course C, since assignments are not graded.

When I asked her if she would take another ungraded course, she said it would depend on the Professor, but that she would if the course had a setup similar to Course C. In describing this, she particularly highlights Professor C’s helpful feedback on assignments:

I feel like even though it's an ungraded class, it also depends on the professor, how they're going to lay out the course. And right now, just thinking about how [Professor C] does it, I think it is less stressful. And he adds comments to our logs and our essays and lets us know that we did a good job or if we need to work on something. And I think that's really helpful. Because, you know, sometimes in other classes, you get docked points or something, but you never get explained why. So you just don't know how to fix it. And with [Professor C], or in this ungraded class, he always makes sure to let us know why. Which helps. At least it

helps me understand how to be better in the future. Yeah, I feel like if all ungraded classes were like that, then I would take it. But I feel like that's mostly because of the professor.

Thus, here, she is again describing Course C as less stressful than her other courses, which she is largely attributing to Professor C and his effort to provide valuable feedback on assignments.

In regards to course C, she additionally expressed a sense of having greater control over her assignments. Some of this sense of control she attributed to the fact that Professor C included his students in creating some aspects of the syllabus when the semester started:

We as a class had gone over the course policies. And we got to decide how much weight each assignment would have at the end. And which assignments would be more important, or if we needed to have an extra day to do an assignment or two days to do an assignment, we got to decide that...That helped, that helped me at least, feel a little bit- it helped me feel more in control...For example, in other classes the teacher determines the weight of each assignment and test. And so, it's more like, ugh, I don't want to do this type of thing. But being able to control, or be able to choose what the weight is for each assignment, I don't feel that way.

So, for student C3, the syllabus negotiation at the beginning of the semester set a positive tone for her. As she states, being able to create or change certain aspects of the course, such as the late work policy, led to her to feel “more in control” of the course, as compared to other courses, where the teacher decides these aspects.

She also observed that the other students in Course C seem to be engaged in the work. She shared the experience of students not tending to enjoy group work, but that in Course C, when students get put in groups to workshop their papers, she hears them engaging and providing constructive feedback to their peers:

When we do group activities, it seems as though most people are actually doing the work. Because I know, this past month, most of our group stuff was reviewing each other's paragraphs, or thesis, or intro paragraph, stuff like that. So I could hear that people were giving actual comments and referencing what we had learned. So I think most of the class is taking it seriously...I think in the past, most time I do group work, almost everyone doesn't want to do it...I feel like mostly everyone is [in Course C], which is, to me, was a little surprising, because it's not, I don't think it's common to see that.

In this second interview, her goal for the final grade in the course was an A. In this interview she also commented that, as a first generation college student, she hopes that she can be a role

model for her younger siblings and cousins who may want to attend college, “so that they can see that they can do it as well.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

Student C3’s final grade in Course C was an A. In our third interview she provided detail about the portfolio assignment and teacher meeting that ultimately determined this final grade. She did express some stress with completing the portfolio, given the amount of time it took to complete, yet overall described the portfolio and meeting assignments as positive. In the portfolio she argued that her effort in the course deserved an A. When I asked her if she felt confident about making this case as she went into the meeting with Professor C, she recalled:

I definitely felt confident because I put in the effort and the work and even if at the time that I was doing, you know, the portfolio, I was stressing out and I was making sure that I got it done, yeah, I got it done. And I know that many people, maybe didn't do one of one part or another part, because, you know, it was a lot. But I finished everything.

In terms of how the meeting with Professor C went, she said it took about 15 minutes, and that he was agreeable to her argument that she deserved an A:

I think it went pretty well. He asked me, I think, five questions, basically the course outcome questions. And he asked me to give him examples or evidence about like, how I fulfilled them. Yeah, so I did that. And then after that, he was like, okay, so What grade do you think you deserve? And I was like, I think I deserve an A, and he was like, I would agree with that.

Student C3 was happy with this outcome.

When I asked her if she would recommend the class to other students, she said that she would recommend it to students who want to learn and who wish to improve their writing skills.

She elaborated:

I definitely feel like I learned more. I know, my roommate took a different [writing] teacher. And she, it was easy for her because she didn't do anything. But at the end of the day, she didn't learn anything. So I would recommend it for people who actually want to improve in their writing skills, because you do learn a lot. And I do feel like it has definitely helped me for future writing projects. But if somebody just wanted a, I guess an easy A, just to pass the class, I guess I wouldn't recommend it. Because it is a lot of work.

Her perception then, is that certain students may enjoy the ungrading setup in Course C, but that others may not. Specifically, she shares that she would recommend the course to students who

want to learn, but not to students who are looking for an “easy A.” She describes Course C as “a lot of work,” but the benefit being that “you do learn a lot.”

In regards to her perceptions of Professor C, her reports were consistently positive throughout our interviews. In interview three, she talked about Professor C as understanding, kind, and non-judgmental:

I would say that he's very understanding. He's really kind. Yeah, I think that sums him up. He's very understanding, very kind. He always, at the beginning of every class, he always asked the class if we had any questions for him. He always made sure to make it a safe space. I don't think I ever saw him mad or yelling...I feel like you could ask anything, like any question, he wouldn't make any judgmental face or he wouldn't answer in a judgmental way. He would answer it in an understanding way.

These sentiments were consistent with her perceptions in our first two interviews, in which she had also specifically mentioned him never getting angry and his efforts to create what felt like a safe space. In terms of Professor C being understanding, she provided a specific example of when she had to miss a class. She knew she had to miss a class on a particular day, and that it was going to be an important class involving student peer reviews of their second essay in the course. She knew it was an important day to miss. She shared: “I feel like sometimes when you approach professors knowing that the day you're going to be absent is a day, that's kind of important, it's a little scary. And you're like, Oh, I'm gonna miss this day, and you don't know how they're gonna react.” Yet, in comparison, given her positive perceptions of him, she did not find it scary to approach Professor C. As she expected, he was understanding of her absence and did not respond negatively

Towards the end of our final interview, she also talked a bit about where she felt she got her motivation for completing the assignments in Course C. She described it as a motivation to do her best:

I think my motivation was definitely knowing that I could do my best. And that's how I would get my grade. Because, you know, in other classes, the grade is based on what the teacher thinks is best. And, you know, sometimes it kind of, it's too much. But with this, I felt, I personally felt like I could do my best, and I could get the grade that I feel like I deserve. So that was something that motivated me to continue. And I think not having that letter grade just in my face all the time.

Her sentiment of Course C not being like other courses in that other courses are “based on what the teacher thinks is best” is a comparison she also made in an earlier interview. In both mentions she expressed the feeling that in Course C, on the other, that she needed to live up to her own

expectations in order to “get the grade that I feel I deserve.” As also expressed in the previous quote, she additionally ties this dynamic to feeling motivated for the assignments in the course.

Student C4

Student Overview: C4

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student C4 described himself as male, Asian, and middle class.²⁵ He answered yes to the question, “Are you a first-generation college student?” and this was confirmed in our interviews.²⁶ He confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our interviews, he was 18 years old, in his first year and second semester of college and was pursuing a dental hygiene major. He shared that he speaks three languages: English, Cantonese, and Mandarin. English is his first language.

He grew up with his mom and dad. They are both immigrants to the U.S. He is an only child. His dad works in construction and his mom works as a nail technician. His mom’s and dad’s highest level of education is a high school diploma. In our second interview, he shared that his parents immigrated to the United States because of “the American Dream,” and went on to say that “many immigrants hear about how America is a great country...it’s the land of the free, land of possibilities.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Student C4 had Professor C in the previous fall semester for another course. That fall course was not ungraded and was not focused on writing. That course did, however, use the end of semester portfolio assignment that Course C uses, which Student C4 said has given him familiarity with the end of the semester assignment.

When I asked him which courses in college have been his favorite so far, he said the courses with Professor C. He said that he likes Professor C’s teaching style, including that he doesn’t rely on lectures. He also said of Professor C’s teaching style: “I really like the way he teaches because he

²⁵ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

²⁶ I double-checked all the questions from the pre-screening survey in the interviews, and through that process realized that some students had misunderstood what it meant to be a “first generation college student,” and did not respond accurately.

uses methods where it's not just like, textbook, read this, memorize it, and then whatever." In further detailing what he likes about Professor C's teaching style, student C4 also brought up an example of Professor C using magic tricks as a means of teaching:

And then throughout the weeks, beginning of a class, he does this magic trick. And it sounds random, right? But then, after he does the magic trick, he kind of explains how, in this magic trick, he'll have to lure the person in into the magic trick. And then, you can connect that to how you can build a good thesis, how you can build a good hook. So it's basically just telling us a magic trick is basically telling a story.

This example demonstrates teaching practices that student C4 appreciates more than the expectation of memorizing material from a textbook.

Regarding the assignments in Course C, student C4 did say that working on these assignments feels different than working on graded assignments in other courses. In regards to the ungraded assignments, he said:

I think the pre-knowledge of knowing that it'll say complete either way, is, is a good feeling. But it's also like, I feel it's also a responsibility to still try your hardest in the assignment. And then for the numerical score, it's more of like, I have more pressure in getting a good score, basically.

Thus, while he expresses a positive feeling in knowing that as long as he submits an assignment, that it will earn a "complete," he also connects the ungrading assignments with "a responsibility to still try your hardest," which he distinguishes from the aim to get a "good score" on graded assignments.

When I asked him if he could elaborate on this feeling of responsibility to try his hardest on the ungraded assignments, his response focused on not wanting to "take advantage" of ungrading, and the benefit of learning. He expressed:

I'd say it's unfair, to just- I feel like it's just not okay to take advantage of this system. And I feel like the system's mainly designed for students to not carry more stress. I feel like the main objective is to make students see that school is for learning, rather than just achievements, where it's numerical scores, getting the degree. Because I feel like some people just see the degree as: Oh, I did this thing. And then other students also see the degree where it's like: Oh, I learned calculus, I learned statistics and stuff like that. And they remember the concepts.

He again here distinguishes the goal of a numeral score from the goal of learning. A little while later, he also distinguishes himself from how other students might approach ungrading. He said:

I feel like, ungrading is good for me. Because I feel like I have high standards in myself, where it's like, it's not fair for me to just, like, just take advantage of the system. But like, I can see,

like, if this system was worth into, implemented in, like, an entire school, like it can definitely be taken advantage of.

Thus, he identifies as having “high standards” for himself, but implies that others who may not hold similar standards may “take advantage of the system.”

Towards the end of the interview, as we were wrapping up, I asked student C4 if there were any additional thoughts he wanted to add to our conversation that he hadn’t already expressed, and he responded: “Professor [C] is one of probably the most interesting people I've met...I just think his way of education is just so like, it's not off the rails, but it's like, so different than the normal textbook and paper. I just feel like, that way is so much better, for me at least.” Thus, student C4’s positive perception of Professor C’s teaching style was a clear theme in this interview.

One of the last notes that he expressed in this interview was emphasis on how Course C focused on learning: “In this class, I can see what I learned, I can see how it helped me become a better writer, I guess. Because you can just look back at the, your final portfolio, and you can actually see what you've actually learned.” He compared this to an approach that feels more like memorization for other courses that use assignment grades: “This ungraded policies, I know I did this stuff. I know how to do this stuff. And it's like, I know I learned it. It feels like it's more of, I learned it, rather than for the numerical [grade], I memorized it.” As he also specified in an earlier part of our interview, he is here perceiving a distinction between the goal of memorization that he aligns with the goal of a numerical grade, and the outcome of learning that he aligns with ungrading.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

Interview two with Student C4 found some common themes in his perspectives of ungrading. The biggest was appreciation for Course C’s emphasis on feedback. He explained that Professor C’s focus on feedback helped him to better understand what specific areas he could further improve upon, as well as to pinpoint specific strengths of his work. With this feedback, he said he can recognize:

Okay, this is what I did wrong. I can now change it. Rather than like: Oh, good job. But it's like you don't really get anything from: Good job. So feedback, where it's like, you can take it and improve your writing...And another thing is on the good job, [Professor C] says what

you did a good job on specifically. So you know that you did this part well, rather than a whole paper.

Feedback was also his main answer when I asked him his thoughts on whether he felt his learning in a course with no assignment grades differed from classes that had assignment grades:

I think understanding what's right and what's wrong - the process of understanding what's right, and what's wrong is different. Because it's like, if just take example, for the paper I just wrote the way I know what's right, and what's wrong is from what his feedback, what he gave me from his feedback. But for grades, it's just like, if I got a B, I know, how well I did on the paper, but I just don't know, what I did good on the paper and what I did bad on paper.

So while he sees grades as providing an overall evaluation of a paper, with feedback, he appreciates that he learns with more detail on what specifically he did well on and what specifically he can work to improve upon. (As educational research shows, students often do not read feedback when it is accompanied by a grade.)

When I asked him about his thoughts on positives and negatives regarding ungrading, he again brought up feedback as a positive. As a negative, he expressed that the dynamic requires more accountability on the part of the student. In his own words, he said:

I think the positives is that the teacher, I think teachers that do ungrading, understand the focus of more feedback. So you're more inclined to get more feedback on the work you do. But I think the cons are also, you have to hold yourself accountable 100% of the time, because it's like, the teachers trust you to turn in your work on time and to still put in your effort in order for this system to work.

When I asked him if he would take or avoid another ungraded course in the future he said that he would take another ungraded class, depending on the professor and the topic. He once again mentioned feedback, in saying that in terms of a decision to take another ungraded class "it would depend on the professor, if he gave back the same amount of feedback as this professor."

In this second interview, student C4 said he is still aiming for an A for his final grade, although he believes that a B may be more realistic, especially due to lower quality work on one of these papers.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third meeting, student C4 had submitted his portfolio and had his final meeting with Professor C. In talking about the portfolio assignment, C4 talked about one of the essays being a letter written to future students. In that letter student C4 said that he wrote: "I said that the class is definitely worth taking. And it's not like a normal class. And it's more like it's more fun and engaging than a normal class." When I asked him what made the class fun and engaging for him, he answered: "A big aspect of it, I think is not having any pressure. And also doing something different, like not just like always looking at textbooks. Or lectures."

He elaborated on some of these sentiments when I asked him how he would now, at the end of the semester, describe Professor C's teaching style. He said:

He didn't really feel like a teacher, because it was like not really lectures... It wasn't just like spitting out information for you to retain. It was more of doing it together kind of thing...I feel like he understands our time. Where it's like, he sometimes, he teaches us how to do this one thing and analyze it, and then he gives us time to do it too...So it's still fresh.

Thus, the points about Course C feeling less stressful/less pressured, and the expression of appreciation for Professor C's teaching style not emphasizing textbook or lectures - were consistent themes for student C4 throughout the semester.

In describing his meeting with Professor C to review his portfolio and determine a final grade, he said it lasted about 10-15 minutes. They both agreed upon a final grade of A-. Student C4 said of the meeting and discussion: "in the meeting, I said that I should get an A, or like a low A. And [Professor C] agreed on a low A." When I asked student C4 how he felt being able to propose his own grade in this way, he replied with positive perceptions:

I thought it was really great. Because this is the first time actually kind of, choosing yourself. So, being honest and rational about how you did. Because just say, if someone just did not go to class at all and asked for an A, it'd be unfair. But that's also not happening because Professor Snyder also ultimately decides, you both like, meet in the middle. Yeah. And I thought, I just thought it was really nice to be able to do that.

Student C4 was happy with the conclusion of Course C.

Student C5

Student Overview: C5

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student C5 described himself as male, Hispanic, and low middle class.²⁷ He answered yes to the question, “Are you a first-generation college student?” and this was confirmed in our interviews.²⁸ He confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our interviews, he was 19 years old, in his first year and second semester of college, and was pursuing a computer science major. English is his first language, and he also speaks Spanish.

He grew up with his mom, dad, two older sisters, and eventually a younger brother as well. When he was younger, his grandma and aunt lived in a duplex next door, although he said that they later “moved back to Mexico.” His dad works in construction and his mom is a housecleaner. His dad’s highest level of education is middle school, and his mom’s highest level of education is elementary school. His two older sisters pursued vocational school after high school: one for nursing and one to become a dental assistant.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

In our first interview, we talked about how Professor C introduced the idea of ungrading to the class. Student C5 described that:

He basically just started off telling us that this class wasn't- we weren't gonna get grades for our assignments. So it was gonna be more like: you did it. He did say he would give us feedback, because he wanted us to grow on, from what we turn it in. And he just explained about how he wanted us to try what we thought was our hardest without having to worry about what grade we're getting on the assignments.

I asked him how he felt when he heard that Course C would be set up in this way, and he responded positively, saying: “I thought it was really cool.” He went on to talk about a writing class that he had in the previous, fall semester, in which he would repeatedly go back to the rubric when he was writing a paper, to ensure he was meeting “my professor’s expectation of an A.” He talked about that class feeling as though he was writing to meet the professor’s expectations, but not necessarily his own. In Course C, however, he feels that this is what Professor C is asking: for him to do the best that he can based upon his own judgment.

²⁷ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

²⁸ I double-checked all the questions from the pre-screening survey in the interviews, and through that process realized that some students had misunderstood what it meant to be a “first generation college student,” and did not respond accurately.

We also talked about assignments in Course C. Student C5 referenced the weekly log assignment. He talked about it being a helpful assignment, and in this description also wrapped in further description of some of Professor C's teaching practices:

I like doing them because it also helps me kind of reflect back on what we learn. Definitely, I think week two, we negotiated our syllabus, and he kind of taught us that we're allowed to ask questions. Because a lot of professors are just like: here's the work, do it...And he taught us that we should be asking the questions.

In addition to describing the weekly log assignments as a helpful opportunity to reflect, he segues into Professor C's syllabus negotiation with students and his encouragement for students to ask questions.

At another point in our interview, he similarly drew a comparison between Professor C and other professors in terms of flexibility. He said about Professor C:

I feel like he's just very open. He's open to what the students are asking. I feel like he's a little more flexible with- I feel like he'd be really flexible with due dates and stuff. Compared to other professors [who are] like: This is due today, like, no extensions, no nothing. He definitely knows how to adapt to the learning styles of the students in the class. And he uses various methods. I know he's showed us YouTube videos...I know he read us a children's book. And I remember sitting there thinking, why is he reading this to us? But then he also shows us how the literary devices that we're learning are being used in children's books, to ultimately help them learn a lesson. He just applies what we learned in class to different methods of showing them.

Thus, student C5 expressed appreciation for the differences he sees in Professor C as compared with other professors, and also shares appreciation for the variety of formats that Professor C uses in his classes.

Student C5 also highlighted the course's emphasis on feedback. He shared that he does not feel confident in his writing skills. He said that he has so much anxiety around his writing skills, that in past classes, he would sometimes complete papers or essays but then not turn them in due to fearing that his writing was bad. With the lack of assignment grades in Course C, he does not have this same fear in the class. He further talked about his appreciation for Course C's emphasis on feedback alongside an example of a paper he turned in, in a High School English class, that he received a low score on:

I'm also really glad that he's going to give feedback. I want to know how I can improve it, or what parts were just not good. Because I was in pre AP honors English up until sophomore year. I remember it was just like a shock. Once I got into that sophomore year class I remember I turned in my first paper for her. And I got one out of six. And it was like, she told me that I used "I" too much, that I didn't analyze it correctly. Definitely like that class was one of the hardest classes that I had ever been in, in high school...So now coming into college and knowing that I can use "I" in a paper, just in a certain way. And knowing that we can analyze in different perspectives that aren't what the professor is expecting, and still get a good grade. So I'm definitely going into this paper with less nervousness and knowing that what I write, I'm going to get good feedback. And not just some random: you get one out of six, because you said "I."

As he explains in this quote, knowing that he will receive feedback versus points, has resulted in him feeling less nervous with writing in Course C, versus other courses that he has taken in which essays were graded.

In this first meeting, he said that while he would like to aim for an A in the course, that he feels a final grade of B may be more realistic for him, given his perception that "I'm not the best at writing."

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In our second interview, student C5 again brought up viewing Course C's emphasis on feedback as positive. He again connected the emphasis on feedback instead of points as creating less worry over what he turns in:

Because I know for our final draft that we turned in, I turned it in missing a paragraph. Because I wasn't super worried about – well, I definitely showed him that this paragraph is still in development – but I just wasn't worried about, you know, it's missing a paragraph, so I'm gonna get a bunch of points taken away. Instead, I wanted to see what he would say, because we're more of a feedback course. So to me, getting the feedback helped once I did my final essay.

As he indicates, at this point in the semester student C5 has already been through an essay assignment, and found that the feedback he received in his draft for the paper helped him in editing for the final paper.

In this second interview he also talked about his experiences as a first generation college student. He shared that the process of applying for college was challenging because it was not a process that his family is familiar with:

I know, when I was applying, you know they asked you all these questions when you're applying, and it was kind of difficult to answer them. So nobody in my house had an answer for me. So I would go to teachers at school, or I would go to people that I knew that applied to these colleges, and ask them for help.

He also shared that in regards to paying for college that he is able to afford it because he participates in a local community program that covers 90% of his tuition. Participation in this program requires that he spends time volunteering to help with local community projects. He additionally works a part time job at Institution C's library. He said this sometimes makes him aware of socio-economic differences between himself and other students and shared the experience of talking to another student about the number of hours he works, and that student responding, "Well, why don't you just quit?" Student C5 expressed needing that income to support himself, which it seemed that this student couldn't understand.

In this second interview, he said that he currently felt that he is aiming for a grade of B or B plus for Course C. He gave himself that assessment due to having missed some of the assigned readings, and thus being unable to participate much in class on those days.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third interview, student C5 talked about the final portfolio assignment and his meeting with Professor C to discuss his final grade in the course. Student C5 had indicated in his portfolio his feeling that a B plus as a final grade reflected his work and effort in the course. Yet, Professor C had a different suggestion:

I told him, everything taken into consideration, like attendance, like reading logs, and everything, I said, I would give myself like a B plus, just because I know, I didn't turn some of the reading logs in. And we eventually- He told me about that he thinks that I did better. He told me that he thinks an A minus would better fit.

Thus, a grade of A minus ended up being the grade that they agreed upon for student C5. Student C5 was happy with this outcome.

When I asked student C5 if he would recommend Course C to friends, he said that he would. He elaborated:

I definitely think yeah. It's a combination of not having that grade of, being just- if you're trying and you're putting in effort it's- You feel like you're doing good. And it's also a

combination of the professor, he's very helpful. And he also gives a lot of feedback. Because if you're not getting it graded, and you're not getting the feedback, you just you don't know where you are. Because you could be telling yourself that you're doing really good, but the professor may not think the same. So it's a combo of getting feedback on how you're doing, and how you can improve, from not only your professor, but your peers that helps build confidence.

Consistent with sentiments expressed in our previous interviews, student C5 is again here emphasized the positives of the course as including Professor C's helpful demeanor and his feedback on assignments.

He continued with these positive assessments when I asked him if he felt like his perceptions of ungrading changed over time, across the duration of the semester. He explained:

At first, I was like, this is something new, it's different. It's really a 50/50 chance that I do good and 50 that I don't. And then I remember, I was like, how would he even- Is this based on his opinion? This doesn't make any sense. But I think as through this last year went on, kind of, not having a grade, and him also explaining to us that it was more based off of the work and effort that we put in, then off of concrete numbers, it definitely, really helped. I think if the rest of my classes were like this, I feel like I would be coming to class every day, I wouldn't skip class. And I feel like they would be more enjoyable because I feel like when you're not having a number attached to what you're, what you're learning, you're more willing to take the risk, you're willing to be wrong.

Thus, student C5 here makes the claim that he would not skip class if the rest of his classes were ungraded. He attributes this to Course C being more enjoyable for him, which he also connects to the feeling of being able to take risks or even be wrong in Course C, since assignments are not point-based.

Group D: Institution, Course, Professor, & Student

Institution D

Institution D is a private institution. According to U.S. News (at <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges> in April 2025), Institution D has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 9,000 students. Of that enrollment, approximately 50% are listed as female students, and approximately 50% are listed as male students. The website reports a 31% minority enrollment with the five largest groups in terms of race and ethnicity as follows: white,

Hispanic, international, Asian, and two or more races. U.S. News also reports that this university has a 12% acceptance rate and a 9:1 student-faculty ratio.

Course D

Course D is a course offered from Institution D's Computer Science and Engineering Department. The course description for Course D, according to Institution D's website (in April 2025), describes it as focused on "Intermediate level programming in Python," and as building upon a prerequisite course: Course D is the second course in a sequence. For the Spring 2023 semester, when I conducted my interviews, Institution D's website lists only one section of Course D offered in that semester taught by Professor D.

Course D Syllabus: Assignments & Ungrading

The syllabus for Course D is detailed, at 35 pages long. The "Assignments" entry in the syllabus lists the following four assignment types: (1) Reflections (due every week), (2) Lab Notebooks (due every week), (3) Final Project (which includes several components: a proposal, workshop, "share out," and the final project itself), and (4) Participation and Engagement. A "Grading & Assessment" entry in the syllabus is about a page long, and details the use of ungrading, or contract grading, in Course D. The first paragraph of this entry reads:

In this class, individual assignments and other required components will be assessed as complete or incomplete. Early in the semester, you get to decide in advance whether you'll receive an A, a B, or a C, based on instructor expectations and requirements necessary to receive that overall grade. Lower grades may be assessed at instructor discretion. This approach (sometimes called ungrading, contract grading, or labor-based grading) is supported by over 40 years of research in educational psychology and the scholarship of teaching and learning. This approach is also grounded in the work of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and philosopher, and bell hooks, a Black feminist, scholar, and activist. Their work in critical pedagogy and theories of education advocated for teaching approaches that promote students' critical thinking and knowledge ownership and dismantle systems of oppression.

This first paragraph provides an overview of ungrading in the course. The rest of this entry (not copied in full here) provides support for the idea that ungrading helps create a focus on learning instead of grades, and gives the student the responsibility of deciding which grade to work towards.

The next entry in the syllabus has a heading titled “What does this look like in practice?”

This entry contains three main bullet points, and has been replicated below:

- Early in the semester
 - We will have a conversation about different contract options and the expectations and requirements necessary to receive that overall grade.
 - You will draft, sign, and submit a contract that I will review and also sign.
 - We both keep a copy of the contract for reference during the semester.
- During the semester
 - There are only two grades for any assignment: Complete/Incomplete. Complete is full credit. Incomplete (poor quality, late, or not submitted) is no credit.
 - If an assignment is marked as Incomplete, you will have the opportunity to revise and resubmit (within a defined time frame).
 - Feedback will be provided, especially in situations where you are receiving an Incomplete.
- At the end of the semester
 - We tally. If you complete the work you contracted for, you get the grade. Done.
 - Final grades should not be a surprise. If there is a situation where the terms of your contract have not been met, this will become apparent and be communicated to you before the end of the semester.
 - We can have a conversation about the terms of the contract and renegotiate those terms as needed so the final grade reflects a mutual understanding about instructor expectations and completed student work.
 - The professor reserves the right to award a grade of D or F to anyone who fails to meet a contractual obligation in a systematic way. A D grade denotes some minimal fulfilling of the contract. An F is absence of enough satisfactory work, as contracted, to warrant passing of the course. Both a D and F denote a breakdown of the contractual relationship.

Thus, this entry provides detail about how the ungrading aspect of the course will operate throughout the semester. This section is followed by a section titled “FAQs about this approach grading,” and includes a list of questions that ends just short of two pages long.

Professor D

Professor D, Course D, & Pedagogy

In our interview Professor D identified herself as a cis-gender heterosexual upper-middle class white woman. Her teaching experience began in her first year of graduate school when she was the instructor of record for freshman composition courses. As a graduate student instructor, she attended an approximately week-long workshop to prepare graduate students to teach courses, and had the opportunity to be in community with some educators at the university who cared about pedagogy, and were interested in instructional design. This community would have discussions about assessment, alternate assessment practices, and considerations for working with a diverse population of students. She mentioned that it was during the TA orientation that she read Freire. She recalled, "That was a life changing experience on multiple levels... just the knowledge that there were spaces where we could have these conversations."

Upon graduating from graduate school (with her second master's degree) she sought jobs that were focused on teaching and/or curriculum development. She "ended up in a center for teaching at a small liberal arts college" in a staff position as a postdoc working on curriculum development. She said "the institutional mantra, which I want to have tattooed on my forehead is: flexibility is an equity principle." Thus, before coming to Institution D, Professor D had years of experience thinking about pedagogy and curriculum. She started teaching at Institution D in the semester of Fall 2020.

Regarding Course D, she described it as a class that she inherited, and that: "it was required for a couple of specific minors, but it was a weed out class... this was the litmus test of, were they going to be able to minor in computer science or something like that." She said that because it was an inherited class, while she had some flexibility with the course setup, that there were also parameters she had to keep in place. She said: "this is a course I inherited, and not something I built. There's some pretty clear guardrails around where I can push and where I can make it something different and where I can't." A shift that she did make was to use the contract grading setup as detailed in the syllabus.

In terms of using this contract grading setup at Institution D, she observed that most students at Institution D will aim for an A grade, and that they will sign up for an A at the beginning of the semester. She said: "at [Institution D], where it is a very kind of GPA obsessed culture... Students will fight you on the A versus the A-, the 92 versus the 95. That's just the culture of what it is here. Every single student is going to choose an A when they're making those choices

earlier in the semester.” The only caveat here, however, is that she noticed that a small group of students would contract for less than an A, and that these were usually student athletes.

In terms of her approach to using ungrading, she frequently emphasized the importance of communication, especially from the educator. She relayed that this communication must first be grounded in the educator’s own understanding of the ungrading practices they are using: “If it doesn't make sense to you, you're never going to be able to make it make sense to students. It has to make sense to you.” She also shared that she checks in with students and their progress in the course, especially if they are not meeting the requirements of the grade they contracted for at the beginning of the semester. She said: “I oftentimes have that conversation with students like: Here's where we are at the midterm point. Here's what it takes to get here, here's what it takes to get here, here's what it takes to get here. Or even, we're starting exam week, and it's really bad, here's how we get to passing the class.” Communication with students and the beginning of the semester, and throughout, is important to Professor D.

She also talked about having repeat students who help her explain the grading setup to other students at the beginning of the semester. She said:

I've also gotten really lucky that students tend to be frequent flyers in my courses. So on day one, I can say, I'm going to go out and run to the restroom, and these five people who have taken a class like this before can answer questions about what that went like. So I'm really grateful for students being willing to kind of pay it forward...I can say things until I'm blue in the face, but hearing from another student about how this helped me focus on my learning. This helped me show up and want to do the work. This gave me opportunities to try something that I hadn't tried before, that I never would have tried had I had kind of concerns about there being a particular grade attached to it. So yeah, just really grateful for students' generosity and being willing to talk about their experiences, talk about the challenges of it, because that, more than anything, helps students, even if they don't completely understand it, at least buy in.

Thus, while she sees her own explanation as important, she also recognizes the importance of students in her courses hearing from other students about their experience with the setup.

Also important to Professor D’s pedagogy, especially around ungrading, is encouraging students to ask questions. She recognizes that students may not understand everything up front:

So I think that's the other thing too, rather than saying, I'm going to explain it so well that you're not going to have any questions. That's not reality...I think I've gotten more into like, Okay, you're going to have questions. As you have those questions, keep sending them my direction. Focusing more on inviting the question, rather than I have to explain it all.

Instead of feeling like every aspect of the ungrading system must be explained and understood upfront, she has shifted to recognizing that students may continue to have questions, and she encourages them to ask.

She brought up popular conversations around ungrading and neurodivergence, and questions about whether ungrading removes structures that are helpful for neurodivergent students. She talked about another important aspect of her pedagogy as trying to find a balance in her own assessment practices between flexibility and structure. She said she thinks about:

How do I wrap my head around this in a way that makes sense to me, that I can truly and consistently and repeatedly communicate to students? And it's not perfect. I think there's a lot, given the time and space, that I want to continue to tinker with. I think the big picture mix of high structure and open endedness is something that, like, that's always going to be my sweet spot. So for me, there are really steady rhythms of low stakes formative assessment so that students get practice. So that is a high structure thing, even though it's very loose in terms of the stakes of each one."

Thus, here she is again emphasizing communication as well as a balance between flexibility and structure.

Specific to Course D, she also brought up that she is teaching Course D with material grounded in a feminist framework. She said that this can be a challenge: "that course is always challenging because some students are ticked off they have to talk about feminism and identity and power. Some students are like, the professor is trying to push their agenda." She relatedly tied this dynamic into some broader considerations about agency in ungrading. While she expressed that an ungrading structure can provide greater agency in terms of students taking responsibility for their learning, she also said:

That agency can mean different things. I'm thinking about sometimes, ... we're doing live polling, or things like that. And I was not prepared for students to say the things that they're saying. So I think it's also giving students agency, but also, how do you be prepared for them to deploy that agency in service of, either things that they want to push back on, or things that they want to communicate?...My job is not to get them to agree with me or agree with the authors. If the goal is that they read something, they have thoughtful engagement with it, and they respond to it, and the response does not clearly veer into hate speech. Like that, I mean, I think there are clear parameters. But "I disagree," or "I want to think about this in a different way," or "I want to come at this using a different approach"? They've thoughtfully engaged with it. Maybe I wish they would do that with a little bit more open mindedness and intellectual curiosity...But also recognizing where that pushback comes from.

So while the ungrading structure may provide students with greater agency, she has observed that this sense of agency may also lead students to feeling greater freedom to push back against the material. While she recognizes that her “job is not to get them to agree with me or agree with the authors,” she does also imply that perhaps this agency impedes students from being more open minded and intellectually curious.

Yet, in relation to this pushback, Professor D observed that the ungrading setup does allow her to curb her own bias in grading, specifically that she assesses with assignments as complete or incomplete and not on a grading scale:

I'm honestly grateful that I'm ungrading in that kind of a scenario, because I think it would be impossible not to let subjectivity enter into how I grade that. Which is part of why we want to move away from grading frameworks. I think there's a larger conversation about academic freedom and free speech, and all these other things.

She is here implying that the ways in which ungrading frameworks may help to reduce bias have relevance for “a larger conversation about academic freedom and free speech.” This observation is relevant for Course D, given that she does experience pushback from students in that class around aspects she includes like feminism and anti-racism.

Professor D: History of Ungrading & Institutional Response

In our interviews, Professor D recalled a history of using alternative assessments, and the evolution into the format she was using at the time we met. When she first started teaching she recalls using assessments similar to what she uses now: “it started with open ended assignments prompts, and then scaffolding ... a lot of low stakes formative assessments, or formative assessments as complete, incomplete, or revision options.” She said she’s always focused on more project based assignments and said “I joke that I haven’t written an exam my entire teaching career and I don’t plan to, which is kind of wild, and lucky.”

While these types of practices have been long-standing in her teaching, she pinpoints that “when things really cemented for me was in spring 2020 when our campus shut down.” At the time she was working for an institution she describes as a “small liberal arts college” with a small student to faculty ratio. She notes that the pandemic shifted many faculty members to prioritize student

mental health and well-being vs “the rigor of the curriculum.” She recalled that “flexibility is an equity principle” was a common mantra adopted by the institution in the context of the pandemic. She noted that faculty was meeting frequently to talk about course redesign in the context of the pandemic and that some faculty restructured their courses to a pass/fail design instead of the regular A-F grading scale.

In fall 2020 she began a tenure track position at Institution D. This was the semester after Spring 2020 in which many educational institutions went online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While many institutions remained online in fall 2020, she recalled learning that Institution D had made the decision to hold all classes in person in fall 2020. This insistence was in sharp contrast to the culture of the small liberal arts college that she was leaving. She shared: “I almost had a mild freak out before I got here, because I'm coming from a culture where flexibility is an equity principle, healthy self governance, and then I'm being told that, we will be in person” She described it as a culture shock. She remembered wondering “How do I get through it? ... How do you come up with ways of making sense of a course that provides structure but also gives students autonomy and agency as they try to figure out their way through this? How do you build something resilient?” She reflected that, “I think how I think about what assessment looks like will never not be shaped by COVID.”

When I asked her how she first heard about the term ungrading, she said that she learned it from educational circles on Twitter. Since learning about ungrading, she has been able to identify having used different iterations of ungrading in different educational contexts. Based on these experiences, she shared an observation about the significance of institutional context:

I think it varies by institution a little bit. So when I was working in a small liberal arts context at [Institution Name], my previous institution, I think there was more student receptivity, or just more understanding that classes can be constructed in different ways and things like that. Or even just, I think more student receptivity to thinking about grades as a power structure or a structuring force and things like that. So I think context can be really different. And it's not that [Institution D] students aren't equipped for having that conversation. But as one of my teaching center colleagues here at [Institution D] mentioned, they have gotten here because their entire life has been optimized to get them here.

Thus, Professor D believes that the institutional context, and relatedly, the demographics of the students, does make a difference.

For example, in terms of this context at Institution D, she explained feeling that Institution D wouldn't have her back if she challenged a student on a negative response to her materials, like the inclusion of topics like feminism and anti-racism in her computer science curriculum, or the use of ungrading:

The other piece of this too, is knowing for a fact that the department and the unit that the course originates in, would not have my back if I chose to challenge a student on something. And, I haven't had the experience of having them not have my back, but knowing enough about cultural politics at [Institution D], knowing enough about where the course sits in the curriculum. The results of my challenging a student on that kind of behavior would be my being told to change my course.

Thus, she recognizes that if she did challenge a student in terms of their response to material or an assignment assessment, that instead of siding with her, she would instead be told by the institution that she needs to change her course.

As we further talked about the significance of contexts when it comes to ungrading, I asked Professor D about her thoughts on whether the social location of educators using ungrading has an influence on its practice and perception. She said:

So most of the faculty members I know that are doing it are largely white, cisgendered, heterosexual. That's the majority of [Institution D's] faculty demographics. So just by virtue of who we have on faculty, and I'm thinking specifically, the folks in anthropology that are doing this are both white, cis-het women. So I think there's a couple of layers. One thing I think about is who is incentivized to think and care about their students in particular ways. So I think that's one question of emotional labor that's highly gendered and things like that.

So while she observes that at Institution D, the educators who are using ungrading practices are "largely white, cisgendered, heterosexual," but says that this is also reflective of the overall faculty demographics at Institution D. She brings up that there may be a gendered aspect in terms of "who is incentivized to think and care about their students in particular ways."

I asked Professor D about her thoughts on the question of whether ungrading is an equitable practice. She expressed feeling that ungrading is not inherently equitable. She said:

I'm gonna make a Stuart Hall reference, because that's where my brain's going. He has this quote where, if theory isn't challenging you to dismantle systems of power, theory is letting you off the hook. I think the same thing is true of any pedagogy buzzword. If it's not asking

you to critically reflect on what you're doing in the course and why, then it's just a band aid for larger, harder conversations that most faculty aren't given the support and the structure to be able to have productively.

Thus, she feels it necessary that ungrading be paired with an educator's critical reflection of "what you're doing in the course and why." She went on to say: "I think anything done poorly can cause harm or reinforce really problematic structures and practices." Therefore, ungrading is one of those practices that, without adequate intention and reflection, can potentially perpetuate inequities in the classroom.

In that previous longer quote she had mentioned pedagogy buzzwords. She talked about this further when it comes to ungrading specifically. She shared:

On one hand, I'm grateful that it's a term that we're able to use in broader conversation. But a couple of my colleagues in our teaching center make these comments of like, the way to get something published in scholarship of teaching and learning, is just to invent a new word or a framework for a thing that people have already thought about. That's not always true, but I partly wonder if we're in a moment where ungrading is just the buzzword that opens up a conversation around authentic assessment, around transparency, around assignment design.

Thus, she is questioning if ungrading has perhaps become that type of buzzword. Yet, she goes on to say that this is not necessarily inherently bad. She said if ungrading has become a buzzword that:

I'm okay with that. But I think if we're clinging to a buzzword for a buzzword sake, or folks are kind of latching onto the buzzword without having the framework or kind of the tools to think about what you do with that, I think we're going to end up with a lot of, kind of ungrading done really poorly. And not that it's like, here's the one right way to do it, but I think that reflexivity, being able to connect it to scholarship of teaching and learning, and what we know about inclusive learning, about assessment, about inclusive practices.. like just reading one piece on ungrading and then figuring it out on your own, seems like it misses an opportunity for a more thoughtful conversation.

In other words, she's saying that while ungrading as a buzzword is in itself not inherently problematic, that its detachment from reflexivity and scholarship of teaching and learning, would be problematic. While she clarifies that she does not believe in the idea that there's "one right way" to do ungrading, she does firmly believe that it needs to be practiced with some intention and reflection, instead of "reading one piece on ungrading," and then attempting it without these other

resources in place.

Student D1

Student Overview: D1

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student D1 described himself as male and white. He confirmed in our interview that, at the time of the interview, he was a senior in his last semester of college, a finance major, and 21 years old. In response to the question about socioeconomic background on the prescreening survey, he answered: “Middle class: my father passed away awhile ago and my mother left when I was a kid so I'm just supporting myself now with fin aid, but when work begins full time I'd expect to be labeled in the middle class.”²⁹

In our interview, he clarified that his mom left his family when he was in elementary school. He shared that his “father was well off, he’d sell equity research,” and went on to say that “he made good money...financially, there was no stress.” In student D1’s senior year of high school, his dad discovered that he had cancer. Through student D1’s senior year of high school, until his father passed away in his sophomore year of college, D1 started taking on some of the responsibilities of his dad’s work. As a result, D1 earned a portion of his dad’s income, he said around \$200K. While student D1 earned this money, and thus was able to keep it, he clarified that in terms of the rest of his dad’s money, that his dad donated “every dollar that he made” to a cancer center he was being treated at. Student D1 reported that he would unlikely be able to afford college if it were not for financial aid.

D1 is not a first generation college student, as his dad attended college. D1 also has two older brothers, who he described as not as successful in school. One of his brothers dropped out of high school. Regarding family, he shared that his friends in college had basically become his family. He said his dad was adopted, and that he does not know any of that extended family. Now, for holidays, student D1 says he shares them with his friends at college and their families.

One of the demographic questions I asked at the conclusion of interview one asked participants how they would identify themselves in terms of ability and disability. Student D1 then shared that while he does not consider himself disabled, that while in elementary school he was

²⁹ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. He shared that he “had a lot of speech problems growing up,” and felt that his teachers had a “negative outlook” on him. He said he did receive accommodations, like extended time, before college, but that he has not sought these accommodations in college. He expressed skepticism of the accuracy of this diagnosis, although he did also share that he struggles with anxiety.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Student D1 is the only student in my sample who did not complete all three interviews. He only completed the first. Thus, while I do not know how Course D ended up concluding for him, we were able to talk about how it started for him, and he was able to share his experiences with ungrading in a previous course with Professor D.

Student D1 took a course the previous semester (the precursor course to Course D) with Professor D, and was introduced to ungrading in that course. He talked about this class when I asked what his favorite class in college had been. He expressed that this class was focused on learning: “She didn't care if you absolutely botched your labs and had no idea what you were doing. She's just like, yeah, you have two weeks to revise it, and then it will be complete. And so everything was very, just, you need to learn the material.” He talked about how, using the skills he learned about coding in this course, that he developed his own two personal “passion projects” outside of that class, that he did for fun, not for school: “They gave me enough material so I could learn how to do really stupid stuff on my own that was fun. That was like, so not productive and not helping my time at college, but I loved it.” Thus, student D1 expresses here that the knowledge he gained in the precursor class to Course D, which used a similar ungrading setup, is knowledge that he ended up using outside of the course, on projects that he described as “fun.” For Course D, he also expressed excitement that it is similarly project based, and described the final project in the course as “one giant final project with a lot of creative liberty.”

When I asked student D1 how Professor D had explained the use of contract grading in Course D, he said:

She literally sent out a Google form that was like, Do you want an A, B or C in the class and you just sign it. And I was like, Okay, well, I love this so far, not knowing what that meant. I was like, I will gladly hit A. And she was just like...”If you want a C in the class, that's fine. And you can put in very little effort.” She's like, “You can miss however many labs, you can do whatever...I don't advise that you do that.” But she's like, “You are all adults. And a part

of learning how to be an adult is making these decisions for yourself" ...Which was just like okay, well, that's the first time I've ever heard any college professors say something that's that insightful in a class. And then the B was just...you're not really trying that hard but completing grades and you're completing the assignments. And then the A was just like, you're taking this class how I hope you take this class. It is literally just, you show up, you want to be there. And you're not treating it like a class, you're treating it like you're just trying to actually learn a new skill.

He went on to describe that this focus on learning encouraged a class environment in which students could collaborate. He compared this to other courses that use grades on individual assignments, and observed that, in those classes, there can be a sense of competition that does not encourage to help one another: "There's always some [competition] in every other class, especially with grading scales."

He also commented about how this environment of competition can be especially true for finance majors: "objectively the finance students have to be. Because every bank that's hiring, that we all want to work - oh this specific bank will only take...like four kids maximum." He goes on to talk about how this influences class dynamics and his own motivation for participating in class and class discussion. He says that regarding most classes:

If I'm raising my hand - and I think this really applies for most students - if I'm raising my hand, it's because I want a good participation grade. I don't want to raise my hand, I don't really want to talk about options, contracts...I'm not a huge fan of talking about working capital, it's actually kind of quite boring... the mindset when I'm raising my hand in most classes, is I haven't talked this class, I need to, I need to come across as like a student that's engaged.

Yet, he contrasts this with Course D in feeling that:

If computing was that case, like a lab, I'm sure I could walk up to the front left of the class to a kid that I've never said a word to before, say like, Yo, man, what's up, what do you do for this problem? And he would just be like, Hey, I was also thinking of trying to do it this way. But this is just how I did. And I was like, oh, okay, cool. Like, there would be not a care in the world of me being able to see and learn from him.

Thus, he observes that while his interactions and participation in graded courses stems from wanting to meet grade requirements for participation, in Course D he feels that the environment allows for, and even encourages, collaborative learning. He states feeling that he can approach other

students for help in this class without concern. He says this is not the case in other classes, which he states: "It's unfortunate."

He shared that while he does enjoy competition sometimes, that he has started to see that he can learn more, when the motivation is learning, which he has experienced in Course D and its precursor course in the previous semester:

That is why I like competition, because it keeps me structured, it keeps me feeling like what I'm doing is important and useful, even if it isn't. But I'm realizing I learn a lot more when I'm not doing that...The skills that I'm learning in these two classes is, they've taken away the competition, which has kind of created a more helpful environment where I can learn to build a structure for myself.

Thus, while previously, student D1 has found that competition in classes can be a motivation, he has found that "I learn a lot more when I'm not doing that." He observes that his experiences in the ungraded courses, which take away that competitive environment, have "created a more helpful environment" for him.

In summarizing his overall experiences in Professor D's ungraded courses, he said: "To put it very concisely, the majority of classes feel like a chore. And this feels like a choice. If I had to- Like as concisely as possible, that's what I would say." Thus, once again, he here makes a stark distinction between the environment he has experienced in Professor D's ungraded courses, and those of other courses.

Group E: Institution, Courses, Professor, & Students

Institution E

Institution E is a private and historically women's college. According to U.S. News (at <https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges> in April 2025), Institution E has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 2,400 students. Of that enrollment, approximately 99% are listed as female students and approximately 1% are listed as male students. The website reports a 55% minority enrollment with the five largest groups in terms of race and ethnicity as follows: white, Asian, Hispanic, international, and Black. U.S. News also reports that this college has a 14% acceptance rate and a 7:1 student-faculty ratio.

Course Ei and Eii

Course Ei and Course Eii are both courses offered from Institution E's Women's and Gender Studies Department. According to Institution E's website (in April 2025), course Ei is a 200 level course without any prerequisite courses. That course is focused on how LGBTQ+ individuals are represented in the media. Also according to this website (in April 2025), course Eii is a 300 level course with two prerequisite courses and is open to juniors and seniors only.³⁰ That course is focused on feminist movements in the United States.

Course Ei Syllabus: Assignments & Ungrading

The syllabus for Course Ei describes the course as grounded in Queer Theory and focused on the representation of LGBTQ+ individuals in the media, particularly movies, television, and social media. The syllabus lists seven total assignments in the course: four papers, one reflection, participation, and a final project. A syllabus entry titled "Assessment" clarifies that the instructor will focus on qualitative instead of quantitative assessment. It clarifies that the instructor will not use letter or number values to assess students' work, and that she will instead use detailed feedback and will categorize students' work as either Developing, Demonstrative, or Distinguished. A categorization of "Developing" is described as not quite meeting the assignment expectations, "Demonstrative" is described as meeting the expectations of the assignment, and "Distinguished" is described as going above and beyond the expectations of the assignment.

This assessment section clarifies that students must complete all assignments in order to receive a final grade. It also lets students know that any assignment that receives a "Developing" categorization can be revised and submitted within a week of receiving feedback from the instructor. This section includes a link to a table which provides a breakdown of how the final grade, submitted to the college at the end of the semester, will be determined. That table shows columns with the labels Distinguished, Demonstrative, and Developing, and provides a numerical breakdown in rows, showing how the categorization of the seven assignments would result in a final grade. For example, the top three rows show what is needed to earn a final letter grade of A, with the top row

³⁰ While for other institutions in my study I was able to find their course catalog and say how many sections of the course were offered in Spring 2023, when I did my interviews. Institution E requires log in information for this, so I was unable to access this information.

showing the number seven in distinguished, the second row showing six distinguished and one demonstrative, and the third row showing five distinguished and two demonstrative. The lowest final grade on the chart is a C-, which the table shows will be earned if all seven assignments are categorized as Developing, or if six assignments are categorized as Developing and one as Demonstrative.

Course Eii Syllabus: Assignments & Ungrading

The syllabus for Course Eii describes the course as broken into three units that cover feminist movements in the United States. The syllabus lists five assignments: participation, reflection essays (a total of six), a midterm meeting, a mini conference presentation, and a final self-assessment. The midterm meeting is described as a meeting between each student and the instructor for 30 minutes midway through the course to discuss the student's work in the course. The final self-assessment is described as a one to two page paper in which students provide the final grade that they believe reflects their work in the course, and their reasoning for that selection. Like Course Ei, the assessment in this course is described as focusing on qualitative feedback, and details the use of a categorization scale of "Developing," "Demonstrative," and "Distinguished" on assignments. Yet, unlike Course Ei, the final grade in the course is described as determined by the student through their own self-assessment. (Although, the syllabus stipulates the instructor's right to assign a different grade if they are in disagreement with the student's assessment.)

Professor E

Professor E, Courses Ei & Eii, & Pedagogy

Professor E identifies herself as a queer, white, able-bodied woman. She described both her socioeconomic background and current socioeconomic status as upper middle class. At the time of our interview, Professor E had been teaching courses as an instructor of record for six years. Yet, at the time of our interview, she had only been teaching at Institution E for that school year, making the semester of our interview her second semester at Institution E. Her role at Institution E was that of Visiting Assistant Professor.

When I asked Professor E how she would describe her pedagogy, she grounded her answer in her position as a women's and gender studies scholar:

So as a women and gender studies scholar, researcher, professor, and student, I like to take the approach that gender and related social identity categories, be it gender, sexuality, ability - [that] everybody is an expert, on their lived experiences, they're experts. So I'm not here to teach anybody about that. I'm here to help give context, history, terminology, literature, to contextualize everybody's experiences. So I try to decenter and make myself not the authority as much as possible, which is complicated.

In her response, she goes on to talk further about trying to decenter her own authority in the classroom, yet observes the challenges of doing so:

...even when you try to actively decentralize and claim that [students] are an equal authority, it's not that they don't believe it, but they're kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. But I also like to be very transparent about the dynamic that's going on. I have to give them a grade. There is a power differential. And so even at the times where I'm, I guess, exercising the authority that the instructor is imbued with, I try to be really transparent and conscientious about it, and explain what I'm doing and why, and how there is a power dynamic here.

As she articulates here, while on the one hand, she seeks to decenter her authority in the classroom, she also recognizes that this is impossible to do completely. Her approach to this dynamic is to be as transparent as possible about it, and to provide detail to "explain what I'm doing and why." She went on to give an example:

And so sometimes I like to ask for a lot of feedback after activities, and I'll say things like, I know it's hard to give me feedback to my face because of the power dynamic. And also, I'm white, I'm a cisgender woman, I appear able bodied, I speak with an American accent. So, my social identities kind of carry an authority that not all the students have. So I try to always, not just be mindful of that, but to clearly express that I know that there's a power dynamic here, and it's layered with all of these things, and just kind of always acknowledging that.

Thus, as she shows with this example, her efforts towards transparency with her students involves her consistent acknowledgement of the power that she does hold, so as to convey to students that she understands the realities of power and privilege, including those from social identity/location, alongside her goal of decentralizing her own authority in the classroom.

As another example of how she tries to deconstruct her authority in the classroom, she mentioned participating in any class activities. She detailed her participation in a recent class

activity with students:

I had my students do an exercise yesterday, and I was like, No, I'm doing it. We read "Use of the Erotic," and I had everybody write down anonymously on a piece of paper how they were going to use the erotic in their own lives, and then we all take turns, pulling one out of a bag and reading it. And I was like, No, I wrote one and I'm going to read one too. I'm a part of this community. So when we do activities like this, I'm going to participate too.

Thus, instead of just being the person orchestrating an activity, she participates alongside the students in the course.

When I asked Professor E about specific influences in the development of her pedagogy, she said that Black feminists have been influential to her, and specifically named Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, and the Combahee River Collective. At one point in our interview, she also shared how the COVID-19 pandemic changed some of her perspectives of teaching. Here she brought up the sentiment of college being preparation for "the real world" on the other side of graduation. She said:

I guess I've had some struggles in the past where I thought, well, here's practice for the quote, unquote, real world. But then the pandemic happened, and I'm like, the real world sucks, right? And a lot of it needed to change. My whole thing was, well, a boss wouldn't understand if your policy paper was, or whatever was late. And then it's kind of like, well, then maybe that's not a good boss, actually. That's not a way to think about these things anymore.

Thus, in addition to the specific scholars that she cited, the context of the pandemic also played a role in the development of her pedagogy.

When I asked her how she first learned about ungrading approaches, she said that she learned about ungrading from her friend who is also a Professor, who uses ungrading. Specifically, Professor E learned about it before the Fall 2022 semester, through reading some of the syllabi her friend uses for her own courses. The Spring 2023 semester in which I interviewed Professor E was the first semester she had implemented ungrading approaches into her courses. In that semester, Professor E was teaching three courses. She implemented ungrading practices into two courses (Course Ei and Course Eii). She described the forms of ungrading in these courses as follows:

I'm doing two classes, one that I think is traditionally ungraded, and the students will be grading themselves, and another that's this weird hybrid thing that I came up with, but still very much away from giving students numbers or letter grades, but giving them like feedback and dialog and opportunities...really making it about learning and feedback, not assessment and grading.

As already mentioned in the syllabi review for these courses, the course she identifies as “traditionally ungraded” is the upper level course, Course Eii, whereas Course Ei is the one in which she using a “hybrid” form of ungrading. (It is worth noting that while she calls this a “hybrid” form, that the format she used is a format that is commonly called “contract grading,” in which students are told at the beginning of the semester what assignments need to be completed to earn a specific, ultimate grade. Contract grading may take a form of assessment based on complete or incomplete, or may use a tiered system, such as what Professor E used with her ranking of “Developing,” “Demonstrative,” and “Distinguished.”)

Professor E went on to describe the assignments in Course Ei. She said:

There's seven assignments throughout the semester, and they're a combination of short essays, infographics, reflection pieces. The one at the end of the semester is a little bit more research intensive...the final assignment is for them to come up with basically a lesson plan. So if I were to teach this class again, what should I put on the syllabus? They have to pick a TV episode or movie, they have to pick an academic article to accompany it, and then a mainstream article or blog to go with it. And so they do an annotated bibliography of those three texts, and then a one page rationale, like here's why I think this fits with the theme of the course, here's what I think students would get out of it. So each of the seven assignments - there's an assignment due once every two and a half to three and a half weeks of the semester - I'm categorizing them as developing, which means they tried, they didn't quite do what was asked of them. Demonstrative, which is, they did exactly what was asked of them, it's clear they got the assignment. And distinguished, which is, they went above and beyond.

This description of her course assignments and the assessment categories aligns with the information presented in her syllabus for Course Ei.

She went on to talk about the chart she made for this course, which depicts what final grade is associated with the categorizations of the seven assignments. She said: “I made this huge chart. So basically, if you have four distinguished, two demonstrative, one developing, that's probably like a B+ or- I forget, but there's a chart. All the students will see the chart, and it just lines up perfectly.” She described the chart as providing a clear overview of how final grades are determined. Her perspective is that the chart provides transparency: “there's total and complete transparency of

how you get your final grade at the end of the semester.” In terms of the final grade breakdowns, she described earning a B grade as “very accessible.” She explained, “it’s going to be difficult to get an A at the end of the semester, but you could probably get a B in your sleep.”

Regarding the lack of letter grades on assignments, one of her intentions is to provide students with freedom to experiment with their assignments. She said: “I want to push students, I just want them to experiment, try something, and this kind of allows for that academic risk taking. Don’t necessarily give me a five paragraph essay. Give me whatever you think is the assignment.” As an example, she described a student’s submission for an assignment in Course Ei. She described:

It was a queer theory concept paper, like, you tell me what queer theory is. And a student wrote a paper, every sentence started with the word queer theory is. But she’d write a sentence, or excuse me, they would write a sentence, and then the next sentence would contradict the previous sentence to show how like queer- it’s indefinable. And I was like, wow, I could never ask for this, but this is exactly what I wanted. And this student integrated, they cited a lot of material from the class, they cited material from the discussions. It was clear that they were integrating the material and doing it in this creative way. And so, you get awesome assignments when you kind of open up the parameters a little bit and you give them this freedom.

Here she is describing that student’s submission as “exactly what I wanted.” She attributes this result as directly due to the freedom of creativity with assignments, which she attributes to the lack of quantitative assignment grades.

Professor E then moved on to talking about Course Eii. She first talked a bit about the assignments in that course, highlighting that she is using the scale of “Developing,” “Demonstrative,” and “Distinguished” on assignments in that course as well, however, students determine their final grade:

I’m categorizing their assignments, but they’re fully grading themselves. We’ll have the mid semester meeting. It is all on them. I told them, I’m treating this like a grad seminar. I give them absurd amounts of reading. I tell them, I don’t expect you to read all this. Here’s how you can read a book without really reading the book. And it’s really, you have to grade yourself at the end of the semester.

In further describing the setup of that course, and the arrangement of its assignments, she talked about how the course is divided into three units:

We did a unit on reproductive justice. We're about to do a unit on Black Lives Matter. And we're going to end with Me Too... Each unit is book ended with what I'm calling a benchmark essay, where they write down what knowledge they have, and then a reflection essay, where they reflect on the knowledge that they've gained. And so in the reflection, I told them a lot of my feedback was, I don't want an essay that you could swap names at the top and it would still make sense. I want an essay that really comes from you. You're under no obligation to disclose personal information. but how does your experience shape your understanding of these topics? I don't want to be able to put anybody's name at the top of any of these essays. They need to be like you, because only you have lived your life, and only you are going to learn this in this way. So I feel like this kind of ungrading, allows me to push for that and really encourage the kind of experiential knowledge that they all bring to the class.

So, in line with her perspective of ungrading allowing for freedom on assignments, in Course Ei, she similarly feels that ungrading will “encourage the kind of experiential knowledge they all bring to the class” in Course Eii.

When I asked her if she felt a difference in the assessment process so far, from the educator perspective, she said: “I don't feel there's a difference because I always hemmed and hawed, well, what is this? An 89? Is this a 90? Now, I'm like, is this a distinguished? Is this a demonstrative?” Interestingly, this conveys that she's experienced similar frustrations with her “ungraded” three-tiered system of assessment as she has experienced with numerical grades. Yet, of both courses, she described the final grade as ultimately being out of her hands. She said: “I do know at the end of the semester, it's out of my hands, because it's either this preset thing or the students decide.”

Towards the end of our interview I asked her about her perception of the pros and cons of ungrading. She said: “I think the pros are, it really emphasizes, learning for learning's sake, and it does enable this kind of intellectual freedom.” Thus, this perception of ungrading allowing for aspects of academic freedom was a theme for her in our interview. Regarding the cons, she talked about the institutional context, which I consider in the subsequent section.

Professor E: History of Ungrading & Institutional Response

The Spring 2023 semester during which our interview took place was the first semester that Professor E used ungrading. Thus, Professor E did not at that time have a history beyond that semester with using ungrading in her courses.

When I asked Professor E about what she found appealing about ungrading, she ended up speaking about the institutional context of Institution E. She shared that her interest in using ungrading was partially influenced by Institution E being a small liberal arts college. She compared this with her experience as a graduate student at a large research institution, with over 40,000 students. She said of that latter context: "There's just too many of them to have a more personable approach." She described that environment as more akin to an "assembly line." Comparatively, she described Institution E as a "learning to learn environment," instead of an environment in which students are focused just on grades. She said of the students at Institution E that, "they're here for this kind of, I don't know, very, very hands on, slowed down approach."

In talking about her use of ungrading, she emphasized her perspective that its use requires balance, and that is influenced by the institutional context. She said:

One of the trickier things about ungrading is also the balance of, [that] I could spend every hour of every day dedicated to thoughtful feedback. But I can't, you can't. I don't believe, at this point in academia, you can sustain a career doing that, because at some point I'm going to have to publish and advise and do all these other things. So I'm trying to figure out the balance that I think will evolve with whatever institution I'm at and where I am.

So, while she feels that her current context at Institution E allows her the ability to use ungrading, she foresees that this may not always be possible, specifically, because the time required for detailed feedback may be needed for other, competing demands, like publishing and advising.

In response to my question to her about the pros and cons of ungrading, she again brought up the relevance of the institutional context:

I don't know if this is a con, but I'm very aware of the fact, I'm at this small liberal arts, well established historic women's historical college with a well known, high achieving student population that would do anything asked of them and want to go above and beyond. And so I guess, I don't know if it's a con, but it's more of an apprehension: how adaptable is this to other places? And not because of the students' abilities, more like the expectations of the university or college, like, from an administrative or departmental perspective. I have hands off, nobody has said anything. I can basically do whatever I want... But at at some point there's going to be- if I get a tenure track job, which is my goal, and then tenure, I guess, at what point are various forces, whether it's chairs, administrators, student population, going to be like, you can't do this, or this isn't working the way you think it's working. So less a con and more of an anxiety that is sitting kind of in the background waiting to emerge.

Thus, while Professor E currently feels able to utilize ungrading practices in her courses, she largely attributes this to institutional context, and also the current point of her career trajectory (i.e., “if I get a tenure track job, which is my goal”). So, while she felt able to ungrading in the Spring 2023 semester, she expressed concern about her ability to use this practice in the future, at other institutions.

Student E1

Student Overview: E1

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student E1 described herself as a cis woman, white, and upper class.³¹ She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of our first interview, she was 20 years old, in her second year and fourth semester of college, and was pursuing a major in Women’s and Gender Studies. In our interviews she also identified as a lesbian, and “mostly able-bodied.” She described her family as consisting of her mom, dad, and a twin sister. She described her mom as a “stay at home mom,” and described her family as “well off” financially.³²

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Student E1 said that before Course Ei, she had not taken any course that used ungrading practices. In our first interview, she shared that she had heard people talk about Institution E as having a high stress environment, but that she hadn’t been experiencing it that way. She attributed this to having attended a high-stress high school: “...people have talked a lot about a stress culture here. Coming from a high school in Silicon Valley, I’ve actually thought that the culture here is super chill. people are way more relaxed here.” In talking about her relationship with education through the years, she brought up an experience that was particularly salient to her in terms of grades, in a geometry class:

³¹ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

³² Due to not saving the second interview, I do not have a transcript of all of this participants’ responses, including what her father’s job was.

That was really, really difficult for me. I just could not get it... I was just super embarrassed about that. I got my first C on a midterm, and I called my mom to take me home because I was crying about it. So that was not fun. [That was] my introduction to grades sucking.

Her description of her difficulty learning as embarrassing, and the upset that she experienced in receiving a grade of C on an assignment, provides some insight into the importance student E1 places on learning and grades.

When I asked her about Course Ei and how the ungraded aspect of the course was introduced to the class, she said:

It was on the syllabus, and she gave us access to the syllabus before the first day of class, but then in class, we talked about it and what it meant. My understanding is that when we submit assignments, we'll get one of three categorizations: developing, demonstrative and distinguished. Kind of each meaning what they sound like. Developing means you don't quite get the concept yet. Demonstrative means it's okay, you have a good understanding of what you need to understand. And Distinguished, you went above and beyond what was asked.

Her understanding of the tiered assessment system matches what is presented in the syllabus for Course Ei. She went on to express further thoughts about this three-tiered assessment system. About that system, she reflected:

There is kind of a correspondence to letter grades, though, because at the end of the day, the college still makes us have letter grades. So I think she said developing corresponds to a D or a C, demonstrative corresponds to a B, and distinguished corresponds to an A. And then we got a chart. So we have seven assignments over the course of the semester, and we got a chart about, if you get this many in each category, that's what letter grade you will get at the end of the semester.

Thus, despite the intentions of the ungrading approach in Course E, student E1 nonetheless viewed it as connected to grades. In part, because she recognizes that there will still need to be a final letter grade submitted at the end of the semester, but also because the three-tiered system of assessment being used in the course has been presented as running parallel to the A-F grading scale.

When I asked student E1 about her initial reaction to hearing about the ungrading approaches being used in course Ei, she said that she felt:

A bit of mixed reactions. I thought it was really cool... And it made me feel kind of good about the professor. This makes me feel like she's actually invested in our learning, and it makes me feel like she has a good pedagogical philosophy. And so that makes me feel more confident about coming to her if I don't understand something, or just talking to her about general things I'm curious about. And it makes me feel like she's invested in my academic

process. So I really liked that. I did also feel, you know, eventually we get a letter grade, and at the end of the day, these do still correspond to letter grades. And so I don't totally feel like it actually does what it's supposed to do.

So, while student E1 appreciates the intention behind the ungrading practices in Course E1, and she feels that it presents Professor E in a positive light, she nonetheless questions whether the practices in Course E1 meet the objectives of minimizing the A-F grading scale. Additionally, she went on to express issues with the policies around revision in the class. She explained:

How it works is that if you get a developing you have a chance to revise your work. And so then [after revision] you could get a demonstrative, or distinguished, or you might get a developing again. But if you just get a demonstrative, you do not get to revise your work, which I feel a little bit weird about.

She went on to further detail her concerns about this policy:

It's one of those things where I've always had mixed feelings about things, where it's like, if you have a certain score or whatever, you get to revise. Because on one hand, I don't like it when there's a cap like, oh, well, if you get below a 70% you can retake, but only for up to 70%...So why are people who originally did better, then disadvantaged?...I do think it's important to give people second chances, because that's how learning works, is you don't always get it the first time, and so people should be allowed to keep trying if they care about continuing to work on their understanding. But it's also, just be kind of nice if everybody had the opportunity to do that. But I also understand that that's really not realistic for professors who just have so much work and so many students, and they can't do that. They are also human. So lots of mixed feelings.

Thus, these mixed feelings come from wishing, on the one hand, that all students had the opportunity to revise their work, yet, on the other hand, acknowledging the time limitations of educators when it comes to accepting revisions and the possible impracticality of offering this option to everyone.

Relatedly, student E1 expressed that she finds it helpful when her teachers are willing to read her drafts and provide some initial thoughts. Yet, she said Professor E does not do this. I asked her how she knows this and she responded: "I went to office hours, and I was like, Hey, would you read a draft? And she was like, No, I don't do that."

When I asked student E1 about how the class has been going for her, she first talked about how the semester started off with discussions around people's comfort in the course:

We spent a lot of the first week talking about people's comfort...we're particularly analyzing the history of LGBTQ plus representation on screen, we're going to be looking at a lot of really bigoted and oftentimes even violent depictions that are going to be very sensitive, uncomfortable, perhaps even triggering... There's an anonymous survey on her website where people can go to just say any feedback they have on what's happening and what could be done differently.

Student E1 further shared that this idea of an anonymous place for feedback was a suggestion provided by a student, that Professor E then implemented. Student E1 reflected on her appreciation for Professor E's willingness to implement feedback:

I don't think I've ever had a class that spent that much time having a conversation about how everyone feels. And I also don't think I've had a class where there was that much adaptation to what people were saying. People were making suggestions and she was taking them. So the stuff about, Hey, can you make this form? Later that day, there was a form up on the website. She's very quick with implementing suggestions...She's actually being attentive to what our needs are.

When I asked student E1 how she would describe Professor E's teaching style, she responded, "very attentive and very accommodating." She also described Professor E, and the Course Ei, as well organized. She additionally described Professor E as self-aware and provided an example of how Professor E has shown this:

I'd also say very self aware. We mostly focus on American media. Right up front she was like, Yeah, this is a class about American media. That's not because only American media is important, it's because that's what I know the most about, and honestly, I don't really yet have the experience to effectively make this a class where I go over global things and also address it with adequate depth. That is a weakness of this class, and I am aware of that...I have never had a professor before be like, Yeah, I just don't yet know how to do this, but I recognize that that's an issue, you know?...So just her being super upfront and reflexive about that was really cool, and made me have a lot of respect for it, because I was like, oh, okay, awesome. You're aware of this and it makes me feel like I can be more of a human when you are more of a human.

Thus, student E1 appreciated Professor E's willingness to be upfront about gaps in her own knowledge. She felt it made her seem more human.

In interview one I asked student E1 if she had a sense yet of what grade she was aiming for in Course Ei. She said she was aiming for an A.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two³³

In our second interview, student E1 mentioned that since we last spoke, students in Course Ei had expressed some criticisms of the course to Professor E in a class discussion. Student E1 felt that students were being overly harsh in their criticisms. She said that a main criticism was students expressing that they did not feel as though there was enough detail on assignments to understand Professor E's expectations for each of the three tiers of assessment (Developing, Demonstrative, Distinguished). She said that the class and Professor E talked about this openly, and together they worked out a plan for Professor E to add bullet point lists to assignments, to demonstrate what she is looking for, for each of the three rankings.

As she had expressed in our first interview, student E1 again expressed frustration for not being able to revise her work on assignments in which she had received an assessment of "demonstrative." On the first paper in the course, she received a "demonstrative" and was provided with some feedback about where she could improve. She felt that she used this advice, and made those improvements for the second paper, and yet still received a "demonstrative" assessment on that one as well. She also said that, on the second paper, it did not provide any detail about why it received the categorization that it did, and that there was no feedback about where she could have improved with that paper.

Her perceptions of Professor E remained consistent from our first interview. Student E1 again reiterated her feeling that Professor E is a teacher who cares about her students. She reported feeling comfortable going to Professor E's office hours, and that she had already done so several times.

Although student E1 expressed a lack of clarity as to why her second paper received an assessment of "demonstrative" instead of "distinguished," she did express feeling clarity about where her grade in Course Ei stood at the time. She said that the chart makes this very clear. Although, at the time of interview two, her standing was in the range of a final B grade, which she was not feeling good about.

³³ Due to human error Interview Two with student E1 was not saved. This was an oversight on my part. Thus, this section is solely based upon a document that contains my notes immediately after this interview.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

Student E1 ended up with a final grade of B in course Ei. She expressed disappointment with this grade. This was her first final grade in college that was not an A. The final project grade is what pushed her final grade towards a B instead of an A. According to the grading chart used in the course, had she received an assessment of “distinguished” on this assignment, her final grade would have been an A. Yet, because she received a “demonstrative,” her final grade ended up being a B. She expressed frustration with this grade and set up a meeting to talk with Professor E about it. In the meeting, Professor E clarified that the annotated bibliography portion of the final assignment was a main factor of the overall assessment, yet student E1 did not come away from that meeting with a clear understanding of why that was the case:

She didn't give me in detail about why the annotated bibliography was demonstrative and what would have made it distinguished. Which is like, Okay, I could use some more constructive feedback. Which was kind of one of my issues this semester, is being really nice. I need you to be a little less nice and tell me what to do differently. But, yeah, I think my main frustration was feeling that, obviously, grades are flawed, but they do allow for a lot of nuance, like pluses and minuses and stuff. It's a very wide range. And so for there just to be three big buckets of worst, best, anywhere in between, I'm not sure that's a super great reflection of the amount of work or quality of work. It just kind of feels too broad.

Thus, student E1 detailed her perception that Professor E was being too nice with her feedback, and that this impeded her from providing helpful feedback in the form of constructive criticism. As she stated here, she also sees the three-tiered categorization of assignments as problematic, as she does not feel that the three assessment “buckets” can truly account for “quality of work.”

As she expressed in earlier interviews, student E1 said she never felt entirely clear about the distinction between Professor E’s assessment of “demonstrative” and “distinguished.” She said she did not have a clear idea about what Professor E was looking for, in order for an assignment to be considered “distinguished.” She expressed: “I wish I had received more suggestions on what I could have done to improve and get better,” and concluded that “I just don’t actually know what she’s looking for.”

As was another consistent perspective for student E1 throughout our interviews, she again reiterated feeling it was unfair that her assignments that were assessed as “demonstrative” were not eligible for revision and resubmission, while work assessed at a lower quality (“developing”) did

get this opportunity. She said: “Not that I think people are intentionally turning in really shitty things so that they get an extra week to write something better. But yeah, I mean, it does kind of reward you if you do want to do that.”

Yet, nonetheless, when I asked her if she would recommend the course to other students, she said that she would. She connected this back to her positive perception of the teacher. In that last interview, she again expressed the feeling that Professor E is a teacher who cares about her students, and again mentioned Professor E’s willingness to accept feedback, and make adjustments based upon that feedback. Student E1 said about her: “on the whole, she was a very good professor and the course content was very engaging.” Student E1 also acknowledged that Professor E seemed to be new to teaching (which was not exactly true, although she was new to ungrading), and thus her belief that Professor E would likely improve upon her teaching skills, like with ungrading, even further in the future.

Student E2

Student Overview: E2

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student E2 described themselves as a nonbinary woman, Asian-American/Bengali-Muslim, and low income.³⁴ They also indicated in this survey that they are a first generation college student. In our interviews, they identified as a lesbian, and that in regards to ability status, they “have ADHD and some mental health issues.” They clarified in our second interview that they received the diagnosis of ADHD in Spring 2022. Their first language is English, but they also speak Bengali. They speak Bengali at home because it is their parents’ native language.

They confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of the interview, they were 20 years old, in their third year and sixth semester of college, and pursuing a double major in Women’s & Gender Studies and South Asia Studies. During the Spring 2023 semester, student E2 was enrolled in both course Ei and Eii.

Student E2 grew up with their mom, dad, and two older sisters. While growing up, their dad worked as a taxi driver, and their mom worked as a cashier at a pharmacy. Student E2 said that their

³⁴ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

household income fluctuated, but estimated that it did so in the range of \$25,000 to \$45,000 annually. Their parents did attend college, but did so in Bangladesh, so student E2 considers themselves to be a first generation US college student.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

In our first interview, I asked student E2 about their relationship with school before college. They called their high school a “pressure cooker,” and described that environment as intense, and with heavy emphasis on “good grades.” Before the semester of our interview, student E2 said they had taken a course using ungraded practices before, in the Spring 2022 semester. In this ungraded course, students were responsible for grading each of their own assignments, as well as determining their final grade in the course. Student E2 relays that they had a largely negative experience in that course, due to having to assess all their own work with minimal feedback from the teacher. In regards to the self-assessment aspect, they shared that they were “very nervous about that and about seeming cocky.” They reported giving themselves a final score of A- in that course, yet wondered if they maybe should have given themselves an A.

While reflecting on the negatives of this prior experience with ungrading, student E2 expressed doubt about whether ungrading practices would be a good fit for students at Institution E generally:

I think that's why the ungrading concept doesn't work the best with us, because we very much thrive on getting that validation from our professors... a lot of us came from schools where we were, the top of our class, and you come to [Institution E] and you're really academically motivated, it's slightly competitive, and it's like a pressure cooker a bit, because you're just, everyone's working really, really hard. And I think with the grades, you can feel like, Oh, well, I deserve this A because my professor decided to give it to me. But with self grading and with ungrading that doubt kind of starts to creep in where you're like, maybe I don't deserve this.

Here, student E2 connected her negative experience of ungrading with a possible mis-match between ungrading and the students at Institution E overall. Specifically, they pinpoint potential problems as: grades acting as a type of validation for these “academically motivated” students, and potential self-doubt with self-evaluative aspects of ungrading.

When signing up for Course Ei and Course Eii, Student E2 did not know that those courses would be using ungrading practices. They expressed particular concern for having another ungraded

course that used self-evaluation. They said: “this is the gender studies in me, but, I know that I've been conditioned to, you know, sell myself short.” In terms of how they initially responded to the news of these courses having ungrading practices, they said:

Yeah, I was like, Oh, not again. Yeah. I was really nervous. I was, I was freaking out a little bit because I was, like, Should I drop this class? Is this worse for me? But then, this was kind of, this is like a challenge to myself, I think, to my own confidence. To be like, No, I think this is a good opportunity for me to basically give myself what I think I deserve.

Thus, despite previous negative experiences, student E2 decided to stay in the courses, implying that despite negative experiences with self-assessment particularly, seeing this aspect as a chance to “challenge” her “confidence.”

As we were talking about Course Ei and Course Eii, student E2 conveyed a clear understanding of the assessments in those courses:

[In Course Ei] you have a three point scale, kind of where it's like distinguished developing demonstrative, so it's not the same thing as a grade. But then at the end of the day, she still gives us a grade for that course. But then in the seminar I'm taking with her, that is completely ungraded, because it's the same scale, but then you give yourself that scale. And then by the end, at the end of the semester, I have to give a two page paper saying the grade that I think I deserve.

This understanding aligns with the syllabi for these two courses and with how Professor E described the assessment in those two courses.

In talking further about assignments and assessments, the topic of feedback came up. They talked about feedback on a paper they had recently completed for Course Eii:

It was a paragraph where she was just commenting on the actual thing I said, where she was like, Thank you for sharing this. This was really insightful. Thank you for getting so personal. And then she was like, It's interesting you brought up this point. We'll discuss this in class. And so she was connecting it to the course material that we were about to learn, which I think also made me more excited about it, and be like, okay, this is why it's relevant. Because sometimes, you know, you get assigned a paper and you're like, why am I doing this? So I like that. She made it relevant to me.

In regards to such feedback, student E2 pointed it out as an aspect that provided an improved experience for her in comparison to the ungraded course she took in Spring 2022. They described that previous course as incredibly stressful, yet comparatively said: “But with this semester, I don't

feel that way, because it still feels like it's going to get graded in some way, because it's receiving feedback.”

As we continued to talk about the set up of courses Ei and Eii, I asked student E2 about their perception of Professor E's teaching style. They said:

I'm not gonna lie, I don't love her teaching style. I would say it's very, I think she selects really good materials and really good readings. But I do think her teaching style, she can kind of go on tangents a lot, and isn't really good at keeping the class on track, I would say. She's not the best facilitator, but she's so clearly an expert in the material.

When I inquired further about these observations, one thing that student E2 mentioned was that, sometimes in Course Ei, students would say “not great things.” When I asked them if they could say more about that, they said about some of the students in the course that: “sometimes I see things that are a little bit like, they're very clearly speaking from their own perspective, and trying to use that to dictate what they think is right and wrong.” When I asked if they could think of an example they would be willing to share, they gave an example from that class having a discussion about queer theory. They talked about one student's comments during that discussion:

[That student], she's like, I don't get why straight people get to queer things. Which I found really frustrating, because it discounts literally all the readings we were doing about queer theory. It's because that's queer theory. You're supposed to queer something. And also it was very - like this was a white student speaking - and it felt very much like she was completely erasing the experiences of people of color who whose experiences are queer, even if they're straight. Which is something my professor said, which I appreciate my professor saying that. But I just felt really frustrated because I was like, I wish the student like- drill that in sooner.

Thus, not only did student E2 feel frustration for this student's argument because it went against the very material they had been reading, but also because the argument was “erasing the experiences of people of color.” Although they did say that Professor E did point this out, they nonetheless felt frustrated with that classroom experience. When I asked them about experiences like this in other classes, they did point out having experiences like this in the ungraded course they took in Spring 2022. In reflecting on this, they ended up expressing curiosity if this suggested a theme with ungraded courses:

I will say the class I took last spring also had a white- no, multiple white students who made many microaggressions throughout that whole course. And I don't know if the common

factor is the fact that these were ungraded courses, but it was really interesting. And both times I do feel like the professors didn't handle it as well. And I wonder if it's that attempt at a restorative approach sometimes means - because the students know there's less consequences for saying things, they might be less thoughtful in how they approach it. I don't know if that's something I can assert, but I do know that, the frustration I experienced [in Course Ei] was exactly the thing I experienced in my class last spring.

So while student E2 recognizes that they cannot feel certain that they can make a correlation between these microaggressions and ungrading, they nonetheless wonder if there may be a relationship due to ungrading creating an environment in which “the students know there's less consequences for saying things,” thus that “they might be less thoughtful.”

In that first interview, when I asked about the final grades she is aiming for in Course Ei and Eii, she said A's.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In a bit of a departure from sentiments expressed in interview one, in interview two, student E2 expressed frustration with unclear feedback and unclear expectations in Course Ei and Eii. They shared that, concerning the assessments, that they had received both assessments of “distinguished” and of “demonstrative” on their work, but that they did not have a clear understanding of why their assignments yielded those assessments. They said of one assignment, “I got a demonstrative. So this is second tier, and she said it was good, but she didn't give any feedback as to why it wasn't a distinguished.” They then went on to say, “that's the thing I'm noticing her feedback is she just kind of gives praise, but very little actual criticism.” Thus, while in our first interview, student E2 expressed appreciation for Professor E's feedback, here they expressing a shift in that assessment, finding that Professor E's feedback is focused on the positive at the expense of helpful critique.

They said that they, and other students, were especially frustrated with not understanding when they received the second-tier assessment of “demonstrative”:

It's been a little bit frustrating, because my peers and I have found that we've gotten, I guess, a lower grade. So it's like a three tier system. We've gotten the second out of the third tier. We didn't meet requirements that she never told us to implement. So it's been a very- it's been a little bit frustrating because we didn't know her expectations, and she graded us based on these expectations that she never communicated in the assignment.

Here student E2 is adding into frustrations about lack of feedback, detailing frustration about assignment assessment due to a lack of clarity on assignments expectations.

They shared that in Course Ei, students shared this frustration with Professor E, and requested that she provide some further clarification on her assignment expectations:

People were really frustrated too, and they basically asked her to implement standards for each tier. So saying, Okay, if you get a demonstrative, what does that mean? If you get a distinguished, what does that mean? Because people were feeling like they weren't- They didn't know what expectations they needed to meet. And the professor is very new and new to teaching, and she's been really transparent about that. So she said to us, she was like, oh, you know, you guys are kind of my lab rats for this. Yeah, which was really awkward. She was just like, you'll decide how this assignment goes in the future. And that was really stressful, because we don't want to be the ones to decide. We just want to know. So, yeah, it's definitely been frustrating in those classes because of that. I think my grades will still work out fine, but it's just a little bit frustrating to not know what's going on and feel like, yeah, I don't know what she wants exactly, and she doesn't know what she wants either, which is awkward.

Thus, as student E2 elaborates here, their feelings of frustration about the course relate to the lack of clarity on assignment expectations, but also the sense that Professor E may have a lack of clarity in terms of what her own expectations actually are.

About the ungrading practices in these courses Student E2 said that she would prefer that Course Ei, which does not include any self-evaluation, would just use a standard grading scale. They reflected: "it feels like in this format, it's trying to be ungraded, but then it's still being graded...this feels like an attempt to kind of be more, I guess, you know, less punitive. But then it still is." It seems that student E2 is finding the structure in Course Ei to be similar to standard grading scales. and to also be punitive, because of its use of a hierarchical, external (versus self) assessment.

Another question that I asked student E2 in interview two, was about their perception of the procs and cons of ungrading. They said:

I think the positive is that it does make you look outside the grading system and just think more about self improvement and more about the materials. It just makes you genuinely more passionate about what you're learning about, because you get to think like, Okay, did I actually deserve this grade? Did I put in the effort? You know, you get to be really honest with yourself. And so I really like that. I think that the drawback is at a place like [Institution E], where students can be, you know, really stressed and really focused on grades, sometimes a bit competitive, and everyone is just so motivated to get the best grade possible, it can be really stressful for people, because I think people like having the answers

and like knowing exactly what they did and exactly what they need to do to improve later on. I think the ungrading system puts everything in a more gray area, which makes a lot of people really uncomfortable.

As a con, they again bring up here, as they did in interview one, a sense that ungrading might not generally work well with students at Institution E, because of students being “so motivated to get the best grade possible.” Yet, as a positive, they do see ungrading as “more about self improvement and about the materials,” than about the grade.

Not too long after that previous quote, they shared their perspective that: “I feel like it's like ungrading kind of takes into account all the parts of you.” When I asked them if they could elaborate on this sentiment, they said: “I just think that a professor who is willing to do ungrading is already willing to kind of step outside the rigid structure of academia. And so they're already more open minded. And so then when I say, Okay, I have ADHD, I need this flexibility, they're already more receptive to it because of that.” Thus, when she states feeling that ungrading takes “into account all the parts of you,” for her own personal experience, she sees this as being true for her as a student with ADHD, who may need further flexibility than other students.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

In our third and last interview, student E2 shared that they earned straight A's across all of their classes that semester. In talking specifically about Course Ei and Eii, they reported that their experience in that class greatly improved since we spoke in our second interview. Student E2 said, “I mentioned to you complaints I had about the professor who was doing the self grading. She went through the feedback and improved a lot by the end of the course, which was good, and so I really ended up enjoying both those courses.” They said that Professr E seemed to become better with receiving and implementing feedback, especially with assignments and assessment. They described that “[Professor E] took feedback really well. So she was like, because for the class where there was three tiers, and we didn't understand what each tier really entailed for each assignment, she was like, okay, in order to get this tier, you need to do the X, Y and Z. Well, and then the feedback she gave was much more specific.”

On the essay in Course Eii, in which students had to provide their own self-assessment, student E2 elaborated on this feedback: “In my essay, talking about why I deserved the grade I

deserve like, I talked about how it was, everything that she gave me - say, a demonstrative instead of a distinguished - I was like, You gave me really good feedback to explain how to get a distinguished, and then I was able to get a distinguished on the next time." Thus, Professor E's feedback improved in a way that was helpful, and helped student E2 earn more assessments of "distinguished" on assignments. ultimately earning the final course grade of A.

Although student E2 was happy with the outcome of both Course Ei and Eii, they did say that Ei was a little more stressful, because of the chart determining their overall final grade. They said how they had received an assessment of "demonstrative" on two assignments, and that receiving a third "demonstrative" assessment would have meant they could not earn an A in the course. They found themselves stressed with the chart, and expressed, as they had in an earlier part of our conversation, feeling that that course should have just used a standard A-F grading scale. They compared the assessment tiers and charts in Course Ei with Eii, in which: "I knew that my improvement was what counted." In Course Ei "that's not what we were told. We were told, get this many, this is the grade you get and, and I think that defeats the purpose of the self graded experience or ungraded experience." So although they did not have a positive experience with the self-assessment component of the previous ungraded course they took in Spring 2022, after Courses Ei and Eii, student E2 aligned the self-assessment aspect as more in line with the purpose behind ungrading (as opposed to something like the tiered system in Course Ei).

When I asked her if she would recommend the class to others, they said "I think yes." They said that they specifically feel that Professor E's teaching style and class format would work well for freshman and sophomore level intro classes, because currently, many of the faculty teaching those courses are older faculty with more traditional teaching styles, and perhaps outdated materials.

When I asked about concluding thoughts about Professor E's teaching style, they said that they did feel that Professor E was caring and understanding. They elaborated: "she's really good at taking feedback, and she really cares about her students. She's very obviously knowledgeable about the material, and knows what she's doing. And so I think she just needs more improvement on facilitating class discussions and being a teacher, but that comes with experience. And so I do like her." So while student E2 had more criticism of Professor E in earlier interviews, it seems that some of these changed, specifically the assessment of Professor E's feedback.

In this last interview I also asked student E2 about their experiences as a student with ADHD. I explained to them that some people who have written about alternative assessments like

ungrading see it as potentially helpful to students with ADHD because of its flexibility, while others see it as potentially harmful to students with ADHD by taking away standard grading goalposts. I asked them what they thought about that, as a student with ADHD, and they said:

So the goal posts, in that sense, was kind of a given with this three tier system of this semester. And I do still think ungrading is really beneficial for people with ADHD. I just think that the process of it needs to happen with feedback from the professor first. It's really hard for me to evaluate without some sort of external opinion, and so get feedback from the professor. And doing ungrading in that way is important, because feedback is not the same as a grade. And so that's what I feel like I needed, personally. And I also think ungrading is beneficial in the sense that, you know, with ADHD, you have lots of ups and downs during the semester. I have so many periods where I cannot be productive for the life of me...And so the ungrading kind of structure makes me feel like my professors care about me more. They want to be more flexible, and they want to see me succeed. If they're like, yeah, this class is about your growth and not about what you got on this one paper that you might have submitted when you were really having a hard time, that makes me feel better.

Thus student E2 overall sees their experiences with ungrading (in the Spring 2023 semester) as helpful to her as a student with ADHD. In terms of goalposts, student E2 perceived Professor E's three tier system and detailed feedback as providing that structure and guidance. With the experiences of self-evaluation in ungrading, they said this focus on "personal growth" instead of grades could prevent one bad paper "when you were having a really hard time," as unfairly dictating the final grade in a course.

Student E3

Student Overview: E3

On the prescreening survey for potential student participants, student E3 described herself as a cis woman, Latinx/Multi-racial, and low-income.³⁵ She also identified as a first generation college student. She confirmed in our interviews that, at the time of the interviews, she was 23 years old, in her fourth year and eighth semester of college, and was pursuing a Political Science major with the intention to go on to law school. She identified as bisexual and regarding ability, as having mental health issues around anxiety and depression.

³⁵ The questions were open-ended: respondents typed in their response. The questions they responded to regarding these demographics were: How do you identify racially? How do you identify your gender? How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?

Student E3 speaks Portuguese, Spanish, and English. Her first language is Portuguese. She shared that her “whole family’s from Brazil,” and that she speaks Portuguese at home, as does her family. In terms of her upbringing, student E3 shared that she “grew up in a household of five including myself, my aunt, my grandparents on my mom's side, in a two bedroom apartment. So we were all very close together.” She shared that she did not have a close relationship with her father. She said that her mom and dad did both attend college, but that they did so in Brazil, so she is a first generation college student in the United States.

In our interviews, she further articulated her class status by saying, “I'm low income. I am providing for myself since I started college. My family in Brazil doesn't have the conditions to help me here. And when I have extra money, I send it back to them.”

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview One

Before college at Institution E, student E3 attended school in Brazil. She mentioned differences between school in Brazil and her experience at Institution E in the United States. She described the education system in Brazil as more “standardized.” She details that school there would consist of one exam at the end of every year, covering “every subject.” Regarding her own relationship with school, she shared that she was on a scholarship since age six, that allowed her to attend a private school. To keep the scholarship, she had to maintain “good grades,” and she expressed that this created an internal pressure for her to do well academically from fear of losing her scholarship. She came to the U.S. for college because she was interested in pursuing law school to become a human rights lawyer. She felt that the opportunities to pursue this career trajectory would be better if she attended higher education in the United States.

She did, though, face difficulties in adjusting to school in the United States. She detailed:

I had no experience with the American College System...And I'm not gonna lie, it started more difficult than I thought. I was considered like one of the smart girls in high school, but when I got here I realized that there was the language barrier, there was the whole system that was different than it was, than what I was used to. The things that the professors wanted from me were different than what I had to deliver in Brazil...The hardest part I feel like was being away from family. And just trying to fit in, in a culture that is very different from what I was used to.

She did adjust gradually to school at Institution E. She also shared that Institution E, and the city in which it is located, had opportunities to connect with other people from Brazil, which she felt helpful in building local community.

In the Spring 2023 semester, student E3 was enrolled in Course Eii with Professor E. Student E3 had taken an Introduction to Women's and Gender Studies course with Professor E in the previous semester. She described Professor E as "amazing." In that previous semester, Professor E told her about using ungrading in Course Eii, which interested student E3, and prompted her to enroll in the course.

When I asked her how Professor E introduced the ungrading aspects of the course to the class, she said:

It was on the course description that it was going to be an ungraded course to start with. So it wasn't a surprise for us. And in the syllabus it's very well detailed, the process that she uses. So she gave the syllabus to us beforehand. We got there like the first class knowing that it was going to be a class like this. And she explained, like every step of the way, to all of us in the first class anyway. Basically, she will read and evaluate all of our assignments based on three different grades.

She then described the three tier system of: developing, demonstrative, and distinguished. She expressed an understanding of that system, and also understood that the final grade would be determined through self-evaluation done by the students themselves. Her understanding matched what was conveyed in the syllabus.

In this first interview, student E3 said that she already perceived a difference with how she felt working on assignments in course Eii versus other classes. Specifically, she brought up writing, which, at several points in our interview, she described as an area of difficulty for her:

So I definitely take longer than most students to write the essays, I'm very self conscious. So like I don't like to free write and then edit what I'm writing. So it takes me a long time. And that prevents me from getting a good flow in terms of all the assignments I have to work on. For this class, we don't really have a limit on the pages.

She expressed this lack of page limits as resulting in a more positive experience for her, regarding writing. She said of those writing assignments: "it can be as long as we want or as short as we want as long as we are dedicating effort to it. And that allowed me to finish the first assignment in maybe two to three hours... it was one of the first times that I sat down when I didn't have to get anxious

about writing.” Not having the parameter of page limits thus helped student E3 to have less anxiety when it came to writing.

She also emphasized the self-assessment aspect of the course, and the class environment feeling like a safe space, as other factors that were making Course Eii a positive experience for her:

I feel like we don't have to do what we think the professor wants us to do, we can do what we think is going to be best for our own learning process. So we get to talk about things that could be controversial in class. We have a very safe space in our class as well. We decided on some initial rules that we could have about respecting each other's opinions, but knowing that there is a limit, but understanding that like, assume no harm from other people's speeches or participation, so it's just a very welcoming environment. I was diagnosed with anxiety last semester, and I feel like this is one of the places that I know my anxiety won't be heating up.

Thus, for multiple reasons, including the ability to focus on what she thinks “is going to be best” for her “own learning process,” as well as the setup of the classroom rules regarding interactions, student E3 describes Course Eii as one that does not trigger her anxiety.

She further elaborates upon her appreciation of this environment in Course Eii by comparing it to the larger environment at Institution E, which she describes as highly competitive:

One of the things that I'm gonna say is that [Institution E] is a very self competitive school in terms of, it's not that you have to be better than the others, but you have to be your best self. And sometimes people take that as like, I always have to be speaking and raising my hand in class, and I always have to be doing the smartest comment. This can create a kind of hostile environment...In all of my other classes, especially as a political science major, a lot of students will like not give chance to others to speak...And in this class, not just because the participation is not being graded, but also because it's discussion based and we agreed at the end of the class at the beginning of the class that we will be respecting people's turns to speak, and we will understand that if we are speaking too much in a class, we can give time to others as well. I feel like it creates a space that we can all benefit from because we're going to be listening to everybody's experiences and opinions.

Here, she is attributing this lack of competitiveness, and greater ease with discussion, to the fact that it is a discussion based class, but also because “the participation is not being graded.” Thus, Course Eii does not have the “hostile environment” that she has experienced in other courses at Institution E.

She also described this environment in Course Eii as one in which she does not experience concern about her language skills, with English not being her first language, that she has experienced in other courses. She shared:

In the beginning of my college experience, I used to stay more quiet than usual. Because I was afraid that I was going to say something that wouldn't be very, well interpreted, or that I wouldn't be able to express myself in the way that I wanted. But I feel safer in this class because I know people will not assume harm from what I say and if they need a clarification, they are going to feel very welcoming to like, welcome to ask and again, better find your point.

Thus, the classroom rules had a significant impact on her experience in Course Eii. Although those rules are not explicitly an ungrading practice, she did, as previously mentioned, also correlate an increased level of comfort with discussion in knowing it would not be graded. This lack of graded participation also seems to limit what she has encountered as a “hostile environment” in other courses.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Two

In our second interview, I asked student E3 how the semester was going and she shared that this academic year was becoming “the first time that I actually feel like I am a good student.” I asked her if she could tell me more about this feeling and she brought up a comparison with how she experienced high school to how she has mostly felt in her time at Institution E:

I've always felt like I was a good student when I was in high school. I didn't have to do much work to feel like I was on top of the topics that we were studying. But ever since I got here, I just felt like I was behind the whole time...I have a 3.67 GPA. It's not bad, but I just didn't feel like I could relax at any point, you know. And if I did, I would see my performance going down. So this semester, I just feel like I can read all of the readings, because I am interested in all of them. I can do all the assignments without second guessing... just feel like I belong here.

Thus, having to adjust to the environment and academic expectations at Institution E has been a theme for student E3, throughout her time at Institution E. It is only in her senior year that she has started to “feel like I belong here.”

She provided some further insight on this feeling when talking about the mid-term meeting with Professor E. She relayed of that meeting:

It was a very chill, informal conversation. And I had a chance to reflect on how it's been such a good environment for me to talk about the things that I am passionate about, but also, I feel safe there talking about anything. And [Institution E] is a particularly challenging

environment if you're still learning about something. And in that class, because of the rules that the professor set up since the beginning, we're very open to talk about our initial thoughts or just be open to learn. So I was telling her how it's one of my favorite classes, probably my favorite class from my entire college experience.

Here, she is again describing Institution E as a “challenging environment,” but juxtaposing that with the feeling of being able to express herself openly in Course Eii, and the feeling that the environment is one that is open, regarding learning. Here, she describes Course Eii as her “favorite class from my entire college experience.”

When I asked her if she could say a little more about Course Eii feeling safe, she said:

I think the main thing is the things that we talk about. We wouldn't feel safe, and we wouldn't talk about the things that we talk about - reproductive justice, Black Lives Matter, now we're gonna go into the MeToo movement - we wouldn't talk about those things and how they impact us, our lives, and the things around us, if we didn't trust that people would be understanding and open to hear what we have to say. Ever since the beginning, I think the very first class, when I told you that she made a list of rules that we should try to abide and respect. She was very insistent on the fact that we should assume no harm from what people say.

Thus, student E3 has mentioned class rules in Course Eii several times in her descriptions of the course. They have repeatedly come up as an example of why she considers the class as having a “safe” environment.

She also again considered her experience with writing in Course Eii. In our first interview, student E3 had shared that writing can be a source of frustration for her, especially given that English is not her first language. In interview two, she again shared that her experience with writing was different in Course Eii. When I asked her how the experience with writing was different in that course, she specified the ungrading aspect. She said: “Because I know this is not going to be graded, and it's very personal. I can use like the first person I can talk about my own experience. I just feel like it's writing a journal. And things just flow very easily.” In regards to the assessment she received on her papers for Course Eii, she said they had so far all received an assessment of distinguished, the highest assessment level.

When I asked student E3 if she had a sense of what grade she was aiming for in the course, she said an A.

Experiences with Ungrading: Interview Three

At the time of our third interview, while classes were over at Institution E, the semester had not actually concluded yet.³⁶ Student E3 shared that since we had last talked, she received her first assessment of “demonstrative” in Course Eii. This assessment was of her mini-conference presentation. She said of this assessment: “the professor also gave us feedback about the presentation. I got like, the demonstrative feedback. And I understand why. I did it in the day before, because I had other assignments to finish. So I acknowledge that I didn't do my best.” Thus, she did not disagree with that assessment, even though it was lower than her other work.

When I asked her about the grade she felt she would give herself on the final assessment, she said she an A: “I got an A from her introduction class last semester. And I think the effort that I put into this class was bigger than last semester. So I was thinking about giving myself an A. I got a lot of distinguished feedbacks on my essays, I only got one of the demonstratives.” So, as student E3 articulates here, although she is responsible for giving herself a final grade, she is also using the feedback and assessments from Professor E as a means to guide that assessment, leading her to the conclusion of an A grade.

She again brought up in interview three that the discussion in Course Eii often focused on potentially sensitive topics, but that it felt safe to have these discussions in that course. I again asked her if she could speak further on what made the course feel safe. She said:

I feel like it depends a lot on the professor. And this professor made sure that you were always feeling confident, but vulnerable and understanding. But I think the smaller classroom is also helpful. The way that the table was designed. So we were sitting in a square. We were able to look at each other's spaces all the time, and just have a discussion as if we were friends sitting at a restaurant talking. I don't know, I am not sure if I can, if I am 100% on this, but for me, the ungrading system is also helpful because it takes away the pressure. And we are able to go to the classroom feeling more relaxed and knowing that we're not being evaluated the whole time.

Thus, while she attributes the positive environment as related to the professor, and also to the small class size, she does also comment that she can see how the ungraded aspect could be related to this

³⁶ While I intended for the third interview to be at the conclusion of the semester, this happened because different institutions in my study had different end dates, and I made the options for interview three to start as early as the first institution's semester was over. I did not use a separate schedule for each institution to ensure that everyone would schedule after their semester's conclusion.

as well “because it takes away the pressure” of “knowing that we’re not being evaluated the whole time.” This aligns with similar, previous comments about participation in Course Eii not being graded.

She went on to further talk about the significance of this environment:

I feel like the format, the way that the professor formulated the contemporary feminist movements class was perfect. So that we could push ourselves, encourage ourselves to learn more, because we are interested about the topic and because we want to give ourselves an A at the end, but at the same time, it takes away the pressure of having someone from the outside evaluating you the whole time. And that allows us to take more risks in terms of what we're going to say, in terms of how we're going to study, and how we're going to lead the discussions.

Here, she continues with the theme of why the ungrading aspect helped discussions in the class feel like a positive experience, and added on, saying that this ungrading aspect also allowed her to feel that she could take more risks.

In response to this description, I asked if she could provide an example of how she felt more able to take risks in Course Eii. She responded:

I feel like the essays that I wrote were much more personalized than I've ever written here at [Institution E]...I got to share a lot from my own experience. And I wrote in first person, and I wouldn't do that, even if- I wrote reflection essays before, without this personalized aspect. And because I knew that I was only going to get either a demonstrative or distinguished feedback, I could either improve on what I was doing, or just continue doing what I was actually interested in doing.

Thus, because of the assessment structure in Course Eii, student E3 felt more able to approach her writing assignments from the aspect of personal experience, which she hadn't felt able to do in other courses.

When I asked student E3 if her perception of ungrading changed, from the start of the semester to the end, she said yes. She further explained:

If I'm being 100% honest, I started the semester thinking that although I knew I was going to like everything that I was going to study, I was thinking that it was going to be a chill class that I could skip some readings, that I could be more relaxed because I would have to- I would be able to grade myself, so I could give myself any grade I wanted. But I come out of it knowing that I did my best because I have to give myself a grade. So yeah, I think that changed a little bit.

So, she shares that when she first heard about the ungrading aspect of Course Eii, she felt it would be a “chill class,” and that she could choose to not give it 100%, such as skipping some of the readings, without worry because she knew she could determine her own grade. Yet, this perception shifted for her. She ended up doing her “best” precisely because she knew she would have to give herself a grade.

She also shared that in her course evaluation of Course Eii, that she wouldn’t change anything about the course: “I had to write her feedback, like we have to write feedbacks for every class at the end of the semester. And I really don’t know what things she could do to improve the space that she created and the syllabus that she designed.” This amplifies her positive experience in the course, and her prior assessment of Course Eii as her favorite course across her college experience.

Chapter 6: Analysis

The analysis will take the material presented in the results section, and turn attention towards answering the research questions of my project. As indicated in the “Research Questions and Framework” section of this document, my research questions are as follows: What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom for (three particular groups of students): (1) first generation college students?, (2) neurodivergent students?, (3) students who have had negative experiences of ungrading? As also further detailed in the “Research Questions and Framework” section of this document, I will consider these experiences through a framework of “engaged pedagogy” as conceptualized by educator and theorist bell hooks (1994).

This analysis section is structured by looking at each research question separately. Each section will begin with a table that provides themes for that research question. Each theme will be further detailed. Then, to conclude each research question section, the framework of engaged pedagogy will be applied to those results. Table 6.1, below, provides the two main facets of engaged pedagogy, and their main characteristics, as reviewed in the “Research Questions and Framework” section. This table is replicated within each research question section, before considering the application of engaged pedagogy.

Critical	Holistic
<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Rejection of “banking model” and education as transactional● Challenges unhelpful hierarchies in the classroom	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Acknowledges students as whole people with roles and identities outside of a student in their class● Educator engages in self-reflection

Table 6.1: The facets and characteristics of bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy.

Research Question #1: What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom for neurodivergent college students?

The neurodivergent student participants in my study were the following five students: A1, A2, C2, D1, and E2. Thus, two students from Course A, one student from Course C, one student from

Course D, and one student from Course Ei and Course Eii. The demographic information about these students, based upon their own responses (from the prescreening survey and the interviews), is listed below:

- A1: male, white, middle class-upper middle class, first generation college student, ADHD
- A2: female, white, middle class, ADHD
- C2: male, Asian, average - good (sic), grew up in India came to U.S. for college, English is not first language, ADHD
- D1: male, white, father passed so on own, middle class, autism spectrum
- E2: nonbinary, Asian-American/Bengali, low-income, first generation college student, ADHD

Before addressing this first research question, it is valuable to first consider these students' general relationship with grades and school, and particularly, how their neurodivergence has impacted that relationship.

Relationship with School and Grades

For student A1, high school was a struggle. He was not diagnosed with ADHD until his senior year, so spent the majority of his time in high school without this knowledge. As relayed in the results section, a common theme for student A1 through his high school years was spending long hours studying, even staying up all night working to complete an assignment. Despite his efforts, he was often disappointed with his assignment grades. His frustration was further amplified when he would hear that other students who spent far less time on an assignment, even starting last-minute, would earn an A. This dynamic left him feeling unmotivated for school, and cultivated an internalized sense of low self-worth. Student A1 also mentioned struggling with focus and described feeling especially distracted while at home taking online courses as the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, after being diagnosed with ADHD in his senior year of high school, and starting medication, he reported improvement in his productivity as well as his grades.

Student A2 also reported struggling with work in high school. As considered in the results, she also shared a common experience of spending many hours on an assignment, including staying up past 3 in the morning, only to receive a grade that she felt disappointed with. She shared that after her diagnosis of ADHD, she started medication and has seen an improvement in her grades.

Student C2 shared that ADHD caused him two primary difficulties with school: focusing and meeting deadlines. This was compounded by the fact that student C2 was also facing some challenges with adjusting to the U.S. education system. He was only in his second semester at Institution C, and previously attended school in India, where he is from. One major adjustment for him was that he was not used to having to do work outside of class time. This compounded his struggle with meeting deadlines and he struggled to meet and often missed assignment deadlines in his first year of courses at Institution C.

Student E2 received their diagnosis of ADHD in spring 2022. They shared that ADHD causes them to have “lots of ups and downs” during semesters. They described having “periods where I cannot be productive for the life of me.” In regards to their experience with school before college, they described the high school they attended as a “pressure cooker,” with intense pressure to get “good grades.”

Student D1 shared that he was diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum in elementary school. Yet, he clarified that he does not consider himself disabled, and that he questions the validity of that diagnosis. While he received accommodations like extended time on assignments in high school, he never sought accommodations while in college.

Thus, themes that were present across this group of students included: feeling as though the work put into assignments was not reflected by the grade an assignment received, struggling with focus, and struggling with time management (missing deadlines or having to stay up all night to meet them).

Experience in an Ungraded Course

Table 6.2, below, summarizes themes that were present in this group of students’ experiences with ungrading. The number in parentheses indicates how many students in this group expressed each sentiment about the ungraded course that they were in. Overall, the numbers lean heavier towards the column of positive experiences, yet all are important aspects of the student experience and will be further detailed next.

Positive	Both Positive and Critical	Critique
<p>I. Focus on learning and improvement (5: A1, A2, C2, D1, E2)</p> <p>II. Minimized fear of failure, mistakes, or judgment (3: A2, C2, E2)</p> <p>III. Freedom to take risks and sense of agency (2: A1, D1)</p> <p>IV. Minimized stress (3: A1, A2, D1)</p> <p>V. Sense that the teacher cares about students and their learning (4: A1, A2, C2, E2)</p>	<p>VI. Coursework took more time and/or more stressful than other courses, because learning and growth were the goals (2: A1, C2)</p>	<p>VII. Unclear about assignment expectations (2: A2, E2)</p> <p>VIII. Lack of grading scale means that individual effort is not reflected in assessment (2: A1, A2)</p> <p>IX. Confusion and stress with where stood with final grades (2: C2, E2)</p>

Table 6.2: Themes of neurodivergent student experiences in an ungraded course. Number in parentheses shows the number of students in this group who expressed the listed experience.

Focus on Learning and Improvement

One theme that was present with all five students in this group was appreciation for the ungraded course’s focus on learning and growth. Student A1 described himself as someone who enjoyed learning and said the ungrading setup in Course A “gives me the freedom to just focus on the actual learning.” Student A1 reported putting time and effort into his coursework in Course A, as well as utilizing Professor A’s feedback, because he wanted to improve his writing skills. In our final interview, he was happy to report that Professor A recognized improvement in his writing throughout the semester.

For student A2, the focus on learning in Course A aligned with her identification as a hard worker who “thrive[s] on excelling,” and stands by the idea that “you’re gonna get out as much as you put in.” She expressed seeing Course A as an opportunity to “get better at writing, because that

is something that I am passionate about.” Instead of competing “with a number scale,” she saw Course A as a context in which she is “competing with myself, on what I can improve on.” She additionally recognized a benefit in that the writing skills she could gain would help her beyond just that course.

Student C2 similarly appreciated that Course C was focused on learning. Writing was a skill that he expressed wanting to improve, and Course C provided that opportunity. He described the focus on learning in Course C as in alignment with his own goals of pursuing a college education in the United States. He expressed that the focus on learning and improvement in Course C was an approach he appreciated more than a focus on memorization, which he experienced in other courses.

Student D1 said about Course D, “you’re not treating it like a class, you’re treating it like you’re just trying to actually learn a new skill.” Although we only had one interview together, at the beginning of the semester, student D1 expressed that he had already been able to take what he had learned in Course D, and apply those skills to projects outside of the course. He additionally remarked that the focus on learning in Course D cuts down the sense of competition that he feels amongst students in other courses at Institution D. He described the focus on learning as creating an environment more conducive to collaboration.

Student E2 described the use of ungrading in Course Ei and Eii as “more about self improvement and more about the materials,” and said that “It just makes you genuinely more passionate about what you're learning about.” They further expressed appreciation that the focus on growth instead of grades meant that one assignment wouldn’t have the power to bring down a person’s standing in the course. They said: “this class is about your growth and not about what you got on this one paper that you might have submitted when you were really having a hard time, that makes me feel better.” They detailed that this was important to them as a student with ADHD who struggles with “ups and downs” and periods of time in which they struggle to “be productive.” Although, it is also worth noting that they did express feeling that Course Eii was a truer iteration of ungrading because it rested on self-assessment of improvement and learning, whereas Course Ei used three assessment tiers, which they felt was closer to a standard grading scale. While in Course Ei, their grade was based upon this three tiered grading scale, student E2 said in Course Eii, “I knew that my improvement was what counted.”

Minimized fear of failure, mistakes, and judgements

While many of the themes in Table X overlapped, the second theme was particularly connected to the third and fourth themes. The second was a lack of, or minimized fear of failure, mistakes, or judgement, while the third was a sense of freedom and agency in the course (due to that minimized fear) and the fourth was minimized stress (also due to that minimized fear). Student A2, student C2, and student E2 specifically expressed the second theme.

Student A2 described Course A as less stressful for her than other classes, because in other classes she would have to worry about getting points taken off “because my format was wrong,” and feeling that the instructor might “completely miss everything I’m saying for technicalities.” In contrast, because assignments were based upon completion in Course A, she did not have this concern in that course. Student C2 similarly compared Course C with other courses, saying that in other courses he would get docked points on an assignment for not memorizing something, whereas he did not have to have that concern with Course C, because it was based on improvement and not memorization.

As also considered in the theme of appreciation for the course’s focus on learning, student E2 described the ungrading setup, especially in Course Eii, as minimizing her worry. Student E2 said it “makes me feel better” that the course is based on growth. They explained that with the focus on improvement over grades, this provides flexibility to not have to fear the impact of “this one paper that you might have submitted when you were really having a hard time.” Thus, all of these students experienced less fear of failure or mistakes on assignments in these courses because the standard grading scale was not being used to assess assignments with a grade.

Freedom to take risks and sense of agency

Closely related to that second theme of minimized fear of failure, mistakes, or judgment, was a sense of freedom to take risks, and a sense of agency in the course. Students A1 and D1 both expressed this sentiment.

Student A1 expressed that Course A was a class in which he could experiment with different writing styles and different approaches to his assignments, without the fear of being penalized. In

our third interview, he articulated:

I think that just not having the worry of a numerical grade attached to every assignment gives you more freedom to try stuff out and take sort of-I feel like this might just apply to writing but taking more risks with your work...it's almost like a sandbox type of situation where you can just try more stuff out without feeling like you could derail your entire semester, if one risk doesn't pan out the way you want it to.

As he stated in our interviews, if a “risk” he took on an assignment was not seen positively by Professor A, he would not have to fear a low grade, and the possibility of one assignment being able to “derail” the entire semester. He knew that, instead, the response would be that Professor A would provide him with feedback indicating her reasoning, and he would learn to not use that strategy again in the future. Thus, student A1 felt a sense of freedom to experiment and try different approaches to his assignments in Course A.

Student D1 similarly relayed a sense of freedom and agency in his coursework for Course D. He compared Course D to his other coursework in saying: “To put it very concisely, the majority of classes feel like a chore. And this feels like a choice. If I had to- Like as concisely as possible, that's what I would say.” He conveyed that Professor D had told students at the beginning of the semester that “You are all adults. And a part of learning how to be an adult is making these decisions for yourself.” He observed that “that’s the first time I’ve ever heard any college professors say something that’s that insightful in a class.” For student D1, because of the setup in Course D in which students essentially decide what grade they would like to pursue at the beginning of the course, he experienced a sense of freedom and agency in the course that he had not experienced with other classes.

Minimized stress

The fourth theme, less stress, was also related to the second theme of minimized fear. Students A1 and A2 explicitly described Course A as less stressful than their other courses, in large part because they did not have fear of getting docked points on, or receiving a low grade on an assignment due to mistakes. Student A1 described Course A as “a class that it's not going to be made very hard for me to succeed in,” and said that he sees the course “as relief, you know, instead of additional source of stress.”

Student A2 described Course A as an opportunity to “detox from worrying about: Oh, you know, if I don’t get this amount of questions right, my grade is gonna drop.” Student D1 also described lessened tension in Course D in terms of competition. Whereas in his other courses at Institution D, he expressed a feeling of competition amongst the students, he described this as absent in Course D, given the focus on learning instead of grades. In Course D, he actually felt that he could collaborate with other students. He said about approaching another student in the course for help, “there would be not a care in the world of me being able to see and learn from him.”

Sense that teacher cares about students and their learning

All of the students in this group expressed positivity about their professors in the ungraded courses. A common theme was the sentiment that their teacher cared about students and their learning. Student A1 described Professor A as easygoing, chilled, and relaxed. He appreciated that Professor A “gave a lot of one on one time to all the students.” He also remarked feeling a sense of obligation to work hard in the course since Professor A is giving the students in Course A “the opportunity to just focus on improvement,” and is therefore supporting students’ ability to succeed.

Student A2 similarly talked about Professor A as being supportive. She described Professor A as passionate, honest, and accommodating. As an example, she brought up that Professor A would sometimes hold class to give time for students to work on upcoming assignments in Course A, or other courses, conveying an understanding that students have lives and responsibilities beyond Course A. Along with experiencing Course A as a course not based upon punitive measures, Student A2 also experienced a sense of equality with Professor A. She said: “being able to feel equal to my teacher is a pretty great feeling.” She explained, “it’s like we’re both mutually getting something out of this. She wants us to grow.” Thus, she sees Professor A as primarily concerned with student growth.

Student C2 described Professor C as nice, reachable, and motivating. He said that Professor C encouraged students to come to his office hours, and student C2 felt comfortable with approaching him with questions or concerns. Student C2 further expressed appreciation for Professor C, because Professor C was willing to provide him with flexibility on deadlines.

Student E2 described Professor E as caring and understanding. One instance of this overlaps with the first and second theme, where they conveyed that they do not have to worry about the

impact of a single paper completed during a “rough time” because of Course Eii’s focus on growth. The full quote conveys that a sense that Professor C cares underlies this sentiment:

And I also think ungrading is beneficial in the sense that, you know, with ADHD, you have lots of ups and downs during the semester. I have so many periods where I cannot be productive for the life of me...And so the ungrading kind of structure makes me feel like my professors care about me more. They want to be more flexible, and they want to see me succeed. If they're like, yeah, this class is about your growth and not about what you got on this one paper that you might have submitted when you were really having a hard time, that makes me feel better.

Here, they express multiple perceptions, with the ungrading aspect making them “feel like my professor care about me more.” They additionally appreciated that Professor E sought feedback from students about their experiences in the course, and was willing to make adjustments in the course based upon that feedback, to improve students’ experience.

Coursework was more time-consuming/Course was stressful

Student A1 and C2 both expressed that the coursework in their ungraded courses took more time than their other courses. Student C2 additionally described Course C as his most stressful class during that semester. Yet they both clarified that the reason for this was because they wanted to learn, and were motivated to put forth more effort in Course A and Course C (respectively) due to these courses encouraging that goal.

Student A1 said about Course A: “I think I take more time and effort to write in this class than in any of my other classes.” He connects this to the motivation of wanting to learn in saying: “Now, I honestly think it might be at times more challenging, and it makes you do more work. Because the freedom that you're given to not have to worry about the grade. And maybe that's just me, because I personally enjoy learning a lot.” In addition to Course A being more work because of the motivation to learn, student A1 additionally linked putting in greater effort into his work in Course A because he felt an obligation to the teacher, who was supportive. He said:

So I think, though, with how much I enjoyed that class, I probably was putting forth a little bit more effort maybe for that class. Because almost, in a way, because I wasn't worrying about the grade and it was just a completion assignment for a professor that I liked. I didn't,

you know, it almost felt like a moral obligation to put effort... I could goof off and just turn in something that's kind of crappy and then fix it before the final. But I feel like that's almost an insult to my teacher because they're giving us the opportunity to just focus on improvement. So it's almost insulting for them to not put the effort forth, since they're making it so easy to succeed.

Thus, in addition to putting forth more effort into the course due to the goal of growth and improvement, he also described a sense of a “moral obligation” to the teacher, feeling that it would be insulting to not put forth effort when she is trying to help students.

Unclear expectations on assignments

Two of the students in this group, A2 and E2, provided a criticism of the assignments in their ungraded courses as being unclear. Student E2 expressed confusion over the assignment assessments they had received in Course Ei. They were particularly vocal about this in our second interview. In that interview they expressed that they and other students were feeling unclear about Professor E’s expectations for assignments in the course, and that they were feeling confused about Professor E’s use of the three-tiered assessment scale on assignments (i.e., an assessment of either developing, demonstrative, or distinguished). Particularly, students who received an assessment of “demonstrative” (the mid-tier assessment), did not have a clear understanding of why they received this assessment, instead of the highest assessment of “distinguished.” They expressed that this frustration came from unclear expectations on the assignment, as well as lack of thorough feedback on the assessments. They described the feedback as “nice” but as lacking guidance on what improvement could have raised the assignment to a “distinguished” level - feedback that could also help them on future assignments in the course.

Yet, as E2 and other students of Professor E’s shared, Professor E was open to and solicited students’ feedback throughout the semester. So, students were able to bring this issue up with her, and it was discussed during class time. By the time of our third and last interview, student E2 reported that Professor E had taken the feedback provided by students and had worked to address their concerns. Professor E added bullet point lists of expectations on assignments moving forward, and clarified what the criteria were for each of the three possible assessment tiers. Student E2 also reported that Professor E’s feedback on assignment became more detailed, and that on assignments

that received a “demonstrative,” Professor E provided guidance about areas of improvement in order to achieve a “distinguished” on future assignments. Based on this feedback, student E2 was able to earn more “distinguished” assessments and ended the course with a grade of an A. Thus, while unclear expectations on assignments was a criticism that student E2 and other students shared in Course E1, Professor E listened to this critique and made adjustments so that this did not continue to be an issue for students in the course.

Student A2 also expressed frustration for not having a clear idea of assignment expectations in Course A. She said that the assignments in Course A were often open-ended, yet that this open-endedness was overwhelming and difficult for her to navigate in approaching the work. She said about Professor A: “sometimes her layouts can be a little confusing to me, because I’m one of those people, like, very straightforward... This is more like: Okay, well, you pick what you want to write about. And you have to find all these genres and these texts that apply to it.” She expressed that she would rather be told “what to write.” She went on to say:

I’m pretty high strung when it comes to academics, because I like knowing that I’m doing things right. I like knowing that, hey, you know, this is what they’re looking for, I’m giving them what they’re looking for... But when it’s kind of like a free for all, like, hey, you know, you pick what you want to do... in my head it’s like, Okay, I feel like I just got thrown into a ball pit. Because now I’ve no idea what I’m doing. I don’t know if I’m writing what she wants to read.

Yet, this is a challenge that she brought to Professor A, and they talked about it. Professor A told her that:

...that’s the mindset that other English teachers have kind of drilled into your head, you have to realize that you can write about whatever you want, and still be interesting. I was like, that is true. But I just like having structure. I like knowing that things are set. I like knowing that things are in control. Because when I’m not in control, that’s when I start freaking out... She’s like, you know, your topic is interesting to you. And it’ll be better because it is interesting, or an interest of yours. So don’t think that you’re going to get a bad grade for something that you’re voicing your opinion and interest in. And I was like, I’ve had her for- This my third class with her and I’m still learning it. I talk to her all the time. I’m like, I’m still learning, because I’m trying so hard to get out of that mindset.

Thus, Professor A was willing to talk with student A2 about her concern and to provide her with assurance. She explained to student A2 that she wants students to have the freedom to write about topics of importance to them, and assured her that she would not get a “bad grade” based on

whatever topic she selected. In response, student A2 shares that she is “still learning” the way that Professor A sets up classes and that she is “trying so hard to get out of that mindset” of having anxiety in response to assignment flexibility. As she states in this quote and at other points in our interviews, Course A is the third course she has taken with Professor A, because she has sought classes with Professor A. Thus, she finds the courses valuable, even though she may face unique challenges with the structure of assignments.

Effort not reflected in ungraded assessment

Student A2 also expressed the concern of her effort not being reflected in her ungraded coursework. In Course A, assignments were assessed as either “complete,” or “incomplete.” While student A2 expressed appreciation for this assessment approach, in that it minimized her anxiety over getting docked points for a mistake, she at one point did also express frustration for the lack of nuance this approach provides. She shared immense frustration at spending multiple hours on an assignment for Course A to receive a “complete,” which was the same assessment another student received, who had put in less time. In our first interview, A2 said this gave her pause about ungrading: “I was a little unsure about it, because I'm someone who takes immense pride in their grades. And it just tickled me wrong that I took hours on a paper. And then this one girl who sat behind me. I know her, she was in one of my other classes. She was like: Oh, I took five minutes.” Yet, as student A2 went on to talk about this experience with me, she shared a variety of different feelings about this experience and ungrading:

Yeah, we both got the grade [completion]. Yeah. And I was just, and the more I thought about it, the more I got enraged. I was like, I'm taking hours. I was like, Why should I try? And it just kind of buckled down to who I am as a person. I was like, I can't not try. That's not who I am. I'm not gonna slander my name for working hard, because some other girl isn't. Because in the long run, she's gonna rely on: oh, you know, I'll just weasel by, I'll get by the bare minimum. And I'm not that kind of person. I thrive on excelling. And if I don't, then I get really upset. I was like, I'm not the one who's going to come out of this without any good tips on my belt. Because she- In her head, she's thinking: Oh this is an easy A. And in my head, I was thinking: You know, this is a way I can express myself without being docked for it. So it was very empowering.

Thus, while student A2 starts out expressing rage that someone who put in less time on an assignment than her received the same assessment as her, she goes on to express that this nonetheless will not change her own level of effort because it is tied to how she sees herself as a person who works hard and thrives on excelling. She further goes on to reconcile that while her genuine effort and work will result in improvement and new skills, that this likely will not be the case for that other student. She contextualizes that while she sees that student as viewing the ungrading setup in Course A as an “easy A,” that she instead views it as an opportunity where she “can express myself without being docked.” On this note, she concludes that she views the ungrading aspect of Course A as “empowering.”

It is worth also recalling that this student’s turbulent history with school and grades, especially in high school before her diagnosis of ADHD, was tied to her feeling that her work and effort was not reflected in the standard grading scale. She had shared oftentimes spending many hours, even staying up past 3 a.m., to complete assignments, just to receive a lower grade than someone else who spent less time. Although a different context, the frustration that she’s described here about the ungrading assessment in Course A is similarly based in the feeling of that assessment not reflecting (or rather, distinguishing) the effort behind her work.

Although student A2 was the only student in this group to express direct frustration for a disconnect between assessment and effort, student A1 did also recognize that the assessment setup in Course A could mean that some students could not put forth much effort and still earn a “complete.” Student A1 shared that: “I know, there are students, and I've encountered them, in [Professor A’s] class, who are just not that interested in being at college...They don't care about each class. So they do kind of try to abuse it.” Similarly, in our second interview, A2 also commented, “I feel like with ungraded, it opens a door for people to half ass.”

Confusion and stress with where stood with final grades

While the courses in my study did not use the standard A-F grading scale on the assessment of assignments, every professor was nonetheless required to submit a final grade at the end of the semester to the institution. Institution C also required the submission of a midterm grade for

students. During the semester, students C2 and E2 expressed confusion and stress for feeling unclear about where they stood with their final grades (in Course C and Course Ei respectively).

While student C2 was ultimately happy with his final grade of A- in Course C, in interviews one and two he had expressed feeling anxious and uncertain about this final grade. In our first interview, he shared that writing was not his strong suit, but was an area he wanted to improve upon. He talked about having had a course based upon writing in the semester prior to our interviews, and said that having grades in that course was helpful because he was able to see that he was making progress through improved grades. Yet, he wondered whether he would be able to gauge that in Course C, without the use of assignment grades. In this interview he also expressed that the final grade in Course C would be based upon multiple aspects, including assignments, attendance, and participation. With the ungrading setup, he felt uncertain about how to determine how to prioritize these facets since they did not have a point value assigned to them. He expressed concern for not being able to know what aspects in the course to prioritize. He contextualized this concern with the impact his final grade could have for his GPA. He shared that, as an international student, he was on a full scholarship to attend school at Institution C. That scholarship was dependent upon him maintaining a certain GPA. Thus, he expressed an overall concern for his GPA, saying: "I don't want to ruin my GPA... So it's a bit scary."

In our second interview, student C2 brought these concerns up again. This time, he felt further concerned due to the mid-term grades that Professor C had submitted to Institution C. This was the first grade that students in Course C saw in the course. Student C2 expressed general confusion with the lack of assessment grades, and specific concern with the entered mid-term grade: "So to be honest, that class has been like, it's pretty confusing. Like, sometimes I feel like okay, this class, I'll be graded on my improvement. Like how I was before and then how I am right now. But then I see a C on my gradebook, like, AGHHH." Thus, student C2 expresses some conflicting feelings about ungrading, and found his mid-term grade to be particularly troubling. Yet, in interview three, he reported feeling that his effort in the course would be reflected by a grade between an A and a B. In his meeting with Professor C, he agreed that an A- reflected his work. So although he felt confused about his standing in the course and how final grades would be determined during the semester, ultimately, student C2 was satisfied with his final grade.

Student E2 also expressed confusion and stress over their final grade in Course Ei. In our third interview, student E2 expressed that while they were happy with the outcome of their final

grade in both Course Ei and Course Eii, that they experienced some frustration and uncertainty with how final grades would turn out in Course Ei. While they knew that Course Eii would be based upon self-assessment, and they felt confident about this process, they specified that it was the grading chart in Course Ei that gave them stress. They said that between our second and third interview, that although the feedback on assignment had improved, and that they were relatedly receiving more assessments of “distinguished” on their assignments, they said that they were at a place where one more “demonstrative” assessment would have meant that they could not achieve an A grade. They expressed stress for knowing that one assignment could make or break their ability to meet her goal of an A in the course. Out of this frustration, they reiterated a sentiment that they had previously made: that given the use of tiered assessment in Course Ei, it was similar enough to a standard grading scale that they would have preferred that in Course Ei. Although student E2 did end up earning an A in the course, they felt that a standard grading scale would have provided more clarity about their final grade as the semester unfolded.

Engaged Pedagogy

I would now like to bring this collection of experiences from neurodivergent students into conversation with bell hooks’ concept of engaged pedagogy. As reviewed in the introduction of this section, hooks’ concept of engaged pedagogy was founded around two main foundations: a critical pedagogy, founded in Paulo Freire’s work, and a holistic pedagogy, grounded in the work of Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. Table 6.1 from the Introduction of this section is copied below, for reference. In this section I will consider how these themes align and also misalign with these foundations of engaged pedagogy.

Critical	Holistic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rejection of “banking model” and education as transactional ● Challenges unhelpful hierarchies in the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledges students as whole people with roles and identities outside of a student in their class ● Educator engages in self-reflection

Table 6.1: The facets and characteristics of bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy.

Alignment

The four facets of engaged pedagogy listed in Table 6.1 align with several of the themes expressed by neurodivergent students in my study as summarized in Table 6.2. While the facets of engaged pedagogy align with all of the themes listed in the “positive” column in Table 6.2, they also find some alignment in themes from the other two columns as well.

As described in the review of these themes of student experience, Themes I through IV in Table X heavily overlapped. Theme I, “focus on learning and improvement,” was grounded in the student perception of the ungraded course that they were in as focused on learning and improvement instead of grades. The lack of standard grades on assignments, and the emphasis on feedback, was a centerpiece of this theme. The lack of standard grades on assignments was also the common denominator of Theme II: Minimized fear of failure, mistakes, or judgment, Theme III: Freedom to take risks and sense of agency, and Theme IV: Minimized stress. This collection of overlapping themes shows significant alignment with the critical facet of engaged pedagogy.

Not using assignment grades, and instead emphasizing feedback as a means to focus on learning and improvement, rejects the banking model of education and challenges unhelpful hierarchies in the classroom (as listed in Table 6.1). Instead of a one-way dynamic in which the teacher gives knowledge and the student receives it, in these courses the students felt encouraged to be active in their own learning. Instead of receiving a grade decided upon from the teacher’s expertise, students were asked to consider and implement student feedback about where they could improve their work. Theme I, focused on improvement, especially conveys that sentiment. The minimization of fear of failure (Theme II), minimization of stress (Theme IV) and the related sense of agency and freedom to take risks (Theme III) all also convey a rejection of hierarchies in the classroom. As student D1 conveyed, he felt that the ungraded format gave him the experience of his learning as a “choice” that he decided upon internally, instead of a “chore” expected of him by external pressure.

Theme V, the sense that the teacher cares about students and their learning, particularly reflects the holistic facet of engaged pedagogy. The majority of students in this sample (four out of

five) described their teacher as caring, and understanding.³⁷ Student E2 even particularly stated “I feel like it's like ungrading kind of takes into account all the parts of you,” and detailed how they felt that the setup supported aspects of having ADHD that could sometimes impact their coursework in school. Thus, the themes listed in the “positive” column of Table 6.2 show a significant overlap with facets of an engaged pedagogy.

Yet, these facets of engaged pedagogy were also present in Theme V: Coursework took more time and/or was more stressful than other courses, as well as Theme VII: Unclear about assignment expectations. For the two students who expressed Theme V, they said that they worked harder and/or felt more stress in the ungraded course because of the focus on learning, and their own goal of wanting to improve. Student A1 additionally said that he felt an obligation to work hard in the course because he perceived Professor A as setting the course up the way she did as a reflection of her desire to support students and their learning. Thus, while this theme could be seen as critical, in terms of more work or stress, these students ultimately contextualized these dynamics as positive, and as linked to Theme I, the course’s focus on learning and improvement. They both clarified that the goal of improvement in Course A and Course C (which were both composition courses) aligned with their own personal goals of improving their writing. As just considered, that Theme I aligns with both the critical and holistic aspects of engaged pedagogy.

Those facets of engaged pedagogy also align with Theme VII, lack of clarity on assignments. While this was a critique posited by both students A2 and E2, it was also a critique that they were able to bring to their teachers and have a discussion with them about. That these students felt comfortable with bringing their concerns to their teachers implies that they felt as though they could be active participants in their learning, and bring their concerns about coursework to their teachers, instead of just being receptacles for what the teacher provided.

Further, Professor E took the feedback that she received from student E2 and other students in the course, and modified her approach to include clearer details about her assignment expectations, as well as to include more helpful feedback to students on areas for improvement. While Professor A did not change her assignment, and did not “just tell” student A2 what to write about, she did nonetheless provide her rationale to student A2 for the open-endedness of her assignments, and assured student A2 that she would not be penalized for whatever topic she

³⁷ It is possible that the fifth student may have expressed this as well, had we completed more than one interview together.

decided to pursue. As a result, student A2 reflected that Course A was the third course she had taken with Professor A because she saw value in her courses, and expressed that she needed to work on further adjusting to the open-endedness of Professor A's assignments.

Misalignment

While Theme VII is listed in the critical column of Table Y, the outcome for the students who expressed this theme ultimately aligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy, as just described. Theme VIII, that assignments in the ungraded courses did not reflect the nuances of individual student effort, doesn't exactly misalign with the facets of engaged pedagogy. This facet did not increase punishment for students, but rather decreased it. Student A2 was not upset with her own assessment, per se, yet was more upset that someone she perceived as doing less work than her, would not receive a lower assessment. This perhaps would have perhaps been misaligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy had this sentiment impacted students' drive or motivation for their own work, but this was not the case. Although student A2 found this dynamic initially difficult to grapple with, she consistently described herself as a hard worker, and even specified that another student not putting in the effort wouldn't change her own effort. Ultimately, she seemed to reconcile this initial anger, in feeling that she knew she would benefit from her own hard work through improving her writing, a skill that students who did not put in genuine effort would not gain. The other student in this group who expressed something similar was student A1. He shared that, because assignments were assessed on just a complete vs. incomplete basis, he felt that this system could be taken advantage of by students who would just do the bare minimum to get a complete. Yet, he shared this as a possible con when I asked him to describe the pros and cons he sees in relation to the use of ungrading. This was the only time he brought it up, and it was never mentioned in correlation with his own effort in Course A. or an aspect that he felt personally impacted by.

Theme IX, confusion and stress about final grades, misaligns with facets of an engaged pedagogy. The holistic facet of engaged pedagogy sees a teacher who cares about their students as whole people and the critical facet rejects unhelpful power dynamics in the classroom. As described in the previous section, these two facets of engaged pedagogy aligned with the theme of students' minimized fear of failure and minimized stress in the course. Yet, Theme IX expresses antithetical sentiments, with students experiencing worry and confusion. While the two students who

expressed this worry and confusion, C2 and E2, did ultimately feel happy about their final grade in Course C and Course Ei (respectively), they did both express the perception that the ungraded setup in these courses specifically caused this stress and lack of clarity. Student E2 explicitly stated wishing that Course Ei would have used a traditional grading scale. They reflected: “it feels like in this format, it's trying to be ungraded, but then it's still being graded...this feels like an attempt to kind of be more, I guess, you know, less punitive. But then it still is.” The stress experienced by student C2 was also amplified because the final grade would influence his GPA, which he needed to maintain at a certain level in order to keep his scholarship.

Research Question #2: What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom for first generation college students?

The first generation college students in my study were the following eight students: A1, A3, A4, C3, C4, C5, E2, and E3. Thus, there were first generation college students in Courses A, C, D, Ei, and Eii. Two students in this group, A1 and E2, are also students with ADHD who were considered in the experiences of neurodivergent students. The demographic information about these students, based upon their own responses (from the prescreening survey and the interviews), is listed below:

- A1: male, white, middle class-upper middle class, first generation college student, ADHD
- A3: female, African American, lower class, first generation college student
- A4: female, Hispanic/Latina, Household income is around \$65,000 first generation college student, dad immigrated from Mexico
- C3: female, Latina, first-generation college student, dad immigrated Mexico
- C4: male, Asian, middle class, parents are immigrants, first generation college student
- C5: male, Hispanic, low middle class, first generation college student
- E2: nonbinary, Asian-American/Bengali, low-income, first generation college student, ADHD
- E3: cis woman, multi-racial Latinx, low income, first generation U.S. college student, grew up in Brazil came to U.S. for college

Experience in an Ungraded Course

Table 6.3, below, summarizes themes that were present in this group of students' experiences with ungrading. Themes were listed when the same sentiment was expressed by two or more students in this sample. Many of these themes were also present in the experiences of neurodivergent students in my sample. Like those themes in Table 6.2, many of the themes in Table 6.1 overlapped.

The themes presented in this table overlap with the themes experienced by neurodivergent students. Like those themes, these themes also comprised a great deal of overlap.

Positive	Both Positive and Critical	Critique
<p>I. Focus on learning and improvement (7: A1, A3, A4, C3, C4, C5, E2)</p> <p>II. Minimized fear of failure, mistakes, or judgment (6: A3, A4, C3, C5, E2, E3)</p> <p>III. Freedom to take risks and sense of agency (5: A1, A4, C3, C5, E3)</p> <p>IV. Minimized stress (7: A1, A3, A4, C3, C4, C5, E3)</p> <p>V. Spoke about teacher in positive terms (7: A1, A3, A4, C3, C4, C5, E2)</p> <p>VI. Confidence with final grade (3: A3, A4, C3)</p>	<p>VII. More work (2: A1, C3)</p> <p>VIII. Freedom of speech without fear of repercussions (2: E2, E3)</p>	<p>IX. Can be taken advantage of (3: A1, A3, C4)</p>

Table 6.3: Themes of the experiences of first generation college students in an ungraded course. Number in parenthesis shows the number of students in this group who expressed the listed experience.

Focus on learning and improvement

The theme of students expressing that the ungrading course that they were in was focused on learning and improvement was expressed by seven out of eight students in this group. All three of the first generation students in Course A described Course A in this way. Student A1 often talked about the course's focus on learning and improvement, and cited it as a main reason that he felt motivated to put forth more effort in Course A (than his other courses). This was detailed further in the section in the experience of neurodivergent students.

Student A3 similarly emphasized Professor A's emphasis on feedback geared towards improvement, rather than assignment grades. She said: "[Professor A's] feedback is amazing. So when I get her feedback, I'm able to look through it and see what I could have done better on." Student A3 experienced the feedback from Professor A as an opportunity to learn how she can personally grow as a writer.

For student A4, she also described the feedback as creating an opportunity to focus on learning, and also specifically calls out assignment grades as an impediment to her learning. She said about the assessment setup in Course A: "I feel like it's more constructive. It allows me to learn better than just like, you know, cram everything and then like, throw it out on an exam and push it off." She later went on to elaborate this further and why she feels that grades impede learning. She said:

Since I don't have to focus on a number, I can focus more on how can I improve? I actually have that want to improve. It's not just, Oh, I got a 98, I did so good. Versus with not receiving a grade it's like, okay, I know, I completed it right. It's gonna be a complete if I met the minimum requirements. And then I can actually focus on the learning aspect. Because I feel like grades suck out the want to learn in a lot of students, I know, at least it does for me. It's more just like, I need to get that grade, I need to either memorize or I need to like cram...It's definitely more like I can actually learn. I'm actually eager to learn more and how to fix certain stuff in my writing and whatnot. And I like that aspect.

Here, she reiterates her experience in graded courses, in which she often feels that she needs to "cram" and "memorize" the material. She distinguishes this from the emphasis on feedback in Course A which, similar to student A1, she says gives her the motivation, an even eagerness, to learn.

All of the first generation college students in my sample from Course C also described Course C as focused on improvement and learning. Student C3 specified that the feedback provides a focus on improvement. She compared this to courses with grades and drew a comparison: “sometimes in other classes, you get docked points or something, but you never get explained why. So you just don't know how to fix it. And with [Professor C], or in this ungraded class, he always makes sure to let us know why. Which helps. At least it helps me understand how to be better in the future.” Thus, for student C3, feedback provided the guidance to “be better in the future.” This sentiment was consistent, and in our last interview, she compared the learning, and new skills she could take away from Course C, and compared this experience to her roommate’s experience in a similar course that used assignment grades:

I definitely feel like I learned more. I know, my roommate took a different [writing] teacher. And she, it was easy for her because she didn't do anything. But at the end of the day, she didn't learn anything. So I would recommend it for people who actually want to improve in their writing skills, because you do learn a lot. And I do feel like it has definitely helped me for future writing projects.

Thus, she says she could recommend Course C to students who want to learn and improve their writing.

Student C4 also expressed a clear sense of Course C being focused on learning and improvement. He said about the setup in Course C: “I feel like the system's mainly designed for students to not carry more stress. I feel like the main objective is to make students see that school is for learning.” He elaborated: “In this class, I can see what I learned, I can see how it helped me become a better writer.” Specifically, he also mentioned how the end of the semester portfolio assignment was a way to see this progress.

For student C4, it was Professor C’s emphasis on feedback that cultivated and encouraged the goal to learn and improv. With feedback he said that he can consider: “Okay, this is what I did wrong. I can now change it. Rather than like: Oh, good job. But it's like you don't really get anything from: Good job. So feedback, where it's like, you can take it and improve your writing.” He distinguishes this from other courses with a numerical grade: “It feels like it's more of, I learned it, rather than for the numerical [grade], I memorized it.” Like student A4, student C4 distinguished the emphasis on learning in Course C from his other courses, in which he says his engagement with the material is focused on memorization. Student C5 similarly expressed how feedback will help him

focus on improvement in the course: “I'm also really glad that he's going to give feedback. I want to know how I can improve it, or what parts were just not good.”

Of the two first generation students in my sample taking ungraded courses with Professor E, student E2 expressed that those courses were focused on learning and improvement. This was detailed further in the section on the experiences of neurodivergent students, since E2 was also in that category.

Minimized fear of failure, mistakes, and judgements

Two of the students in this sample from Course A additionally described the course as minimizing a fear of failure, mistakes, or judgment, For these two students, who also described the course as focused on learning and improvement- this aspect tied into the theme of minimized fear.

Student A3 shared that an aspect of Course A's focus on feedback over grades that she appreciated is that she did not feel judged for her work. She said: “It makes me feel better, like on the inside, when I get the feedback, because it's like I'm not being judged for my work, I'm being helped with it. So I think I love ungrading. I wish for the rest of my college career, that it's ungraded.” This was a theme for student A3. At another point in our interviews she expressed a similar sentiment in saying about her work in Course A: “I'm not going to feel like I'm put down for it.” Thus A3 sees the emphasis on feedback as connected to less judgment. As conveyed in this quote, and her desire that all of her courses operated similarly, this was a significant benefit for her.

For student A4, a frequent theme was her experience in Course A as minimizing stress through minimizing fear of mistakes. The lack of assignment grades, she said: “took that stress away, because I've always thought of English as minus five points, minus this, minus that. And it's like, if I'm not super careful with my paper, then I could easily screw up my grade in here.” She said at another point that: “not having that number there gives me less anxiety. It's not like, I'm looking at Oh, my gosh, I got five points taken off for a comma.” At another point, she similarly reiterated: “the fact that there were no grades, that was a lot better just because for me, every single like, if I get a grade on an essay, it stresses me out, because I missed a comma and I got five points taken off.” Thus, for student A4, the lack of assignment grades minimized her fear of mistakes, her anxiety, and her stress.

Two students in this sample from Course C similarly conveyed this theme of minimized fear. Student C3, like A3, specified a minimized fear of judgment in her ungraded courses. For student C3, this was directly tied to Professor C. She said: “ He always made sure to make it a safe space. I don't think I ever saw him mad or yelling...I feel like you could ask anything, like any question, he wouldn't make any judgmental face or he wouldn't answer in a judgmental way. He would answer it in an understanding way.” She expressed feeling comfortable in Course C to ask questions, because of Professor C's efforts to create a safe environment.

Student C5 expressed a minimized fear of mistakes in Course C, and distinguished Course C from other writing courses he had taken in which he would be penalized for mistakes. He shared an experience in a course where, because he used the first person “I” on a paper, that he received one point out of six on an assignment grade. In comparison, he said that he doesn't have to worry about that in Course C. He expressed that he can even do things outside of what may be expected on an assignment in Course C, and still receive a “good grade.” As an example, he said in one of our interviews about an upcoming assignment: “So I'm definitely going into this paper with less nervousness and knowing that what I write, I'm going to get good feedback. And not just some random: you get one out of six, because you said ‘I’.” Thus, he equates grades with heightened nervousness and the feedback on Course C as “good feedback.”

Relatedly, on another draft assignment, he expressed not being able to finish it in its entirety before he submitted. Yet, he was not stressed or worried about submitting an incomplete assignment, as he knew that he could express in his draft that it was still a work in progress. He said:

Because I know for our final draft that we turned in, I turned it in missing a paragraph. Because I wasn't super worried about – well, I definitely showed him that this paragraph is still in development – but I just wasn't worried about, you know, it's missing a paragraph, so I'm gonna get a bunch of points taken away. Instead, I wanted to see what he would say, because we're more of a feedback course.

Thus, even when turning in an incomplete assignment in Course C, he did not have the worry that he felt he would have in a graded course.

The two students in this sample from Course E expressed this theme of minimized fear in their ungraded courses. Student E2 shared the perception that Course Eii specifically minimized their fear of mistakes on assignments. This was detailed further in the section on the experiences of neurodivergent students, since E2 was also in that category. Student E3 also shared the feeling that the ungrading setup in Course Eii was positive because she knew she was not “being evaluated the

whole time.” She explained: “for me, the ungrading system is also helpful because it takes away the pressure. And we are able to go to the classroom feeling more relaxed and knowing that we're not being evaluated the whole time.” Thus, similar to students A3 and C3, who found the environment of their ungraded course as nonjudgmental, student E3 described Course Eii as having an environment free from the feeling of constant evaluation.

Freedom to take risks and sense of agency

Five students in this sample of first generation students expressed the theme of freedom to take risks and a sense of agency. Two of the students in Course A expressed this. As detailed further in the section on the experiences of neurodivergent students, student A1 emphasized feeling as though Course A, and the assessment setup, allowed him to take risks with his work, and that it gave him the freedom to try out different approaches to his writing.

A common theme in my interviews with student A4 was experiencing less stress in Course A than her other courses, which she directly linked to minimized anxiety over grades and points. She additionally added that this dynamic gave her a sense of freedom with her work, particularly freedom to be more creative in how she approached her assignments: “I like that more, it feels more like there's freedom for creativity. And I feel like students feel that too. They feel that comfort with her. And so that contributes to the comfort within the classroom.” Thus, the freedom that student A4 experiences in the course is “freedom for creativity.”

Two students in Course C also expressed this theme. Student C3 expressed having a sense of control in Course C, particularly due to the fact that Professor C had students be a part of deciding policies on the syllabus in the beginning of the semester. She said, “it helped me feel more in control.” Student C5 expressed a willingness to take risks and “be wrong” in Course C: “I feel like when you're not having a number attached to what you're, what you're learning, you're more willing to take the risk, you're willing to be wrong.” He also said that this relates to minimized nervousness: “And knowing that we can analyze in different perspectives that aren't what the professor is expecting, and still get a good grade. So I'm definitely going into this paper with less nervousness and knowing that what I write, I'm going to get good feedback.” Thus, both of these students in Course C expressed sentiments of feeling more in control and having freedom.

The last student who expressed this theme was student E3. Specifically, she expressed a feeling of being able to take risks in Course Eii. She shared:

I feel like the format, the way that the professor formulated the contemporary feminist movements class was perfect. So that we could push ourselves, encourage ourselves to learn more, because we are interested about the topic and because we want to give ourselves an A at the end, but at the same time, it takes away the pressure of having someone from the outside evaluating you the whole time. And that allows us to take more risks in terms of what we're going to say, in terms of how we're going to study, and how we're going to lead the discussions.

When I asked her if she could say more about feeling able to take risks in the course, she continued on to say: "I feel like the essays that I wrote were much more personalized than I've ever written here at [Institution E]...I got to share a lot from my own experience."

Minimized stress

Of the first generation college students in my sample, all three of the students in Course A described it as less stressful than their other courses. As considered further in the section of neurodivergent student experiences, student A1 found the assessment binary of "complete" or "incomplete," as less stressful than grades, and experienced minimized stress with the contract grading setup because it allowed him to know in advance how missing a class assignment would impact his final grade.

Student A3 also expressed less stress with the work in Course A. She said about the work in Course A: "I'm not going to feel like I'm put down for it, if that makes sense. As compared to other assignments, where I stress more, because there might be a mistake that I'm not aware of. And that drops my grade like 20%. And it's more stressful." Thus, for student A3, her minimized fear of failure in Course A overlapped with her experience of minimized stress in the course.

For student A4, minimized stress was a theme throughout our three interviews. In our first interview, she shared this feeling upon first learning about the ungrading aspect of Course A: "When I first heard of it, it was like, Okay, this is nice. This is great. It's gonna be a lot less stressful." She tied that minimized stress to not having grades on assignments, and the fear of points being docked for mistakes. She provided a comparison: "Whenever I get a notification from [Professor A's] class, it's either incomplete or complete, right. So if it's incomplete, I know that I can like resubmit it, right? So if totally I just messed up, like I'm dumb, I didn't read X, Y and Z, I need to just resubmit it and whatever it is, right? With other classes, my heart races a little because I know it's a numeric grade." Thus, for student A4, her minimized stress in Course A relates to the lack of a numerical grade on

assignments, and also the knowledge that she can resubmit an assignment if it is not accepted as “complete.”

Of the first generation college students in my sample, all of these students who took Course C also reported minimized stress in the course. Student C3 said of the self-assessment aspect of Course C: “it’s not as much pressure,” and described the layout of the course as “less stressful.” Student C4 similarly said about the setup of Course C that “I feel like the system's mainly designed for students to not carry more stress.” He described Course C as fun and engaging, which he distinguished from other classes, explaining that “it's not like a normal class.” He said about Course C not being “normal,” that “A big aspect of it, I think is not having any pressure.” Although he spoke about it with less detail, student C5 expressed having less nervousness with his assignments in Course C as relating to his minimized fear of mistakes.

Student E3 was the last student from this sample who expressed this theme. She described Course Eii as less stressful than her other courses and shared that one aspect she related to this was the minimized fear of constant evaluation: “it takes away the pressure of having someone from the outside evaluating you the whole time.” She additionally described the environment of Course Eii as lacking the pressure of competition, which she feels in other courses at Institution E. She said that in other courses that this sense of competition between students “can create a kind of hostile environment,” but that this is not the case in Course Eii.

Spoke about teacher in positive terms

Seven of the eight first generation students in this sample described their teacher in the ungraded course in positive terms. As further detailed in the section on the experiences of neurodivergent students, student A1 repeatedly expressed the sense that Professor A cared about her students and their learning. He perceived her assessment setup to be a reflection of that and aligned his own motivation in the course as partly related to the perception that Professor A was going out of her way incorporate ungrading policies into her course to support students’ learning.

Student A3 described Professor A as someone who felt more like a colleague or mentor, than a teacher. She explained: “I don't think of her as a teacher per se. I would say a colleague or mentor, because of how chill and laid back she is. When I think of professors I think of people who really,

really, really love the doctor in front of their names. But with Professor A, right, she's just amazing. She's so chill and relaxed." She also described Professor A as understanding, and gave examples of Professor A "never really minding repeating" aspects of the course that students were struggling with. She said that, even when she had to repeat something several times, that Professor A "never sounded aggravated about it," and said that "she was always cool and understood that it was a bad habit that needed to be broken and that we needed time." Thus, student A3 characterized Professor A as understanding and sympathetic to students' struggles, as well as highlighting the lack of a reinforced power dynamic on the part of Professor A, who feels more like "a colleague or mentor."

Student A4 similarly described Professor A in a positive light, and highlighted the lack of reinforced power dynamics from Professor A. She described Professor A as helpful, friendly, and sweet. She said that Professor A provided students with "a lot of resources," and she felt that her friendliness created "a very casual kind of relationship" between Professor A and her students.

Of the first generation college students in my sample for Course C, all three described Professor C positively. In interview number one, student C3 stated about Professor C that "He really cares about his students," which she said also influenced her feeling that "the environment feels more safe" in Course C. She repeatedly used the words caring, nice, kind, and understanding to describe Professor C. She said: "I've never heard him raise his voice or anything...I feel like his personality is really calming. So it makes the classroom feel a little bit safer."

Student C4 also expressed feeling that Professor C was different from other teachers because he did not rely on lecturing, and that he instead worked with students collaboratively. He detailed: "He didn't really feel like a teacher, because it was like not really lectures... It wasn't just like spitting out information for you to retain. It was more of doing it together kind of thing...I feel like he understands our time."

Student C5 talked about how Professor C encouraged students to participate in their own learning and understanding of the course. He said, "I think week two, we negotiated our syllabus, and he kind of taught us that we're allowed to ask questions. Because a lot of professors are just like: here's the work, do it...And he taught us that we should be asking the questions." Student C5 also talked about how Professor C supports students: "I feel like he's just very open. He's open to what the students are asking. I feel like he's a little more flexible...Compared to other professors [who are] like: This is due today, like, no extensions, no nothing. He definitely knows how to adapt to the learning styles of the students in the class." He went on to talk about how Professor C "uses

various methods” in Course C to keep students engaged, like reading a children’s book to students as a lesson in learning literary devices.

Of the two first generation college students in my sample from Institution E, student E2 described Professor E in a positive way and as a caring person. This was detailed further in the section on the experiences of neurodivergent students, since E2 was also in that category.

Confidence with final grade

Of the first generation students in my sample from Course A, two expressed having confidence and clarity about their final grade. In our first interview student A3 expressed that the assessment setup in Course provided her with a clear idea of what her final grade would be. She compared this against other courses that use traditional grading. She said about the use of ungrading in Course S: “I've been thinking, why doesn't everybody do this? It's so much easier. Like, you know that if you do this much work, you're getting this grade. So now it's not like, at the end of semester, you're fumbling to bring grades up, or do extra credit work. It's just, you know, you did this, so you know what you're getting.”

Student A3 also connected this clarity to support for students who may be juggling multiple responsibilities, and find they are unable to complete all of the coursework. She expressed that because of how clearly the contract grading setup in Course A was explained, that this would allow a student in that situation to opt out of an assignment, and know upfront how their grade would be impacted. She said: “as far as somebody with a job, and a kid, they might not be able to stay up all night writing eight hundred word essays. So it can be easier for them to say, hey, you know what, I'll skip this grade, just so I can get like a B and still pass.” Thus for student A3, the contract grading was clear and supportive in that it provided students with the ability to know how a missed assignment would impact their grade.

Student A4 also expressed clarity and confidence about her final grade. She earned an A in Course A, and she said that this was not a surprise for her. She explained that Professor A encouraged them to keep track of their assignments and how they were doing in terms of where they stood with the grading contract. Thus, she shared: “ And I turned in every single assignment and got a complete on it. So from the start, I knew I was going to get an A.”

The third student who expressed this theme was in Course C. In our third and last meeting, Student C3 shared that she felt confident going into the final meeting with Professor C for the final grade determination. She said: “I definitely felt confident because I put in the effort and the work.” She felt that she deserved an A and Professor C agreed with that assessment, so she was happy with this final grade.

More work

The theme of the ungraded course requiring more work is listed in Table 6.3 as both a positive and a criticism, because while the students who expressed this sentiment felt positive about this aspect, they also clarified that it would be something that not all students would enjoy. As further detailed in the section on the experiences of neurodivergent students, student A1 experienced putting forth more time and energy into Course A than his other courses that semester. He linked this effort to the focus of learning in the course, and his motivation to learn. He did not characterize this as a negative aspect of Course A. He felt positive about it, yet also provided the caveat that this is because he enjoys learning.

Student C3 similarly described Course C as “a lot of work,” but as an aspect that is beneficial to students like herself who want to learn. She said about Course C: “So I would recommend it for people who actually want to improve in their writing skills, because you do learn a lot. And I do feel like it has definitely helped me for future writing projects. But if somebody just wanted a, I guess an easy A, just to pass the class, I guess I wouldn't recommend it. Because it is a lot of work.”

Freedom of speech without fear of repercussions

The second theme listed in the positive and critical column in Table 6.3 was the sense of “freedom of speech” in the ungraded courses. Two students expressed this sentiment: with one student describing it as positive and the other describing it as negative. Student E2 shared feeling that the assessment setup in Courses Ei and Eii provided a sense of freedom for students in terms of what they say in class. For student E2, this was a frustration, as they observed this freedom equating to students feeling free to make offensive comments during class discussion, which they particularly noticed in Course Ei. They additionally reflected upon experiencing this same dynamic with

problematic comments in the ungraded course she previously took with another teacher. They reflected:

I will say the class I took last spring also had a white- no, multiple white students who made many microaggressions throughout that whole course. And I don't know if the common factor is the fact that these were ungraded courses, but it was really interesting. And both times I do feel like the professors didn't handle it as well. And I wonder if it's that attempt at a restorative approach sometimes means - because the students know there's less consequences for saying things, they might be less thoughtful in how they approach it. I don't know if that's something I can assert, but I do know that, the frustration I experienced [in Course Ei] was exactly the thing I experienced in my class last spring.

Thus, while they clarify that they “don’t know if the common factor is the fact that these were ungraded courses,” they do wonder if these instances are related to the ungrading setup in that “students know there’s less consequences for saying things,” and that they “might be less thoughtful.” It is also worth mentioning here that Professor A expressed something similar in our interview. Although Professor A isn’t a student, and my focus is not on the experiences of educators using ungrading practices, the fact that Professor A, another person of color in my sample, similarly expressed the feeling that ungrading sets up a situation in which students feel free to express “vitriol” and that “the feelings are a lot more intense around ungrading” is important. Both student E2 and Professor A provide considerations of a possible link between these instances and the use of ungrading.

For student E3, the experience of freedom of speech in Course Eii, was a positive for her. She described this as creating an environment which felt “safe.” She said: “I feel like we don't have to do what we think the professor wants us to do, we can do what we think is going to be best for our own learning process. So we get to talk about things that could be controversial in class. We have a very safe space in our class as well.” She connected this feeling of safety with the fact that the class came up with rules. She explained: “We decided on some initial rules that we could have about respecting each other's opinions, but knowing that there is a limit, but understanding that like, assume no harm from other people's speeches or participation, so it's just a very welcoming environment.”

Student E3 further talked about the fact that, because English is not her first language, that when starting at Institution E, she became concerned with people misinterpreting what she was saying. Though, with Course Eii she again expressed a sense of safety:

In the beginning of my college experience, I used to stay more quiet than usual. Because I was afraid that I was going to say something that wouldn't be very, well interpreted, or that I wouldn't be able to express myself in the way that I wanted. But I feel safer in this class because I know people will not assume harm from what I say and if they need a clarification, they are going to feel very welcoming to like, welcome to ask and again, better find your point."

Thus, while the two students who expressed this sentiment were both taking courses with Professor E (although student E2 was talking about Course Ei while student E3 was talking about Course Eii) - the context of this theme was very different for these two students.

Can be taken advantage of

Three students in this sample expressed that the ungraded practices in their ungraded courses could be taken advantage of by students. Yet, like the neurodivergent students who expressed thi, it was not expressed as a personal impediment to the student's own experience of the course, but as an observation of how other students may approach the course assignments.

Student A1 made the observation that, while he was motivated by the focus on learning in Course A, that the setup in course A could be abused by people who aren't invested in their own learning. While she enjoyed the setup of Course A, student A3 did observe about that setup: " I guess it can make them not try as hard to make sure that they do assignments." Student C4 also said that he could see a course like Course C being taken advantage of. While he distinguished himself as someone who wouldn't do that, and said " Because I feel like I have high standards in myself, where it's like, it's not fair for me to just, like, just take advantage of the system," he did nonetheless express feeling that if the setup of Course C was "implemented in, like, an entire school, like it can definitely be taken advantage of."

Engaged Pedagogy

I would now like to bring this collection of experiences from first generation college students into conversation with bell hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy. As reviewed in the introduction of

this section, hooks’ concept of engaged pedagogy was founded around two main foundations: a critical pedagogy, founded in Paulo Freire’s work, and a holistic pedagogy, grounded in the work of Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh. Table Y from the Introduction of this section is copied below, for reference. In this section I will consider how these themes align and also misalign with these foundations of engaged pedagogy.

Critical	Holistic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rejection of “banking model” and education as transactional ● Challenges unhelpful hierarchies in the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledges students as whole people with roles and identities outside of a student in their class ● Educator engages in self-reflection

Table 6.1: The facets and characteristics of bell hooks’ engaged pedagogy.

Alignment

The four facets listed in Table 6.1 align with several of the themes expressed by first generation college students in my study, as summarized in Table 6.2. The first theme in Table 6.2, “focus on learning and improvement,” contains multiple elements that align with the factors in Table 6.1. This Theme I for first generation college students was also Theme I for neurodivergent students. As was the case for the neurodivergent students in my study, Theme I overlapped with several other themes that were present for first generation college students (many of which were also present for neurodivergent students). Theme I: a focus on learning and improvement, had great overlap with Theme II: minimized fear of failure, mistakes, or judgement, and Theme III: minimized stress. Students in this group described Theme I, the feeling that their ungraded courses were focused on learning and improvement, as directly tied to the lack of assignment grades and emphasis on feedback. They felt that the lack of assignment grades minimized their fear, anxiety, and stress, and that this aspect paired with feedback that provided personalized guidance and supported individual growth, created an environment in which learning and improvement felt like a main foundation. This combination of factors reflects an environment in alignment with the facets of engaged pedagogy.

The experience of students in this group who expressed their experience in the ungraded course as focused on learning and improvement, often tied this to the lack of assignment grades, and the feelings of stress and anxiety that came with them. This result of lessened anxiety and stress

aligns with both the critical and holistic aspects of engaged pedagogy. On the critical side, the rejection of a traditional grading scale also rejected unhelpful hierarchies for many of these students. The removal of grades was not experienced as a loss, but instead as a rejection of an assessment structure that caused unnecessary stress, fear, and anxiety.

Instead of reinforcing their authority in the classroom, by giving grades that the student received, these students experienced assessment through feedback as an equalizing facet. For example, as student C4 expressed about Professor C: “He didn't really feel like a teacher, because it was like not really lectures... It wasn't just like spitting out information for you to retain. It was more of doing it together kind of thing.” Similarly, student A3 said about Professor A: “I don't think of her as a teacher per se. I would say a colleague or mentor, because of how chill and laid back she is. When I think of professors I think of people who really, really, really love the doctor in front of their names. But with Professor A, right, she's just amazing. She's so chill and relaxed.” Both students express the feeling of a minimization of hierarchy between teacher and student. Student C4's description of Professor C as someone who doesn't just “spit out information” for students “to retain,” overlaps with engaged pedagogy's rejection of the banking model of education. That both students describe the professor as working alongside them (i.e., “doing it together,” a “colleague or mentor,”) additionally conveys that rejection of hierarchies in the classroom. These examples also feed back into Theme V, a positive perspective of the teacher.

Another theme for first generation college students which aligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy was Theme: VI, confidence with final grades. Three students expressed this sentiment about the ungraded courses they were in. Student A3 provided a poignant description of how this clarity can help support students as whole people with responsibilities and roles beyond one course. She talked about appreciation for the contract grading setup in Course A, because it allowed students to understand how a missed assignment would impact their final grade, and thus yield lessened stress in that situation. She observed feeling that students who work a job, or who have children, could be particularly benefited by this, when they are having to make decisions about where to spend their time and energy across multiple competing responsibilities. Thus, the student experiences characterized in the “positive” column of Table 6.2 demonstrate many instances of alignment with the facets of engaged pedagogy in Table 6.1.

Misalignment

Like Theme VIII in Table X (Lack of grading scale means that individual effort is not reflected in assessment), Theme IX in Table A, the perception that ungrading can be taken advantage of, neither aligned or misaligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy. For the students in this group who expressed the sentiment that ungrading could be taken advantage of, it did not impact their own motivation. The experience neither aligned with or went against the facets of engaged pedagogy.

Theme VIII, freedom of speech without fear of repercussions, is a theme that expressed misalignment with the facets of engaged pedagogy. Even though student E2 said they couldn't feel certain about a connection between the student use of microaggressions in an ungraded classroom, they did say they experienced it in Course Ei and another ungraded course they previously took at Institution E. Although not a student, Professor A in my sample mentioned seeing ungrading as correlated with the student's sense of freedom to speak freely, and with "vitriol," due to a sense of not having the consequences they might have in a traditionally graded classroom. The potential link between microaggressions and vitriolic comments demonstrates a stark misalignment with the facets of engaged pedagogy: It perpetuates hierarchies of inequality (misalignment with the critical facet), and puts students with marginalized identities at risk of further harm (misalignment with the holistic facet). If there is a possible association between the student use of microaggressions and ungrading, this would be a potentially harmful aspect to students and would not promote an environment of care.

Research Question #3: What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom for students with negative experiences of ungrading?

My last research question asked: What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom for students with negative experiences of ungrading? In this group I included students whose overall experience of the ungraded course was negative, as well as students who were unhappy with their final in the course because they felt it did not reflect their work in the course. Both of these aspects were present for two students (B2 and C1). The demographic information

about these students, based upon their own responses (from the prescreening survey and the interviews), is listed below:

- B1: female, Middle Eastern, middle class
- B2: nonbinary, “pale person” (race), lackluster (in response to question about socioeconomic standing)
- B3: female, white (parents from Cuba), middle class
- C1: female, Chinese and Filipino, middle class
- E1: cis woman, white, upper class

Experience in an Ungraded Course

Students B1, B2, and C1 all had an overall negative experience in Course B and Course C, respectively. Student E1 conveyed positive aspects about Course Ei, yet she also expressed some criticisms of the ungrading setup in that course, and was unhappy with her final grade. Student B3 also conveyed some positive aspects of Course B, but had mostly negative reflections in our last interview, and was also unhappy with her final grade. Students B2 and C1 were also unhappy with their final grades. Thus, all of the students in this group, except B1, were unhappy with their final grade.

Table B, below, summarizes themes that were present in this group of students’ experiences in their ungraded courses. Themes are listed when the same sentiment was expressed by two or more students in this group. Many of these themes overlap.

Negative Experiences
I. Confusion with the ungraded components of the course (3: B1, B2, B3, C1)
II. Dislike of ungrading components of the course (5: B1, B2, B3, C1, E1)
III. Lack of clarity about final grades (3: B1, B2, C2)
IV. Unhappy with final grade (4: B2, B3, C1, E1)
V. Felt negatively about dynamic between teacher and students

(3: B1, B2, C1)

Table 6.4: Themes of the experiences of students who had negative experiences with ungrading. The parenthesis shows the students who expressed this theme.

Theme I: Confusion with ungrading components

Theme I: Confusion with the ungraded components of the course, shared some degree of overlap with all of the other themes in Table 6.4. Theme I and Theme II were often related, in that students who were confused about the ungrading aspects of the course also disliked those aspects. For students B1 and B2, Themes I and II had strong overlap. Regarding the aspect of confusion, both of these students conveyed confusion with the specifications grading setup in Course B. They both articulated not being able to understand the grade tracker that Professor B was using. Student B1 expressed in our first interview that the specifications grading setup was never explained to students, but that “It was just in the syllabus, hey, we're doing specifications grading for the semester. That's it.” She did clarify that while the grade tracker document was available, that “It's just very vague, and it definitely requires a lot more explanation. But she didn't get into it in person. So it was hard to understand.” This confusion was consistent for her throughout our interviews.

In our final interview, she described this confusion as getting worse towards the end of the semester:

No one knew what was going on, especially towards the end...Everyone was very confused because a lot of people didn't know that you had to do certain things because she never cleared that up in the syllabus to begin with. So everyone was pretty confused with that.

Student B1 expressed that this was compounded by Professor B also making mistakes on assessments. She said about Professor B: “ She'd make a lot of mistakes with grading. If you did everything right sometimes she'd just miss stuff and you'd end up with a B because she missed some stuff.” In our last interview, she expressed that, while she earned an A, that other people received lower scores due to not completing certain assignments because of this general confusion. She said: “a lot of people were frustrated and most of the class got like C's and F's because they didn't fulfill a couple of requirements. And she had to keep changing and updating...So it was super disorganized towards the end.” Thus, in addition to general confusion with the grade tracker in

Course B, the assessment setup in Course B was additionally confusing because the teacher would make mistakes with grades (as B1, B2, and B3 all mentioned).

Student B2 similarly expressed confusion with the grade tracker and the syllabus overall. They repeatedly brought up their inability to make sense of the syllabus, saying on several occasions that reading it was like having a stroke or “fever dream.” They described the grading tracker being used in the course as “incomprehensible,” and expressed confusion for the use of tokens in the course, saying: “there's a token system in her class that I don't understand where you can give yourself extra time on assignments...And it's like, I don't want to play a video game. I can do that on my own time. if I so choose. I came here to take a chemistry class.” B2 shared that at the start of the semester, when they first saw the syllabus and became aware of the specifications grading setup in the course, that they felt so confused, they tried to drop the course and take it with another instructor. They found out, however, that Professor B taught all of the sections of that course. In our last interview they added that Professor B changed the grading tracker twice during the semester, further compounding a lack of clarity. In our last interview they also talked about trying to use the “tokens” in the course to boost their grade, but that because the Google Forms page that was set up to track these was broken, and because they could not get a clear response from Professor B through email, never knowing whether the tokens were actually applied to their work. Thus, their confusion with the ungrading aspects of the course were consistent throughout the semester.

While at first student B3 felt that she understood the specifications grading setup in Course B, as the semester went on, she recognized that there were aspects of that setup that she had not accurately understood. In our second interview, she shared: “Before, I didn't really understand how it worked. I actually understand it now.” She specified that aspects of the course she had not accurately understood before included the opportunity to revise work in Course B, and the use of token in Course B. She explained that for lab work involving written responses, one assessment that work could receive is “needs revision.” She said, “So the way it would work is, after your lab is due you have a certain deadline to revise any of your short answer questions if you need to. So I actually didn't know you could do that before.” She reflected that she had received a “needs revision” assessment on an assignment earlier in the semester, but because she had not understood this setup, she missed the deadline to revise that work. Yet, at the time of interview two, she came to understand that she could still complete this revision, even after the deadline, if she earned enough “tokens” in the course. She shared that, regarding the use of tokens in the course, “It was a little

confusing at first, because I didn't get what the point of it was." In that second interview she had gained the understanding of tokens as "basically like extra credit points," which can be earned through completing certain assignments. She explained that she could still revise this assignment at the end of the course with four tokens, which was her intention in interview two. In that interview, she said about Course B: "I think the only negative would be just getting used to the way it works. Because it did take a little bit of time to actually understand how the course is set up."

In our last interview student B3 said about Course B that "the overall class experience wasn't bad," and that Professor B is "a great professor," she nonetheless did say that she would avoid courses that use ungrading practices in the future due to the lack of clarity around its use in Course B:

I feel like the confusion and learning how it works delayed everyone in how they would do their work, right? Because I know a lot of people at the very beginning were really confused on how the grading system worked. And because of that, they wouldn't understand what work they needed to do, or complete, in order so that the course tracker wouldn't mess up their grade. And I feel like because a lot of people didn't know what they were doing that impacted their grade in the beginning, which may have made it difficult to come back or try to do anything to better whatever work you didn't do before because you didn't understand what you're supposed to do. I feel like that's why I wouldn't recommend it. Because if you don't know what you're doing, or if you don't understand it, it's really hard to know what things you need to complete and when and how and all that.

These sentiments also related to B3's unhappiness with her final grades, which will be detailed further in consideration for that theme.

While these students in Course B expressed confusion for the grade tracker and its components in Course B, student C1 expressed a sense of confusion resulting from the lack of assignment grades in Course C. She felt confused about how she would be able to gauge her standing in the course, and whether or not she needed to try harder in the course. She said: "Getting that grade kind of puts, like a scale on whether you should really try harder or if you're doing really well in that subject. So now, I don't know if I'm doing well, or if I need to try harder."

Student C1 also expressed confusion regarding how to approach the self-assessment aspects of the course. She felt confused about how to evaluate herself, because she felt that she lacked the expertise of the teacher who would have greater knowledge as to how to gauge her work. She explained:

Your teacher is the one with those PhDs, the knowledge in that subject that you're in. But now you who doesn't have any knowledge in that subject, or you who's just being taught, is now grading yourself kind of. And it's just, you don't know where you should be because you don't have that. You just don't have that knowledge.

Thus, student C1's sense of confusion around the ungrading practices in Course C stemmed from the lack of guideposts that assignment grades provide and the sense of not being qualified to assess her own work.

Theme II: Dislike of ungrading components

Theme I's confusion for the ungrading components in the course overlapped for students B1, B2, and B3 with their dislike of these components. As detailed in the Theme I section, these students did not speak about the specifications grading setup in a positive way, largely because they did not understand it. The confusion of this setup created a negative experience with and dislike of the specifications grading. Student B1 said about Course B in our first interview that:

This semester, she's doing something called specifications grading. But to be completely honest with you, I've talked to several other students also in the lab, we don't really understand it. She wasn't very thorough about it, she didn't really talk us through it, or ask our opinions or ask for a vote or anything. It was just, hey, we're doing this for the semester. Yeah, we're just going to do it for this semester, whether you like it or not. So I'm not really sure how it is.

Thus, as conveyed in this quote, student B1 felt confused about and forced into this grading setup (e.g., students were not asked their opinion on it or included in a vote about using it).

As detailed in Theme I, student B2 also expressed a consistently negative experience and strong dislike of the assessment setup in Course B throughout the semester and student B3 concluded the course with wanting to avoid future ungraded courses due to her experiences with it in Course B.

For student C1, her expression of both Theme I and Theme II came from the absence of assignment grades and the use of self-evaluation. She felt confusion, and a lack of familiar goalposts with the absence of assignment grades, and expressed an overall dislike of the assignment setup in Course C because of this absence. Student C1 started out Course C with a sense of dislike for the ungrading aspects of the course: "When I first heard about it, I honestly didn't, I don't like it. I didn't

think I would like it at all. Because like I said, I based everything off of grades. Now, I don't know if I'm doing really well in the class, if I'm not doing well in the class, if I need to try harder, if I don't need to try harder kind of thing." She relatedly expressed this setup causing her stress. She said: "I feel like that also leads to more stress with it. Because I don't know how I'm doing." Her negative experience with the absence of assignment grades remained consistent throughout our interviews.

In addition to disliking the lack of assignment grades in Course C, student C1 was also consistent in expressing negativity about the self-assessment aspect of Course C. In our first interview she explained the feeling that the self-assessment component was unfair. Specifically, she articulated that this aspect would disadvantage people who are timid. She said: "I think I don't really have a positive look on it. Just because I also see it as in like, there's some people who can obviously just brag and brag and brag about themselves. And then there's some people who are really timid," going on to say that a timid person may deserve an A, but because they "don't want to brag," that they will likely rank themselves lower. She also connected the self-assessment aspect to increased stress. She said about the mid-term evaluation in which she had to evaluate herself: "It was just adding on more stress to me...I feel like I don't really entirely feel like I want to, in the whole ungraded thing. I don't really like it in general." Then, again in her final portfolio, she reiterated this sentiment, saying about Professor C that "he's also ungraded and I just didn't like that." Thus, these two facets of dislike for ungrading remained consistent throughout the course.

Student Ei is also being included in this theme, although it is important to note that she did not express a dislike of ungrading entirely, but did express a dislike of certain aspects of it in Course Ei. The main aspects she expressed in this vein were: lack of helpful feedback, the revision policy in the course, and feeling that traditional assignment grades are better at reflecting work in effort than the assessment tier used in Course Ei. Regarding the revision policy in the course, Course Ei utilized a three tier assessment hierarchy, and assignments in the course were allowed to be revised and resubmitted only when they received an assessment of "developing," the lowest assessment, but were not allowed for the mid-tier assessment of "distinguished." Student E1 was not a fan of this policy, and that everyone was not provided the opportunity for revision. She questioned: "So why are people who originally did better, then disadvantaged?"

In Course Ei, student E1's first paper in the course received a "demonstrative," and she expressed frustration for not being able to revise and resubmit this work. She did receive feedback on that first paper that provided guidance for improvement. She reported applying that advice to

the second paper, but then also receiving a demonstrative on that paper. On that second paper, she reported receiving no feedback detailing the reason for that assessment nor guidance on how to improve. In our third interview she said: "I wish I had received more suggestions on what I could have done to improve and get better," and concluded that "I just don't actually know what she's looking for." Thus, she felt frustrated with the lack of feedback, leaving her feeling that she did not have a clear idea of the teacher's expectations.

Student E1 expressed some skepticism throughout the semester about how and whether the three-tiered assessment system in Course E1 was a better alternative to traditional scales. In our last interview she conveyed this sentiment:

I think my main frustration was feeling that, obviously, grades are flawed, but they do allow for a lot of nuance, like pluses and minuses and stuff. It's a very wide range. And so for there just to be three big buckets of worst, best, anywhere in between, I'm not sure that's a super great reflection of the amount of work or quality of work. It just kind of feels too broad.

Thus, she concluded the semester feeling that the assessment setup in Course E1 was not a better alternative to traditional grading scale.

Theme III: Lack of clarity with final grades

Theme III: Lack of Clarity with Final Grades also overlapped with Theme I: Confusion with the Ungraded Components of the Course. For the students in this sample, the confusion with the ungrading structure was what often led to lack of clarity with where they stood in the course, and lack of clarity with where they stood in terms of final grades. This was the case for student B1. When I asked her if she had a sense of how the final grade in Course B would be determined, she said:

I wish I could tell you specifically, but from what I know, she is going to give us a general numeric grade at the end. It's not just a letter grade. But I'm not sure how she's calculating it. She's calculating it with a point system and with percentages. But again, she didn't explain it. So I'm not really sure how that works.

When I honed in on individual assignments, to see if student B1 had any clarity of individual assignment assessments, she only reiterated this confusion. She said:

So I don't know, we're still pretty much confused with the grading. I know, we got numerical grades back and the data sheets need to be satisfactory enough to have high passes. But

honestly, no one's really sure how we're doing so far this semester. We're not really that sure. But I don't know so far, for me, personally, I've been getting good numerical grades back. And I've also been getting high passes. So I'm just assuming that I'm in A range right now. And I think that's what a lot of people are doing. We're just making assumptions based off that.

While the grade tracker used in Course B was provided as a way for students to keep track of their standing in the course, it was clear that student B1 did not have this clarity. Here, she also expressed here that this confusion was shared by other people in the class.

Student B2 also expressed lack of clarity with final grades, as aligned with their overall confusion about the assessment setup in Course B. They consistently expressed, throughout the semester, not having a clear understanding of the assessment setup. In our first interview, when I asked them if they had a sense of their standing in the course, they said: "I have no idea what my grade is. Again, because I can't even begin to interpret her grading system."

Both student B1 and B2 provided the example of Professor B emailing incorrect final grades to students in Course B, and then having to send out new grades. This additionally caused at least momentary confusion about final grades, yet for student B2, this also resulted in lack of confidence for the final grade that was ultimately entered for them (as will be considered further in the next section).

For student C1, not having assignment grades left her feeling uncertain about her standing in Course C. Adding to this confusion was lack of knowledge about how aspects beyond assignments, like participation and attendance, would impact her final grade. For example, in our second interview, she said she has missed some class sessions for Class C, yet expressed not having an understanding on how this would impact her overall final grade. She said: "So then, it's just me thinking: what has that done to my grade? But, not being able to see that."

Theme IV: Unhappy with final grade

Students B2 and B3 did not believe that their final grade in Course B was an accurate reflection of their work in the course. Student B2 was very unhappy with their final grade in Course B. Their final grade in the course was a C. Their unhappiness with this grade stemmed from how the effort they perceived of giving to the course, as well as lack of confidence that Professor B had calculated the final grades correctly. While student B2 did express confusion for understanding the

grade tracker which was used to determine their final grade, they also stated that, based upon the assignments they completed, that they did not feel that a final grade of C reflected their work in the course. They said if they were to give themselves a grade, that they felt an A reflected their effort in the course. They went on to say that they felt according to the grade tracker, they had earned a B, saying: “if you look at the grade requirements, by my best interpretation, if you look at the grade requirements to get a B, I have met those numerically.”

Related to the grade tracker and calculations of final grades, student B2 also felt that their grade was incorrect due to earning “tokens” in the course, which they felt were applied to the grade. They explained that tokens could be earned in the course, and that a Google Forms page was set up to track and let students apply the tokens to their grade. Yet, because this page ended up broken and non-functioning, they emailed Professor B for confirmation about whether these tokens had been applied manually. They said they never received a response from Professor B, but only from a TA who could not provide the confirmation they were seeking.

Further, they reported that because Professor B changed the final grades in the course multiple times at the end of the semester due to calculation errors, student B2 felt further concerned with the accuracy of their final grade. Student B2 emailed Professor B about this several times at the end of the semester. At first, their emails were forwarded to TAs in the course. Yet, they were unable to resolve the issue and confirm that the tokens had been applied. Ultimately, the responses to student B2’s emails just stopped. A message was sent to the entire class from Professor B stating that if students disagreed with their final grade, that this could be taken up with the department head. Student B2 then did go to the department head with this issue. Ultimately, though, the grade was not changed, and student B2 felt they had to accept the grade of C that they did not agree with.

Student B3 was also unhappy with her final grade. She received a grade of B plus in the course. As she explained: “I got a B plus, I was like, one point away from an A which hurt a little bit.” She went on to explain that she would have earned an A in the course, but that she missed one assignment due to confusion which dropped her final grade below an A. She shared that there was a strike at Institution B’s campus between our second and third interview, and that as a result, one class session of Course B was cancelled. Since students were unable to be physically present for the lab that week, that week’s lab assignment was also cancelled. Student B3 assumed that since the lab was cancelled, that the pre-lab assignment that was usually due before labs, was also cancelled. She

shared that she did not complete that assignment, nor did other students she spoke with. Yet, Professor B posted an announcement the day after the pre-lab was due, to clarify to students that the pre-lab assignment had not been cancelled. Student B3 reached out to Professor B about the possibility of completing that assignment late, due to the confusion, yet, she never received a response from Professor B. Student B3 conveyed feeling frustration for this situation: “You know, it makes sense to assume you wouldn't have to do something for a class that you won't be attending. So, I don't know. It was a little frustrating because she sent out the email after the due date had passed. If I would have seen that the day it was due or before, then I would have done it.” She expressed this sentiment several times in our last interview. She went on to say:

I feel like I could have gotten the A. And I feel like my work reflects that. It's, again, that one mistake, but I feel like it's kind of logical to assume if you don't have a lab, because of a strike, you wouldn't have to do the prelab for that lab, right? So I don't know. I feel like, if that wouldn't have been a thing then I would have had all the requirements for the A. So I don't know. I feel like it's a little, maybe not the best reflection, because I did put in all the work.

Thus, student B3 ended up concluding Course B feeling unhappy with her grade and feeling that it was not an accurate reflection of her work in the course. She felt frustrated because she felt she made a reasonable assumption about the pre-lab assignment when the lab had been cancelled, that Professor B did not provide clarification until the day after the assignment was due, and that Professor B did not respond to student B3's request to turn in the assignment late. This frustration, paired with the conduction she experienced with the specifications grading setup through the semester, led her in this final interview to conclude that she would avoid taking another ungraded course in the future.

Student C1 was also not happy with her final grade. For her, this overlapped with a negative experience with Professor C in the final meeting between student and professor in the course. This was the meeting during which the final grade would be determined based on the student's self assessment and the teacher's perceptions of that assessment. Prior to our last interview, student C1 expressed feeling that she would go into that final meeting proposing that she felt she had earned an A in the course. It's also worth contextualizing that in our second interview, she expressed this just after saying: “I'm kind of making up B.S. just to get a higher grade.” The sentiment of feeling that she can “B.S.” her work in Course C was also a sentiment she expressed in our first interview,

which she aligned with the lack of assignments grades: "I feel like since I'm also not really getting a grade for it, it kind of feels like, like I can just B.S. it to be honest." Elsewhere in our interview, she expressed that, regarding her history of school and grades, that she felt like "the reason why I worked so hard, I believe, is for the grade, which really isn't good." So, although she observed that working just for a grade "isn't good," perhaps it is the lack of grades as motivation that led her to feeling that she could "B.S." the work in Course C.

Nonetheless, she went into that end of the semester meeting feeling that she had earned an A. Yet, Professor C expressed disagreement with this. She said about that meeting: "I didn't like how that went. Because I feel, I felt like he kind of went in already knowing what grade he wanted to give me. So I was like, I didn't feel like I was really negotiating too much." Thus, while she felt that this final meeting had been explained as a final grade negotiation based on her own self-assessment, the experience of it did not feel that way to her. Instead, she felt that Professor C came into that meeting knowing what grade he wanted to assign her instead of being open to her self-assessment. She expressed feeling that she deserved an A in the course. She said that from her perspective: "I felt like I did deserve an A because I did put in a lot of work. I did turn in all of the assignments on time...it really felt like he was using one of my papers, which is the analytical paper and just used that against me the entire time." So, she felt as though her overall work in the course was not being considered, and that one assignment was being "used against" her. She did not feel positively about this meeting, described Professor C as "harsh" and "unprofessional" in that meeting, and said that she "just felt so terrible about myself afterwards too." Further detail about how this meeting impacted her perception of Professor C will be considered in the next section.

Student E1 was also disappointed with her final grade in Course Ei. She received a final grade of B and expressed frustration with this grade. As per the grading chart for Course Ei, the difference between a final grade of a B or an A came down to the assessment of her final project. On the three tiered scale used in Course Ei, a mid-tier assessment of a demonstrative on that assignment would yield a final grade of B whereas the highest assessment, a distinguished, would result in an A. Student Ei received an assessment of demonstrative which resulted in her final grade of a B. She felt frustrated with this outcome and met with Professor E to talk about it. She explained that some of this frustration came from the lack of feedback from Professor E on this assignment to explain why the final project received this assessment instead of distinguished. She said about the annotated

bibliography, a central aspect of the final project:

She didn't give me in detail about why the annotated bibliography was demonstrative and what would have made it distinguished. Which is like, Okay, I could use some more constructive feedback. Which was kind of one of my issues this semester, is being really nice. I need you to be a little less nice and tell me what to do differently.

She went on to tie into this into frustration with the grading setup overall, which she had expressed multiple times throughout our interviews. She went on to say:

I think my main frustration was feeling that, obviously, grades are flawed, but they do allow for a lot of nuance, like pluses and minuses and stuff. It's a very wide range. And so for there just to be three big buckets of worst, best, anywhere in between, I'm not sure that's a super great reflection of the amount of work or quality of work. It just kind of feels too broad.

She concluded that: "I wish I had received more suggestions on what I could have done to improve and get better," and said "I just don't actually know what she's looking for." Thus, student E1 concluded Course Ei feeling frustrated with her final grade, the lack of helpful feedback that she felt would have helped her earn a higher grade, and for the ungrading assessment setup in Course Ei overall.

Theme V: Felt negatively about dynamic between teacher and students

Students B1 and B2 expressed feeling very negative about the dynamic between Professor B and her students. Student B1 came into Course B having already taken the prerequisite course for Course B with Professor B in the previous semester. Based on that previous course, she came into Course B with an already established negative impression of Professor B. She was only taking another course with Professor B because she was the only instructor teaching that course at the time. Student B1 said about that prerequisite course:

It wasn't a very good environment to be in because the teacher assistants were constantly being yelled at... And there was a lot of, there was just a lot of negativity around the room...it was just very disorganized, and just not a very healthy learning environment.

That Professor B yelled at the TAs in front of students in the course was something student B1 mentioned multiple times. She said that this behavior continued in Course B. She said that Professor B “used some unprofessional language,” and described the yelling at TAs as “very unprofessional and a terrible learning environment.” She described the behavior of Professor B as “very demeaning.” She talked about the announcements posted on Canvas by Professor B as “passive aggressive.” In the prerequisite course, student B1 earned an A, yet commented: “I ended up with an A but at what cost? Three hours of belittlement every week. It's terrible.” Thus, student B1 saw the dynamic between Professor B and her TAs as well as her students in a negative light.

In our final interview, student B1 added on to this, describing Professor B as also unorganized and unhelpful. She said about Professor B:

I would say very unorganized. I think that would be the top thing that I would be able to say. I think the two top things are unorganized and unhelpful. Unorganized because no one knew what was going on at all times. And a lot of mistakes. She'd make a lot of mistakes with grading. If you did everything right sometimes she'd just miss stuff and you'd end up with a B because she missed some stuff.

The experience of Professor B making a mistake on grades was one that student B1 brought up several times. She brought up one example (also shared by student B2) that: “She made a mistake on like a whole class' scale once. Like gave us all the wrong grade one time.” Student B1 went on to describe her as “very unhelpful and sometimes very, very rude,” providing an example of Professor B telling students in an email that if they had an issue with the grade in the course: “Oh, you have a problem, take it up with someone else.” Thus, words that student B1 used to describe Professor B included: rude, belittling, demeaning, passive-aggressive, unorganized, and unhelpful.

Additionally, it is relevant here that early in first interview, student B1 expressed concern about sharing her opinions with me, because she was worried about possible repercussions from Professor B. (She was also the only student in my study to never turn her camera on, which I think may have also been related.) I assured her that what she shared with me would be confidential

Student B2 similarly expressed a consistently negative impression of Professor B throughout the semester. In our first interview, they'd shared about her that: “[Professor B] is leagues from a good professor. She is late to all of her classes, and has left a little under five minutes after they've begun, each and every time, and left everything in the hands of her TAs.” Throughout our interviews they mentioned several occasions in which they had reached out to Professor B: from confusion

about labwork and the software being used, to confusion on whether the “tokens” they earned in the course had been applied to their grade. They said that these emails were often forwarded to TAs who could not answer their questions, and that there were other instances, particularly at the end of the semester, in which their emails were just not responded to at all. Like student B1, B2 highlighted that Professor B made mistakes with students grades and told students to take up concerns with grades with someone else (the department head). In our third interview, when I asked student B2 to describe Professor B’s teaching style they said: “Non existent. There wasn't any teaching to be had there. There were no lectures. Everything was delegated to TAs, if it was delegated at all.” They also mentioned that the TAs also did not seem to have a good grasp on how the class was set up, be he felt this was due to Professor B not providing them with adequate information or support.

In Course C, student C1 said that she felt positively about Professor C through most of the semester, but that this changed in their final meeting/grade negotiation. That meeting was reviewed in some detail in Theme IV: Unhappy with Final Grade. One result of this meeting was student C1 feeling unhappy with the final grade that was determined for her, by Professor C. Another result of that meeting was that she came out of it with a negative perception of Professor C. During that meeting, she described the way he spoke to her and treated her as unprofessional and backhanded. She particularly disliked that when she proposed her own grade for the course, that Professor C asked her “what do you actually think that you deserve?” This question led her to feel that Professor C wasn’t actually interested in her self-evaluation, as he had stated. She detailed:

I feel like there were a little bit more kind ways to say, a couple of things that he did say. Like how he kind of said: what do you actually think that you deserve? Like, that kind of just felt like a little bit backhanded instead of just flat out saying something. I feel like I'm more of a straightforward person. Instead of giving me these side comments and making me say things that you want me to say kind of thing. So I would rather him just be like, I think that you kind of deserve more of a B instead of an A minus.

Thus, she felt that comments like these in their meeting conveyed a “back-handedness,” in that Professor C wasn’t being upfront, but was instead pressuring her to say something he agreed with.

She went on to say that she felt that her work was on par with other students in the course who had already had their meeting with Professor C, and who had ended the course with a grade of A. Based on this, she remarked that: “So I definitely did argue a lot with him during that meeting.”

The main theme of our third and last interview was her residual feelings from that meeting with Professor C. At another point she had detailed:

I know he does care about his students... I think, just as a professor, I didn't, I didn't like the ending of it. Throughout the entire thing I was okay with him... But at the end, I think, after that meeting, it was really hard for me to like him as a teacher, just because he, it just felt so kind of harsh to me, some things that he said. So I was kind of like, I don't really like the way that he talked to me about a couple of things. So it was just, I didn't really like him as a professor, as a professor and the professionalism inside that meeting.

Thus, that meeting at the end of the semester significantly changed the way that she felt about Professor C.

Engaged Pedagogy

I would now like to bring this collection of experiences from this group into conversation with bell hooks' concept of engaged pedagogy. I am again replicating Table Y, below, which breaks down the two main facets of engaged pedagogy that I am using in my analysis. With my this research question section being focused on negative experiences, Table B only presents negative themes. None of the negative themes in Table B align with the facets of engaged pedagogy presented in Table Y, although several do convey a misalignment with some of these facets.

Critical	Holistic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Rejection of "banking model" and education as transactional ● Challenges unhelpful hierarchies in the classroom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Acknowledges students as whole people with roles and identities outside of a student in their class ● Educator engages in self-reflection

Table 6.1: The facets and characteristics of bell hooks' engaged pedagogy.

In Table 6.4, Themes I and III both reflect confusion connected to the ungrading setup (with the former related to the ungraded components in the course and the latter related to the final grade). Theme II, a dislike of the ungraded components of the course, strongly overlapped with

confusion for those components. Theme IV, unhappiness with the final grade, also shared overlap with the other themes related to confusion and dislike. Several of the experiences that students expressed that fell into Theme V, the perception of a negative dynamic between teacher and students, also overlapped with Themes I through IV in Table 6.4. While these themes were considered separately in the breakdown of themes, because there is so much overlap, it is easier here to consider this collection of themes against the facets of engaged pedagogy listed in Table Y. The critical facet of engaged pedagogy challenges the banking model of education and unhelpful hierarchies in the classroom. The experiences of this group find misalignment with this facet.

In Course B, students did not experience a rejection of the banking model or a challenge to unhelpful hierarchies in the classroom. While a rejection of these aspects would cultivate a sense of power dynamics being flattened, and a focus on collaboration, this is not what students in this group expressed about course B. Student B1 described Professor B's behavior towards students as demeaning, belittling, rude, and passive aggressive. Students B2 and B3 both gave examples of Professor B not being responsive to emails. Student B3 reached out, due to being confused about work that was due during a week that class was cancelled, and asked for an extension. She received no response, and her inability to complete this assignment resulted in a final grade that she felt did not reflect her work in the course. Student B2 reported several examples of reaching out to Professor B and receiving no response, including concerns about the accuracy of their final grade. Student B1, B2, and B3 all expressed limited interaction with Professor B, and instead greater interaction with the TAs in the course. Students B1 and B2 also highlighted feeling that the TAs were also confused in Course B, having not received adequate instruction and support themselves. Thus, this left students B1 and B2 as being particularly unsupported in their learning in Course B.

In Course C, student C1 did actually express an initial perception of some degree of alignment here, because she felt that with the self-evaluations, that Professor C was intending to give power and responsibility to students. Yet, she just did not perceive this in a positive way. Instead, she saw this as negative, in terms of it generating more work on her behalf (with having to do the work and assess that work), and giving her responsibility that she felt made more sense for someone with greater expertise to have (like the teacher). Further, ultimately, after her experience in the final grade-negotiation meeting with the teacher, she did not feel that the course was actually based upon self-evaluation as had been initially expressed. Instead of challenging hierarchies, student C1 felt that Professor C was exerting his power in the situation, by not being open to her

self-assessment, and through making comments that she experienced as him pressuring her to say things that he agreed with. Thus, she concluded the course in feeling that while Professor C may claim to use ungrading practices to challenge power dynamics in the course, that he ultimately relied on those power dynamics in the determination of her final grade.

In Course Ei, student E1 did also perceive Professor E's use of ungrading practices as an attempt to flatten out unhelpful hierarchies and power dynamics in the course between her and her students. Unlike student C1, this perspective didn't change for student E1. Yet, in other ways, student E1 expressed not feeling supported by Professor E in her learning. This was largely due to feeling that she was not receiving helpful feedback. Student E1 expressed that Professor E's commentary was often focused on being "nice," but that it lacked the constructive criticism needed to help her learn and improve on future assignments. Due to the lack of helpful feedback, student E1 ended up not having a sense of understanding for the assessments that she was receiving on her assignments, and did not feel guided in terms of how to improve. Ultimately, she felt that having a system of three "buckets," or three assessment categories, was not necessarily less punitive than a traditional grading scale, and actually saw an advantage in the traditional grading scale in that the wider scale provided a better reflection of students' work and effort. Thus, while she felt that Professor E wanted to be supportive of students' learning, she did not feel that this goal was always met, and specifically questioned whether the ungrading aspect of the course actually created more harm than help.

In Table 6.1, the holistic column of engaged pedagogy revolves around treating students as whole people, beyond just their role in one course. As hooks detailed, this facet includes self-reflection on the part of the teacher as well.

The students in my sample did not have a sense of either of these aspects being present in Course B. Student B1's descriptors of Professor B, including demeaning and belittling, did not convey a sense of support. She described the environment in Course B as negative and not a healthy learning environment. Student B2 expressed extreme frustration with understanding the grade tracker, as well as some of the assignments in the course, yet reported never getting clarity, in part due to Professor B's lack of response to emails and the confusion of the TAs in the course. Student B3 hoped that Professor B would be understanding of the confusion behind why she missed the pre-lab assignment during the week that the lab class was cancelled, yet, she did receive a response

from Professor B about that issue. None of the students from Course B in this group expressed the feeling of a holistic approach in Course B.

In Course C, student C1 did not feel like her perspective mattered. She did not like the ungrading setup in Course C, yet, did have a say in participating in it. She participated in the self-assessment component of Course C, yet ultimately felt that her self-assessment did not have much of an impact on her course grade. She felt that Professor C was biased against her because she had missed some classes, and that he unfairly emphasized one assignment in their final, grade negotiation meeting. She reported finding out from other students, who had missed a similar number of classes, that Professor C gave them a higher grade than they came in assessing themselves as, whereas student C1 was graded lower. Thus, she ended up concluding Course C feeling that her perception did not matter and that her voice was not heard.

Student E1 on the other hand, expressed some alignment with the facet of holistic pedagogy. She did express throughout our interviews feeling that Professor E had good intentions in using the ungrading methods in her course, and felt that she was using these methods because she cared about and wanted to support her students' learning. (This, however, was not a theme listed for this group of students, because she was the only student to express this theme in this group, and remain consistent with this feeling. Student C1 initially expressed this, but this perception was not upheld by the end of Course C.)

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

Engaged Pedagogy

My analysis was structured around my three research questions, with each research question pertaining to a particular group of students in my sample. For each research question, themes that were present for the related group of students were summarized in a table (Tables 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4). The themes were categorized in the table columns as either relating to positive experiences, experiences critiqued by the student as both positive and critical, or as negative. Each theme presented in these tables was considered in further detail. Each research question concluded with putting those themes into conversation with bell hooks' engaged pedagogy, and specifically, their alignment or misalignment with facets of engaged pedagogy.

The framework of engaged pedagogy was relevant, as almost every theme that emerged from these student experiences showed alignment or misalignment with the facets of engaged pedagogy as broken into four characteristics in Table 6.1. In most cases, themes that were aligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy related to positive experiences of students, and themes that misaligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy related to student experiences that were negative or that students were critical of. Only a couple themes (Theme VIII in Table 6.2 and Theme IX in Table 6.3) neither aligned nor misaligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy.

Thus, this relevance suggests engaged pedagogy as a valuable framework for understanding the student experience of ungrading and organizing themes related to those experiences. Much of the dynamic between the themes of student experience in my study and engaged pedagogy was straightforward, in that engaged pedagogy aligned with positive experiences and misaligned with negative experiences. In that regard, the facets of engaged pedagogy could provide a valuable roadmap in terms of creating a positive student experience of ungrading. This is important, yet, perhaps the most insightful examples, and those that amplify the insight that an analytic framework of engaged pedagogy can provide, comes from those cases where the application of engaged pedagogy to themes was not so clear cut.

This was the case with those three themes listed in the "Both positive and critical" in Table 6.2 (Theme VI) and 6.3 (Theme VII and Theme VIII), as well as as a theme listed in the "critique" column of Table 6.2 (Theme VII). Theme VI in Table 6.2 (Themes from neurodivergent students) was that "Coursework took more time and/or more stressful than other courses, because learning and

growth were the goals” (experienced by students A1, C2), and it appeared in the “both positive and critical” column. Similarly, Theme VII in Table 6.3 (Themes from first generation college students) was that the ungraded course was experienced as requiring more work than other courses. As considered in the analysis, this experience could be seen as negative, in that the course work took greater time and effort and caused more stress than other courses. Yet, the potentially negative aspects of this experience were eclipsed by the students’ perception that these courses were focused on growth and learning, goals that these students expressed as being in line with their own. In fact, this perception of the courses’ focus on learning is arguably what actually motivated these students to put forth more time and effort in these courses. As detailed in the analysis this focus on learning and improvement was its own theme, experienced by all neurodivergent students in my sample. As detailed in the analysis, this theme aligns with the facet of engaged pedagogy. Thus, this could present an insightful case in which a potentially negative attribute (more work/more stress) is recontextualized within the context of an engaged pedagogy.

Another layered example from Table 6.2 (Themes from neurodivergent students) was Theme VII: “unclear about assignment expectations” (which was experienced by students A2, E2). Although this theme was listed in the critical column of Table 6.2, as detailed in the analysis, both of these students ultimately found resolution to this issue. For student E2, they expressed that Professor E solicited feedback from students, and that students expressed their frustration and confusion over lack of clarity on assignment expectations, as well as about the three-tiered assessment scale. Student E2 said (as well as other students in Course Ei), that Professor E took this feedback and made changes to provide greater detail about assignment expectations as well as greater clarification in her feedback. Student E2 concluded the course feeling that the issues with clarity had been resolved.

Similarly, student A2 talked with Professor A about her confusions with the open-endedness and flexibility on assignments. Professor A listened to her concerns, emphasized her intentions behind the assignment setup, provided assurance to student A2, and expressed confidence in her ability to successfully complete the assignments. As a result, student A2 reported that instead of focusing on frustration with the assignments, she was focused on trying to challenge herself to get used to a new way of approaching her work. Thus, student A2’s frustration was, if not resolved, rerouted towards resolution. As discussed in the analysis section, while the experience of confusion and frustration experienced by these students misaligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy,

both were resolved in a way that aligned with the tenets of engaged pedagogy. Both students ultimately felt that they were heard by their teachers and that their teachers cared about supporting their learning; their relationship and interactions with their teachers was a cornerstone of how this negative experience was resolved. Thus, the trajectory of this theme's resolution demonstrates how facets of engaged pedagogy can address and resolve negative experiences in the classroom. (Although not a theme, the case of student C1 could also be insightful to bring into conversation with these two experiences, in that student C1 had a mostly positive perception of Professor C throughout the course, but that this drastically changed at the end of the course, which was partially related to her unhappiness with her final grade. This case could provide an interesting juxtaposition in terms of how the student perception of the teacher, and the teacher's intentions, can have significant influence on how their experience in the course can change.)

One of the most poignant and multifaceted themes of student experience was Theme VIII in Table 6.3 (Themes of first generation college students). This theme was "Freedom of speech without fear of repercussions," which was experienced by students E2 and E3. It is worth reiterating that E2 expressed this experience as a negative in Course Ei and that E3 expressed this experience as a positive in Course Eii.

For student E3, the sense of freedom of speech came from a sense of security, safety, and mutual understanding in the classroom. As an international student, for whom English was not her first language, E3 reported feeling cautious about participating in class discussion as Institution E, due to concern that she may not use the most accurate terms to describe what she is trying to convey in English, and/or that she may be misinterpreted. Yet, she reported that Course Eii felt like a safe environment (in large part due to class guidelines around discussion) and that she did not feel the same hesitation in that course. She felt safe to express herself, and felt that even in the case of a misunderstanding, that it would be approached with a sense of mutual respect.

Student E2 experienced that sense of freedom of expression in a very different way. In Course Ei, as well as a previous ungraded course they had taken, they reported students saying offensive things, including microaggressions, that she felt they might not say in a traditionally graded course. Student E2 felt that because of the lack of points and grades in ungraded courses she's taken, that this may create an environment in which students feel more able to express problematic/offensive sentiments. As also noted in the analysis, although not a student, the one Black educator (and only non-white educator) in my sample also expressed feeling that the

ungraded context can create an environment in which students may feel freer to be more vitriolic in their communications and interactions.

Thus, on the one hand, this context provided a feeling of safety and understanding for an international student from Brazil, whose first language is not English - an experience which, as discussed in the analysis, aligns with the facets of engaged pedagogy. Yet, on the other hand, this same theme, a sense of safety and lack of repercussion in the classroom, was experienced negatively by a non-binary, Asian-American/Bengali- Muslim student in a predominantly white classroom - an experience which, as discussed in the analysis, misaligned with the facets of engaged pedagogy.

This is an incredibly layered example. It is one that merits greater attention in terms of the course environment that ungrading can foster, and it demands a detailed teasing apart of whether and how that sense of freedom can be addressed/modified/tweaked in order for all students to feel safe - especially for the many educators using ungrading practices because they want to uphold equity in the classroom. The framework of engaged pedagogy would work well to further tease out the intricacies of this example, and provide guidance towards creating a safe environment for all.

Not only do these examples provide cases that could provide further insight through a deeper analysis via a framework of engaged pedagogy, they also demonstrate, generally, the types of complicated scenarios that could be benefitted from an application of engaged pedagogy as an analytic framework. Relatedly, while my study focused on the student experience, and thus did not find themes linked to the teacher self-reflection facet of engaged pedagogy,³⁸ bringing this in alongside the teacher perspective of such scenarios could be incredibly valuable.

Thus, what I can come away from this research feeling confident in, is that engaged pedagogy can provide a valuable framework - for the study of ungrading, conversations around ungrading, and in the development of personal pedagogy for folks wanting to pursue ungrading (especially for reasons related to equity). The literature review considered how there has been some back and forth about doing ungrading the “right” or “wrong” way. As some educators expressed, if ungrading has grown out of critical, feminist approaches to education, those approaches provide room for growth through flexibility and the ability to learn from mistakes, and would not subscribe

³⁸ While this may have been present in some cases, like with Professor E soliciting feedback and changing aspects of the course in response - the presence of this aspect cannot be confirmed without the teacher perspective of that situation.

to a one-size fits all, right vs. wrong way of doing things. So, a conversation around the right and wrong ways of ungrading is antithetical to its intention. Yet, perhaps, what we as educators can focus on is the student experience. Instead of right vs. wrong, we should ask: How is the student experiencing this setup? What positive and negative experiences are they having? How can this inform my own pedagogy, around ungrading, and beyond? Again, the aspect of engaged pedagogy focused on teacher self-reflection, which was not a theme in my student focused project, would be valuable to such questions.

Limitations

One limitation of my study is that I utilized a sub-sample of my larger pool of participants instead of using the data from all of my participants. While I do believe that this made sense for my project, as detailed in the “Analytic Cases” section, using the data from all of my participants could have provided opportunities for comparison. With each of the three student groups that I focused on in my research questions, these student experiences could have been compared with students in the same courses outside that group. For example, I could have addressed whether the experiences of the first generation students in my sample differed from the experiences of students who were not first generation students. Since my study utilized six courses, I could have considered this comparison broadly, across all participants, as well as within each course (e.g., whether the experiences of first generation students in Course A differ from non-first generation students in Course A).

Due to the large amount of data in my study, there were many ways the data could have been addressed. For this project, it made sense to organize the analysis by research question. Yet, the data I collected could be considered in many other ways. For example, it would allow me to consider all the student experiences by course (Course A, Course B, etc.), and/or by ungrading setup (contract grading vs. self-evaluation, etc.). These and other potential aspects are not included in my research. Such inquiries would have provided further consideration of the student experience of ungrading and could have teased out further insight, such as how the specific course, or teacher, or specific ungraded approach, influenced the student experience. Relatedly, because my study did include six different courses with five different teachers, in a variety of subjects (social sciences, humanities, STEM), these contexts may have had significant influence on the student experience.

For example, had I chosen to focus on Course Ei and Course Eii, two courses taught by Professor E and at Institution E, within the same department, greater consistency between teacher, institution, and department could have held the potential influence of holding these factors as more consistent. Yet, again, this was not the approach used in this project.

Another limitation of approaching my analysis through three separate groups also meant that themes present in student experiences that went beyond these groups did not get considered. As clarified in the analysis section, themes were only listed in the related tables when an experience was expressed by two or more students in each research question group. So, for example, if there were two students who had the same experience, but one student was in the neurodivergent group and the other student was in the first generation college student group, this was not listed as a theme. Therefore, the focus on these three separate groups missed out on broader themes with my sample as a whole.

Another limitation of my study is that, while this project provided an overview of my interviews with teachers of the courses in my study for context, this data was not incorporated into the analysis. Although this project was focused on the student experience, and thus did not prioritize the data from the educators, this information could potentially bring in insightful context to the student experience. Particularly, it could be valuable to consider where the student experience and educator experience of ungrading overlaps and where it does not. Considering these two perspectives together could also find value within the framework of engaged pedagogy. Furthermore, in this study I did not consider how the demographics of the teacher, particularly race and gender, might have impacted the student experience of ungrading and the ungraded courses that they were in. This was an aspect that Professor B specified in our interview as something that she feels has an impact on how students perceive and interact with her, and it is an important aspect to consider. It just was not a focal point in my study.

Also, especially through conducting my interviews, I further appreciated that students who were having negative experiences in their ungraded courses may feel hesitant about sharing those experiences or may have felt dissuaded from participating to begin with. This particularly became salient to me in my first interview with student B1 who expressed very negative experiences in Course B. Student B1, who did not have a positive experience in Course B, expressed concern early on in our first interview for the confidentiality of what she was sharing. She was worried that what she was saying could end up negatively impacting her in the course. I assured her that what she was

sharing with me was confidential. Yet, this highlighted potential hesitancy of students to share negative experiences, especially due to fear of repercussion. While I provided the flyers to instructors to share with their students, I had no impact on how that information was shared. I do not know whether the teachers who shared my flyer emphasized that student participation would be confidential and that they would not know who participated and what they said. Thus, students like B1, who felt hesitant, may have had their hesitancy prevent them from responding to my flyer and taking the prescreening survey as a potential participant. While my hope was that students would feel more open to being honest in their experiences (vs. other studies where the researcher is a current or past teacher). This issue was not eliminated in my study, and perhaps could have been further limited with more attention to how students were recruited.

Future Research

In focusing on the student experiences of ungrading, I initially hoped that my project could explore if and how student social location impacts the experience of ungrading. Ideally, I had hoped that such an exploration could further contribute to conversations and debates around ungrading as an equitable pedagogical practice.

Due to my sample (see section, “Analytic Cases”), and the evolution of my research questions (see section “Research Questions”), I elected to explore the experiences of three specific groups whose voices are valuable to understanding the student experience of ungrading. I was not able to address the question of if and how student social location impacts the student experience of ungrading. As I highlighted in sections of my Literature Review, this is an important question, and one that still merits addressing.

While I was able to consider the experiences of neurodivergent students and first generation college students in my sample, I did not compare these experiences directly against students outside these groups, which may have allowed my study to say more about the influence of those identities specifically. Future research is needed to consider these dynamics more fully. Further, race and gender are two facets that I did not consider, that are also important for this topic. Future research on if and how the race and gender of students influences the experience of ungrading is needed. For example, I can't say that student C1 may have felt timid with self-evaluation due to her gender, but it is possible (and aligns with concerns about the use of self-evaluation in ungrading that

I have heard expressed on social media and in ungrading groups, about certain groups being more likely to evaluate themselves at a lower rank than others). I can say though, that student E2's race did position her to be more aware of a potential link between ungrading and microaggressions. For future research, it is essential to further consider the experiences of non-white students and how race may influence the experience of ungrading.

The social location of educators would be an important facet to consider in future research as well. The importance of this facet to the dynamic between students and educators was brought up by Professor B. While this was not an aspect I looked at in my dissertation research, its relevance to Professor B's experience is important to note. As was mentioned, Professor B was the only non-white educator in my sample of five educators, and she was the only Black woman. As was also mentioned, Professor B made an observation about a potential challenge of ungrading in saying that ungrading creates an environment that can result in "intense" feelings and even "vitriol" from students. She made this statement after sharing that one of her students called her course "an embarrassment" in a reflection they turned in, and she questioned whether that student would have said this had she been a white male professor. Thus, the implication is that while ungrading may result in strong emotions from students, that these strong feelings can intersect with unchecked racism and sexism from students.

Given the realities of racism and sexism for women of color in academia generally (for example, see: Gutiérrez y Muhs et al. 2012), and Black women specifically (see: Walkington 2017), it is relatedly worth calling attention to the fact that Professor B was the only Black woman educator in my sample and that her course was disproportionately experienced as negative by the students in my sample who were in her course. While the students in her course did have concrete and specific concerns that did also sometimes line up with Professor B's descriptions (for example, students feeling confused about the grading tracker at the beginning of the semester and Professor B also saying in our interview that she does not explain how the grading tracker works in detail until later in the course, after students have completed assignments), the realities of racism and sexism faced by Black women in academia, and in STEM fields, are necessary to highlight as potential amplifiers of students' negative experiences. For example, contrast Professor B being told that her course is an embarrassment by a student, as compared with instances in which students in Professor E's courses (with Professor E being a white woman) felt frustration with her, yet still regarded her as kind and seemed more willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. Thus, to reiterate, the dynamic between

Professor B and her students also calls attention to the need for research on ungrading to further consider how the social location of educators can impact this dynamic.

There is a great deal of research still to be done on the topic of the student experience of ungrading. Future research is particularly needed between researchers and students who do not already have an established relationship (i.e., researcher is not current or past teacher), and future research could take additional precautions so that students do not fear sharing negative experiences (e.g., the researcher talking with potential student participants directly and making their confidentiality clear).

Conclusion

While this project provides a mere snapshot of the student experience of ungrading from 16 of my participants, I nonetheless hope that it provides a helpful building block towards a more robust landscape of literature on the topic. Lastly, I hope that my use of engaged pedagogy in this project stands as a testament to the relevance and value of bell hooks' ideas, for those interested in ungrading, and education generally.

I conclude this project having learned a lot myself about teaching, learning, and the student experience. I hope that it can be of some benefit to other educators interested in alternative assessment and ungrading. In closing, I wish to thank my participants for spending several hours of their time with me across the Spring 2023 semester.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Application

The purpose of a research protocol is to document your research question(s) and describe how you will address it. Documenting your research plan will help you articulate the necessary steps for a reproducible and replicable study. This protocol template has been designed to guide researchers through ethical and methodologic considerations in developing a research plan. It will be useful in developing research output such as theses, dissertations, presentations, and journal articles. It will help ensure that you are developing and designing an ethically sound and scientifically valid study. Additional resources are available in the [resource](#) section of the Human Research Protection Program website. The [Tips](#) document provides additional details for each section along with helpful tips.

INSTRUCTIONS:

- Use this “TEMPLATE PROTOCOL (HRP-503a)” to prepare a study protocol outlining your research plan for research that only involves **surveys, questionnaires, focus groups, or educational tests**. Do not use for intervention, observational, or biomedical/clinical research.
- If your research involves minors, please, contact the human research protection program at irb@vt.edu to discuss your research plans to ensure you are using the correct template, as there are specific federal requirements for research with minors.
- Depending on the nature of your study, some sections and subsections might not be applicable to your research. If so, simply indicate “N/A.”
- Once the IRB or HRPP approves your submission, your approved version of the protocol will be stored in the IRB Protocol Management online system.
- If your research plan changes, you might need to modify your protocol and submit an amendment. Please review our guidance on amendments for exempt research the [Exempt Guidance for Amendments in PM](#) to determine if an amendment is required.
 - If an amendment is required, please submit an amendment to Protocol Management with the requested modifications. Download your current protocol from Protocol Management and indicate the changes/revisions using the track changes feature to make review of the modifications easier to follow. If you are unable to use track changes, please create a new paragraph wherever you need to make a change and indicate “Amendment: Date.” Protocol Management will store the older versions of your protocol if the IRB or HRPP need to compare them during the review.

PROTOCOL TITLE:

Include the full protocol title.

The Student Experience of Ungrading

PROTOCOL NUMBER:

Include the number assigned in Protocol Management (verify this has been added before submitting the protocol to HRPP).

IRB # 22-1091

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:

Full Name and Degrees: David L. Brunisma, BA (1992), MA (1995), PhD (1998)

Department: Sociology

Telephone number: 573-355-0599

Email address: brunsmad@vt.edu

FUNDING:

Sponsor(s): [Click here to provide a response.](#)

Funded or in the proposal phase? Proposal

Is Virginia Tech the primary awardee or the coordinating center for the funding? If not, list the primary institution: [Click here to provide a response.](#)

VERSION NUMBER/DATE:

Include the version number and date of this protocol. Versions should start at 1.0.

2.0

REVISION HISTORY:

Use this table to keep track of changes. Add more rows as needed.

Revision #	Version Date	Brief Summary of Changes (i.e., the different sections)	Consent Change?
2	12.9.22	Removed plan to use course evaluations (5: Procedures) and uploaded email consent for use of info from ungrading meetings & twitter conference (Supporting Documents, 5: Procedures, & 12: Consent)	
3	12.15.22	Clarified that use of NVivo on this project will only be for coding – and that this falls within the listing in Cobblestone that reads: NVivo 12 Plus & NVivo 12 Mac (contract number: LA-2008-635).	

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1.0 Study Summary

Study Title	The Student Experience of Ungrading
Primary Objective	To conduct a sociological analysis of the student experience of ungrading.
Secondary Objective(s)	To consider whether student social location influences student experience of ungrading and to consider whether the context of ungrading benefits the experience of learning about social inequalities.
Study Population	Teachers using ungrading in undergraduate courses and undergraduate students
Sample Size	5-10 teachers of undergraduate courses using ungrading and 3-10 students in each of these courses, for a total of 5-10 teachers and 15-30 students in Spring 2023
Research Design	Questionnaire, Interviews, Content Analysis, Participant Observations
Analytic Approach	Qualitative
Acronyms and Definitions	<i>Ungrading: is an umbrella term for the pedagogical tactic of not using standard grading scales of A-F or 0-100%, but instead uses alternative assessments to encourage a focus on learning vs. a focus on grades.</i>

2.0 Objectives

2.1 Describe the purpose, specific aims, and objectives of this study.

The aim of this intended study is to apply a sociological lens to the practice of ungrading and to gather information about the student experience of ungrading. This intended study specifically seeks to explore the student experience of ungrading, whether student social location (race, class, gender, etc.) impacts student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom, and seeks to explore whether ungrading benefits the experience of learning about social inequalities like racism, sexism, class inequalities, etc.

2.2 State the hypotheses to be tested.

N/A

3.0 Background

3.1 Summarize published (or available unpublished) literature to build a rationale for the research question(s), study objectives, and research design. If none are

available, include a statement that there is no available research data. This section must provide a justification for the conduct of this study based on existing knowledge and should include your research question.

The A-F grading scale, which became a widespread standard scale of evaluation in US educational institutions in the mid 1900s, has had critics since its inception (Schinske & Tanner 2014). A main critique against the A-F grading scale is that it ultimately detracts from learning and creates a focus on grades over actual content in a course (Kohn, 2013; Schinske & Tanner 2014).

“Ungrading” refers to a philosophy of teaching, as well as a range of teaching practices, defined by the rejection of the A-F grading scale, and an emphasis on qualitative feedback over quantitative grades (Blum 2020). Advocates of ungrading describe it as an approach that emphasizes learning over grades, and one that improves the educational experiences of teachers and students (Blum 2020). Many advocates of ungrading practices highlight that the A-F grading scale is not an equitable practice. They highlight that grading perpetuates social hierarchies like racism and ableism in the classroom – thus advocates for alternative assessments argue that rejecting the A-F grading scale can support social justice in the classroom (Inoue 2019; Kuhn 2020).

Although critiques of the A-F grading scale have a long history, interest in the specific concept of “ungrading” peaked alongside the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic temporarily, but swiftly and massively, forced educational institutions to shift their practices to a virtual format, and led many teachers to rethink their own teaching and assessment practices (e.g., Taylor, 2022). While this peak in interest has yielded an uptick in interest about ungrading in online spaces (Moore, 2021), and in academic research (see Blum’s 2020 book), this research has predominantly come from the perspective of teachers using ungrading. While proponents of ungrading explain it as a practice and philosophy that improves the educational experience of both students and teachers, the first-person voice of students is lacking in the research on ungrading. Thus, this intended study would contribute to this growing body of research by contributing information about the student experience of ungrading.

Furthermore, the argument has also been made that if it is not carefully and intentionally put into practice, that ungrading practices can unintentionally exacerbate already existing inequalities in educational experience and achievement (Carillo, 2022). This is problematic, especially given that many advocates of ungrading describe it as a practice inherently grounded in social justice and equity in the classroom. Thus, this intended research would further add to that conversation, in its consideration of whether student social location impacts student experience of ungrading.

Lastly, this intended study would consider the student experience of learning about social inequalities, specifically, in a course using ungrading. This aspect would contribute specificity to the first question about student experience and would also contribute to

conversations around ungrading and social justice in the classroom.

Thus, the motivating research questions for this intended study are: (1) What is the student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom? (2) Does the social location of students (race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, etc.) have an impact on student experience of learning in an ungraded classroom? And (3) Does the pedagogical practice of ungrading benefit the learning environment for education about social inequalities?

References:

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Kuhn, Brianna. 2020. "Get the 'F' Outta Here: Exploring Contract Grading as a Decolonizing and Equity-Minded Assessment Practice in Composition Classrooms." PhD Dissertation, Department of Educational Leadership, San Diego State University, CA.

Moore, Christina. 2021. "#Ungrading: A Digital Ethnography." PhD Dissertation, Department of Education, Oakland University, Rochester, MI.

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4.0 Statistical Analysis Plan

4.1 Describe the statistical methods that will be used to analyze the data you collect.

The plan for analysis is to use NVivo 12 Plus & NVivo 12 Mac software (contract number: LA-2008-635 in Cobblestone) for coding data.

5.0 Procedures Involved

5.1 Provide a description of:

- All research procedures being performed. Start with recruitment and end with when participation is complete.
- Include the estimated duration of participant's participation (i.e., how long will it take participants to complete survey(s), questionnaire(s), focus group(s), or educational test(s)?).
- If the research involves deception include a justification (why it is necessary) and describe the debriefing process. You will need to request and justify an alteration of the consent process in section 12.2.

This intended study seeks to utilize the following research components: - Individual interviews with teachers using ungrading in their courses

- Individual interviews with students who are taking one of these courses -
- Content analysis of syllabi from these courses
- Participant observations from meetings with teachers using or interested in using ungrading approaches in their courses, who have voluntarily come together for monthly meetings
- Participant observations from online "Twitter conference" about ungrading

Interviews

Interviews would be sought with: teachers teaching an undergraduate course using an approach of ungrading in their student assessments, and would be sought with students taking one of those courses, across the span of a semester. This study intends to find teachers teaching an undergraduate course using an approach of ungrading specifically in introductory level social science or humanities courses (this parameter is included to seek courses which will cover some extent of social inequalities/social hierarchies in the course).

Recruiting Teachers

This study intends to primarily recruit participants through social media, and secondarily through direct contact with individuals. Primary recruitment via social media will take place on the platforms of Twitter and Discord. Research has shown that Twitter has become a popular place for a growing online educational community around the practice of ungrading (Moore, 2021). There is also an online educational community around the practice of ungrading on Discord.

Thus, on both Twitter and Discord, a flyer will be posted with the aim of recruiting teachers who use ungrading as a main strategy of assessment in at least one of their introductory level social science/humanities courses in the upcoming Spring 2023 semester. If recruitment on Twitter and Discord platforms proves unsuccessful, I may pursue recruitment through a Facebook sociology teaching platform or other teaching

affiliated online groups through the American Sociological Association. The posting of the recruitment flyer will include information in the posting that will provide a link to a prescreening anonymous Google Form (for teachers).

Recruitment will additionally take place through direct contact with individuals. This will take place in a couple ways. The first tactic will involve reaching out to a former instructor at Virginia Tech, who is currently teaching undergraduate courses at another university using ungrading. The graduate student researcher on this project, Amy Ernstes, is aware of this person and their use of ungrading through working for this person in the Spring 2022 semester as a Teaching Assistant. The recruitment flyer for teachers will be shared with her via email. That email will also include a request for her to forward the email to anyone else she is aware of who is using ungrading and who she feels may be interested in participating.

A second tactic will be that the graduate student researcher on this project will share the recruitment flyer with each of the members of her dissertation committee (as this intended study is being conducted to fulfill the requirements of her dissertation.) She will send an individual email out to each member of her committee with the request that they also forward the email to anyone they are aware of who is using ungrading and who they feel may be interested in participating.

A third tactic involves reaching out to TLOS here at Virginia Tech, to inquire if they know about any teachers here that may be using ungrading in their courses. If TLOS identifies any teachers here at Virginia Tech who are using ungrading in their courses, the flyer will also be emailed to those individuals.

The emails of the recruitment flyer will also contain the link to an anonymous Google Form (for teachers). The recruitment flyer will ask that any teacher who is potentially interested in participating to click that link, and to complete the screening questionnaire that this link will take them to. The last question of the screening questionnaire will ask that if they are interested in participating in this research to provide their email address.

Any teacher who expresses interest in participating through this form will be contacted at the email address they have provided. They will be sent an email with a request to review the Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study (for teachers). That request will also ask that if a potential participant is still interested in becoming a participant after reviewing that information sheet, to respond to express their confirmed interest in wanting to participate.

Recruiting Students

After using these processes to identify teachers using ungrading in their course(s) in the Spring 2023 semester, the next recruitment step would be to identify students in those courses who might be willing to participate.

For this step, after receiving confirmation of willingness to participate from the teachers, they will be asked to share a flyer (for students) with students in their classes very early in the semester. The sharing of that recruitment flyer will contain a link to an anonymous Google Form that will link to a prescreening survey (for students). The recruitment flyer will ask that any student who is potentially interested in participating to use that link, and to complete the screening questionnaire that this link will take them to. The last question of the screening questionnaire will ask that if they are interested in participating in this research to provide their email address.

Any student who expresses interest in participating through this form will be contacted at the email address they have provided. They will be sent an email with a request to review the Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study (for students). That request will also ask that if a potential participant is still interested in becoming a participant after reviewing that information sheet, to respond to express their confirmed interest in wanting to participate.

Scheduling Interviews

Student interviews and teacher interviews will be set up through the email addresses provided from participants. One interview with each participating teacher will be requested to take place during the Spring 2023 semester. Three interviews with each participating student will be requested to take place during the Spring 2023 semester: one around the beginning of the semester, one around the mid-way point of the semester, and one around the conclusion of the semester.

Each interview is estimated to take 30-60 minutes. The interviews will take place across the Spring 2023 semester (approximately January 2023 to May 2023). The interview process will conclude when the third (and final) round of interviews with students is complete.

Content Analysis

This study also intends to include a content analysis of course syllabi of the courses that are to be involved in the study. The request for course syllabi will be detailed on the information sheet for teacher participants. Course syllabi will be requested from teacher participants via email towards the beginning of the Spring 2023 semester.

Participant Observations

This study also seeks to include participant observations: of an online Twitter conference which took place on Oct 15, 2022, and of monthly zoom meetings (that have currently taken place from September - November 2022) that have taken place with teachers using and/or interested in using upgrading in their classrooms.

Graduate student researcher on this project, Amy Ernstes, attended the October 15th online Twitter conference about ungrading due to her personal interest in incorporating ungrading into the courses she is teaching. She also became aware of monthly zoom

meetings among teachers who are interested in ungrading via Twitter, and also started attending these once a month meetings in September, and has currently attended a monthly meeting in September, October, and November.

While she participated in these events due to personal interest in incorporating ungrading into her courses, these events have since become relevant to this intended study. Thus, this study seeks to utilize this information on this present project.

Any information that would be used from either of these sources would be shared confidentially. Thus, any mention of tweets from the Twitter conference would be kept confidential and would not include any identifying information. While mention may consider the content, it would not provide any detail about the account or person who tweeted the information. Similarly, any mention of conversations from the monthly meetings would be kept confidential and would not include any identifying information. While mention may consider the content, it would not provide any detail about individuals who made specific comments.

Furthermore - in order to secure permission to use the monthly ungrading content and content from the conference in this study moving forward - student researcher Amy Ernstes has sought approval of this information being used confidentially through the organizer of the monthly meetings and twitter conference (the same person organized both). She has reached out to the organizer and asked permission to use content from the meetings and twitter conference. The approval from this person via email has been included in the supporting document portion of this application. will reach out to the organizer and ask permission to use content from the meetings in this project.

Please select the methods that you will use to collect data about participants. Upload all data collection forms to Protocol Management.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Screening questionnaire(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Survey(s), including online survey(s)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Demographic questionnaire(s)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Interview guide(s) or question(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Focus group(s)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other, please specify: Click here to provide a response.

5.2 What data will you collect during the study and how you will obtain them? Please include the name of the software and descriptions of electronic data collection, database matching, and app- or device-based data collection. If third party software will be used, please provide the name of the software, and indicate if you have confirmed that the software has been approved for use (see <https://vt.cobblestone.software/public/>).

The data for this study will consist of transcribed interviews with teachers and students. The interviews will take place on zoom. The interviews will be recorded via zoom. These recordings will be used for transcription purposes. Once the interviews are transcribed, the video/audio recordings will be immediately deleted.

5.3 Will your research involve any audio and/or video recordings?

- Yes, respond to question 5.4
- No, skip to question 5.5

5.4 Who will transcribe or code audio and/or video recordings? If third party software will be used, please provide the name of the software, and indicate if you have confirmed that the software has been approved for use (see <https://vt.cobblestone.software/public/>).

The graduate student researcher on this project will transcribe audio/video recordings by hand.

5.5 Please select the identifiers you will obtain (whether directly from participants or from another source). The collection of social security numbers, student records, including grades and assignments, may require approval from Virginia Tech data stewards prior to use. Please contact the Privacy and Data Protection Program at prdp@vt.edu for information on additional approvals.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Name
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Geographical subdivisions smaller than a state, including street address, city, county, precinct, zip code, and equivalent geocodes (note, the initial three digits of a zip code are not considered identifiable)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Elements of dates (except year) directly related to an individual, including birth date, admission date, discharge date, date of death, and single year of age over 89 and all elements of dates (including year) indicative of such age (note, such ages and elements may be aggregated into a single category of age 90+)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Phone numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Fax numbers
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Electronic mail addresses (e-mail)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Social Security numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Medical record numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Health plan beneficiary numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Account numbers

<input type="checkbox"/>	Certificate/license numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Vehicle identifiers and serial numbers, including license plate numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Device identifiers and serial numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Web Universal Resource Locators (URLs)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Internet protocol (IP) address numbers
<input type="checkbox"/>	Biometric identifiers, including finger and voice prints (audio recording)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Full face photographic images and any comparable images (including video recording)
<input type="checkbox"/>	Student record number or identification number
<input type="checkbox"/>	Student grades or classroom assignments
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Username for online or computer accounts
<input type="checkbox"/>	Any other unique identifying number, characteristic, or code (note this does not mean the unique code assigned by the investigator to code the data): Click here to provide a response.

6.0 Participant Population

6.1 Provide a general description of the individuals who will be included in your study (e.g., Virginia Tech undergraduate students, a national sample of adults with engineering degrees) and how you will screen them for eligibility.

Undergraduate teachers who utilize ungrading practices in their courses and students who are taking those courses will be the participants in this study. To ensure that participants are 18 years or older, this stipulation will be clarified in the Information Sheet for Participation and the pre-screening survey for students will also ask students to confirm that they are 18 years of age or older.

6.2 Provide the geographic location of where you will recruit participants (e.g., New River Valley; Blacksburg, VA; Paris, France).

The United States

6.3 Describe any populations or groups that you will target for inclusion in or exclusion from your sample. Please indicate why these groups have been selected and how your participant selection is equitable.

The targeted groups for this study will be undergraduate teachers who use ungrading in their courses and undergraduate students who are enrolled in their courses. These are

the targeted groups because the practice of ungrading is the focus of this intended study.

6.4 Will your research involve individuals who are vulnerable (pregnant women, minors, prisoners, adults with decisional impairment, students, and individuals who are economically or socially disadvantaged)? Pregnant women should be included in minimal risk studies that pose no risk to the woman or fetus.

Yes, respond to question 6.5

No, skip to question 6.6

6.5 Please specify which vulnerable populations you are including and provide justification for including these individuals. Describe additional safeguards you will include to protect their rights and welfare.

N/A

6.6 Indicate the total number of participants to be enrolled and how this number was determined (e.g., sample size calculation [show], number of available participants in a finite pool, number of tests funding award would allow).

The aim of this intended study is to recruit 5-10 teachers who are teaching at the undergraduate level and who are using ungrading practices in their courses in the Spring 2023 semester. The aim of this intended study is to recruit 3-10 students from each of those courses, and to recruit 15-30 students total. Thus, the total number of participants to be enrolled is 5-10 teachers and 15-30 students.

7.0 Recruitment Methods

7.1 Describe when, where, and how you will recruit potential participants. If recruitment will be online, include the name(s) of participant management system (e.g., Ripple), the social media platform or online forums that you will use, include web address and contact information (for example MTURK, Facebook, Twitter, or Reddit). If recruitment will be in person include the specific location(s) (e.g., students in the library, community members at a gathering, or members of a local gym) and the methods that you will use to identify potential participants.

The primary mode of recruitment will take place online through the social media platforms Twitter and Discord. The recruitment flyer for teachers will be posted through the personal/professional accounts of graduate student Amy Ernstes on both Twitter and Discord. This recruitment flyer will be tweeted in December and/or January and/or February 2023.

A secondary mode of recruitment will be sharing the recruitment flyer for teachers out to individuals directly via email. These individuals will include: an already identified instructor using ungrading methods in her undergraduate courses (that graduate student Amy Ernstes worked for as a TA previously), the graduate student researcher's dissertation committee members, and any individuals identified by Virginia Tech's TLOS as using ungrading practices in their courses. These emails will ask potential participants to follow a link to fill out a pre-sceneing survey and/or to forward the flyer to other teachers that the recipients may be aware of who may be eligible to participate.

7.2 Describe materials that you will be used to recruit participants. Use the Worksheet on Advertisements [HRP 315.1](#) as a guide. Attach final copies of these documents with this protocol in Protocol Management and be sure to include the IRB protocol number on each document.

- For flyers, attach the final copy of printed flyers.
- For Virginia Tech News, Facebook postings and ads, newspaper ads, websites, MTurk/SONA/online survey systems, etc.
- For email recruitments, please include the subject line as well as the text.
- For advertisements meant for audio or video broadcast, please submit the wording of the advertisement prior to taping (to avoid having to re-record with approved language) and submit the final recorded version for IRB review before use.
- Describe any payment to participants. Please review [HRP 092.1](#) *Payment to Research Participants* to ensure you are following the most recent guidance. Separate payments into appropriate categories, such as reimbursement for expenses, time and effort, and additional incentives for study participation. For each category, specify the amount (including any pro-rated amount), schedule, and method of payment.

Recruitment flyers have been submitted along with this application. There are two types of recruitment flyers: a recruitment flyer for teachers and a recruitment flyer for students. The recruitment flyer for teachers will be shared via social media - Twitter and Discord - and through email to individuals. The recruitment flyer for students will be shared from teachers to their students either via email or their institution's LMS.

The text that will be provided along with these methods is detailed below.

Payment will be provided to student participants. Payment will be provided to student participants at the conclusion of each of three interviews and an additional bonus payment will be provided at the conclusion of all three interviews. This payment amount will be at least \$15 and up to \$20 – for each of these four payments. Since this intended study is in its initial proposal phase, funding for this intended study has not yet been sought. Funding will determine the exact amount of payment.

Payment will be offered in the form of gift certificates. Students will have the choice to select from the option of gift certificates from Amazon, Target, or Barnes & Noble. Students will be asked to verify their choice via email. Gift certificates will be emailed to students at the completion of each interview (and within 48 hours of the completion of an interview). Students will thus receive compensation with the completion of each interview, even if they do not complete the study by participating in all three interviews.

Recruitment flyer for teachers to be shared via:

1) Twitter

a. Twitter posting

Do you “ungrade”? If so, I would love to hear from you! I am a doctoral student conducting a study that focuses on the student experience of ungrading. Please check out my flyer, and if interested take a short pre-screening survey here: [ADD LINK](#). #ungrading #highereducation

2) Discord

a. Discord posting

Do you “ungrade”? If so, I would love to hear from you! I am a doctoral student conducting a study that focuses on the student experience of ungrading. Please check out my flyer, and if interested take a short pre-screening survey here: [ADD LINK](#). #ungrading #highereducation

3) Email

a. Email Template (to committee members and person I TA'd for who uses ungrading)

b. SUBJECT: Ungrading Recruitment Flyer

Dear [name],

Hello! As you know, I am currently in the beginning stages of working on a dissertation for my graduate program in Sociology at Virginia Tech.

I am studying the pedagogical philosophy and practice of ungrading. I am seeking to recruit teachers who use any practices that they identify as ungrading in their undergraduate courses.

I am reaching out to you with a recruitment flyer for my intended dissertation study. I am sending this to you either because you may be eligible and/or because you may know teachers who may be eligible to participate. If you may be eligible and interested in participating, please use the following link to fill out a pre-screening survey to determine your eligibility: ADD LINK HERE. This survey should take no more than 15 minutes of your time.

If you know of other teachers who may be eligible to participate, and you would feel comfortable doing so, please forward this flyer to them.

Thank you!

- c. Email Template (for anyone that TLOS identifies)
- d. SUBJECT: Ungrading Recruitment Flyer

Dear [name],

Hello! My name is Amy Ernstes and I am a doctoral student in the sociology department here at Virginia Tech. I am reaching out to you because I am in the beginning stages of working on a dissertation that focuses on ungrading, and in my conversations with TLOS, they shared with me that you may be someone who uses practices of ungrading in your teaching.

I am reaching out to you with a recruitment flyer for my intended dissertation study. If you may be eligible and interested in participating, please use the following link to fill out a pre-screening survey to determine your eligibility: ADD LINK HERE. This survey should take no more than 15 minutes of your time.

If you know of other teachers who may be eligible to participate, and you would feel comfortable doing so, please forward this flyer to them.

Thank you!

Recruitment flyer for students – to be shared from teacher via email or LMS:

- 1) Text that will be provided:

Hello!

My name is Amy and I am a doctoral student in the sociology department at Virginia Tech. I also teach sociology and my research interests include teaching and education.

Would you be interested in participating in a study I am conducting this semester? Participation is voluntary and you would be compensated. Please see the flyer for further information.

If interested, please use the following link to fill out a pre-screening survey to determine your eligibility: ADD LINK HERE. This survey should take no more than 10 minutes of your time.

If you would like to reach out to me directly with any questions, please email me at: ernstes@vt.edu. Thank you for your consideration!

8.0 Risks to Participants

8.1 List the reasonably foreseeable risks, discomforts, hazards, or inconveniences to the participants related to their' participation in the research. Include a description of the probability, magnitude, duration, and reversibility of the risks. Consider physical, psychological, social, legal, privacy, reputational, and economic risks. **Do not indicate "no risk" or "N/A."** Instead, for studies with very low risk (e.g., anonymous online survey on a mundane topic) indicate "The investigators are not aware of any risks from participation in this study." or "No more than risks that are found in everyday life." Common risk types include:

- Psychological (e.g., potential for stress, discomfort, and/or embarrassment)
- Social (e.g., potential for discrimination or stigmatization and disruption of personal and family relationships)
- Legal (e.g., potential for disclosure of illegal activity, negligence)
- Privacy (e.g., potential for personal information being accessed, used, or disclosed without the participants' knowledge or consent, breach of confidentiality/security)
- Reputational (e.g., loss of stature in the community, in business, or negative media coverage)
- Economic (e.g., potential for individuals to lose access to economic services, employment, insurability)

Psychological: No more than risks that are found in everyday life.

Social: The investigators are not aware of any risks from participation in this study.

Legal: The investigators are not aware of any risks from participation in this study.

Privacy: No more than risks that are found in everyday life.

Reputational: The investigators are not aware of any risks from participation in this study.

Economic: The investigators are not aware of any risks from participation in this study.

8.2 Describe procedures or safeguards intended to reduce the probability and magnitude of risks.

Participation in this study is voluntary, participants are not required to participate, and individuals can stop participating without negative consequences. These safeguards ensure participant autonomy by eliminating the risk of pressure or coercion from the researchers. Additionally, interview video/audio recordings will be deleted immediately after transcription.

8.3 If applicable, describe risks to others who are not participants (e.g., mandatory reporting of abuse, unflattering results generalized to identifiable or vulnerable communities):

N/A

9.0 Potential Benefits to Participants

9.1 Describe the potential benefits individual participants might experience from participating in the research. Include the probability, magnitude, and duration of the potential benefits. Do not include benefits to society or others. Do not list monetary or non-monetary compensation for participation, as this is not a benefit. If there are no anticipated direct benefits for participants, please state that below.

N/A

10.0 Data Management and Confidentiality

10.1 Describe procedures that you will use to ensure the validity of collected data.

- How will you prevent the data from being inadvertently changed?

- How will data be accessed by the study team?
- How will you prevent those not on the study team from accessing the information?
- How will you back up your data to protect them from loss?
- How will you ensure that all copies of the data will remain at Virginia Tech when there is a change in study personnel?

Video/audio recordings will be taken of the conducted interviews over zoom. The recording function on zoom will be utilized to create these recordings. The video/audio recordings will be transcribed by graduate student Amy Ernstes by hand. The video/audio recordings will be immediately deleted after transcription. The transcriptions will be saved to the graduate student's Virginia Tech account google drive. This account is password protected and transcriptions will be saved as restricted files, which will not be shared with anyone.

This intended study will not undergo a change in personnel, as it is a project being undertaken as a dissertation.

10.2 From the list below check all the processes you will use to handle and secure study data during collection, storage, use, and transmission. Describe the process in the text field. Keep in mind that data is owned by Virginia Tech and must be stored on the university's resources. Helpful resources are available on the Privacy and Research Data Protection Program [website](#). Include information about:

- Training of study staff
- Authorization of access
- Password protection
- Encryption
- Physical controls
- Separation of identifiers and data
- Equipment or devices data to be used to collect or store data
- Other, specify below

Audio/video recordings of the zoom interviews will be stored on the graduate student researcher's password protected Google drive account. Files stores on the Google drive account are encrypted. These interviews will be transcribed, and the resulting transcriptions will also be stored on the graduate student researcher's password protected Google drive account. Once an interview is transcribed, the audio/video recording of that interview will be deleted.

10.3 Do you plan to store data online or in the cloud?

- Yes, respond to question 10.4

No, skip to question 10.5

10.4 Please indicate the location of storage and any software used to access or input data. Please ensure that the data storage and software have been approved for use for Virginia Tech. You can review the list of approved software and data storage services at <https://vt.cobblestone.software/public/>. If you need assistance determining an appropriate location for your data or confirming software or storage have been approved, please contact the Privacy and Research Data Protection Program at prdp@vt.edu.

Data from this project will be stored on graduate student Amy Ernstes' Virginia Tech google drive account. NVivo 12 Plus & NVivo 12 Mac (contract number: LA-2008-635 in Cobblestone) will be used to code the data.

10.5 Does your research involve collaborators from other institutions or organizations?

Yes, respond to question 10.6

No, skip to question 10.7

10.6 For collaborative projects, describe how data will be handled and secured. If a central storage mechanism will be used, please indicate which institution is hosting the data:

N/A

10.7 Describe the plan for data disposition following the conclusion of the study (e.g., long-term archive of data, data destruction).

- How long will the data be stored?
- Where and how data will be stored?
- What information will be included in the long-term storage of data?
- When and how will personal identifiers be destroyed?
- Who will have access to the data during long term storage?
- Will you make the data available through a public or curated archive? Are you obligated to do so by a sponsor/grant agreement?

The audio/video recordings of the interviews will be deleted as soon as they are transcribed. The resulting transcripts will use pseudonyms instead of real names.

Those transcriptions will be stored at least through the Spring 2024 academic semester, the semester that the graduate student researcher on this project intends to complete and defend the dissertation that this study intends to inform. The de-identified interview

transcripts will be retained for up to ten years, to provide an opportunity to utilize this information for publication in peer-reviewed journals.

The only people who will have access to the data will be the research team listed on this application – the PI and the graduate student researcher. The data will not be made available through a public or curated archive and there is no obligation to a sponsor or grant agreement that this study be made available to anyone else.

11.0 Provisions to Protect the Privacy Interests of Participants

11.1 Describe the steps that you will take to protect participants' privacy interests. "Privacy interest" refers to a person's desire to place limits on with whom they interact or to whom they provide personal information (e.g., collecting the minimal amount of private information required to complete the study, protecting the data once it is obtained, obtaining a Certificate of Confidentiality).

Only the minimal amount of private information required to complete the study will be asked from the participants. Participation is voluntary, and participants can choose to leave the study at any time. Participants will be informed, via the Information Sheet, and reminded at the beginning of each interview - that they can refuse to answer any question.

The data will be protected: it will only be held on graduate student Amy Ernestes' Virginia Tech google account google drive. She and the PI, Dr. Dave Brunsmas, will be the only people who will have access to this account.

11.2 Describe steps that you will take to make participants feel at ease with the research situation in terms of the questions being asked. "At ease" does not refer to physical discomfort, but the sense of intrusiveness a participant might experience in response to questions, making it clear on surveys that participants can discontinue at any time, not asking questions about private or sensitive issues unless necessary for the research.

Participants will be made to feel at ease by making it clear that they can choose not to answer any questions involved in the interviews and that they can discontinue participation at any time. This will be clearly stated in the Information Sheet for Participation, for both teachers and students, and will be reiterated at the beginning of each interview.

11.3 Describe any required reporting that might occur because of your research questions, study populations, and data collection methods. Examples of required reporting in the Commonwealth of Virginia and Virginia Tech include:

- **Any** suspicions (e.g., circumstantial, disclosed) of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual) and neglect
- Sexual discrimination and/or sexual violence that involves a student
- Disclosure or signs of intention to harm oneself (i.e., suicidal ideation and/or plan)
- Disclosure or signs of desire to harm others (i.e., homicidal ideation and/or plan)
- Suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of vulnerable adults (e.g., individuals with a disability, elderly persons)

It is not anticipated that this study would result in the sharing of such information. In the unanticipated event that such information is shared, the graduate student who will be interviewing participants is aware of the mandatory reporting requirement for all VT employees that would require that the Virginia Tech Title IX Coordinator would have to be notified about matters of possible sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, or stalking.

12.0 Consent Process

12.1 Indicate the process by which you will inform participants about the study and determine their voluntary decision to participate. If consent is implied that process should be described here. Please upload the information sheet and scripts referenced in this section to Protocol Management.

A recruitment flyer will be provided to potential participants. This project will use two recruitment flyers: one for students and one for teachers. The flyer will ask interested potential participants to follow a link to a pre-screening survey on Google Forms. The last question on this survey will ask if potential participants filling out the survey are interested in moving forward to become a participant. This question will ask potential participants to check a box indicating that “yes” they are interested and will ask anyone who has indicated “yes” on this question to voluntarily share their email address if they wish to participate. For anyone who indicates this interest, the Information Sheet for Participants will be provided to them for review via email. They will be asked to review this Information Sheet and to respond via email to confirm if, after reviewing this sheet, they wish to participate in this research. Thus, if potential participants confirm that they are interested in participating after reviewing the Information Sheet, consent will be implied in this way.

For observations of the online Twitter conference, this information is publicly available. Further, any content from the online Twitter conference used in this study will not use any identifying information about any involved people or information about any involved people’s accounts. For observations of the monthly ungrading meetings, any information from those meetings used in this study will not use any identifying information about

any involved people. Consent to use any content from these meetings and the twitter conference has been sought through the meeting/conference organizer and the documentation of this consent via email has been documented in the supporting documents portion of this application.

12.2 Does your research involve Non-English speaking participants?

- Yes, respond to question 12.3
- No, skip to question 12.4

12.3 Indicate what language(s) other than English are understood by prospective participants or representative and describe the process you will use to ensure that the information will be provided in a language that they understand.

N/A

12.4 Does your research involve participants who are not yet adults (minors: infants, children, teenagers)?

- Yes, respond to question 12.5
- No, skip to question 12.6

12.5 Describe the criteria that you will use to determine legal age for consent to treatments or procedures involved in the research under the applicable law of the jurisdiction in which the research will be conducted (e.g., in Virginia, individuals under the age of 18 years). Make sure you include the appropriate consent or assent template. If you are unsure which one to include contact the HRPP at irb@vt.edu. The inclusion of children includes some restrictions and additional information might be needed.

- For research conducted in Virginia, review “SOP: Legally Authorized Representatives, Minors, and Guardians ([HRP-013](#))” to determine which individuals in the state meet the definition of “minor.”
- For research conducted outside of the Virginia, please describe the legal requirements for that state’s or locality’s definition of “minor.”

Describe the process for obtaining parental permission. Federal requirements state that:

- Permission from one parent is acceptable for studies that involve no greater than minimal risk OR involve greater than minimal risk but present the prospect of direct benefit to the minor participant.
- Permission from both parents is required in all other cases (unless one parent is deceased, unknown, incompetent, or not reasonably available, or when only one parent has legal responsibility for the care and custody of the minor).

Describe whether you will obtain permission from individuals other than parents or legally authorized representatives, and if so, who will be allowed to provide permission. Describe the process you will use to determine these individuals' authority to consent to the minor's general medical care.

- Indicate whether you will obtain assent from all, some, or none of the minors. If you will obtain assent from some minors, indicate which minors will be required to assent. Consider chronological age and intellectual capacity when determining who will be required to provide assent (e.g., infants are unable to assent, while teenagers are likely able to read and sign an assent form).
- When assent of minors is obtained, describe whether and how you will document it. Will minors sign an assent form or give verbal assent?

N/A

12.6 For research that involves deception describe how the study meets all of the following criteria for an alteration of the consent process:

- The research involves no more than minimal risk to the subjects
- The alteration will not adversely affect the rights and welfare of the subjects
- The research could not practicably be carried out without the alteration/deception
- (Optional but encouraged in most cases) Subjects will be provided with additional pertinent information after participation (i.e., debriefing for studies involving deception)

N/A

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter



Division of Scholarly Integrity and
Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board
North End Center, Suite 4120 (MC 0497)
300 Turner Street NW
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
540/231-3732
irb@vt.edu
<http://www.research.vt.edu/sirc/hrpp>

MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 16, 2022
TO: David Brunsmma, Amy Marie Ernstes
FROM: Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572)
PROTOCOL TITLE: The Student Experience of Ungrading
IRB NUMBER: 22-1091

Effective December 16, 2022, the Virginia Tech Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.104 (d) category(ies) 2(ii),4(i).

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit an amendment to the HRPP for a determination.

This exempt determination does not apply to any collaborating institution(s). The Virginia Tech HRPP and IRB cannot provide an exemption that overrides the jurisdiction of a local IRB or other institutional mechanism for determining exemptions.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<https://secure.research.vt.edu/external/irb/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before beginning your research.)

PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Determined As: **Exempt, under 45 CFR 46.104(d) category(ies) 2(ii),4(i)**
Protocol Determination Date: **December 16, 2022**

ASSOCIATED FUNDING:

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this protocol, if required.

Invent the Future

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY
An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution

SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS:

***Please note: The HRPP office has stopped stamping documents for Exempt protocols. It is your responsibility to maintain these documents and make current versions available on request.

Date*	OSP Number	Sponsor	Grant Comparison Conducted?

* Date this proposal number was compared, assessed as not requiring comparison, or comparison information was revised.

If this protocol is to cover any other grant proposals, please contact the HRPP office (irb@vt.edu) immediately.

Appendix C: Flyer for Educator Recruitment

IRB #22-1091


DO YOU "UNGRADE"?

DO YOU:

- TEACH AT THE UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL?
- USE PRACTICES IN YOUR TEACHING THAT YOU IDENTIFY AS UNGRADING?


If so you may be eligible to participate in my study! For more information, please use the posted link. If you have questions, feel free to DM me directly.

Thank you!




Appendix D: Posts on Twitter For Educator Recruitment

← **Post**

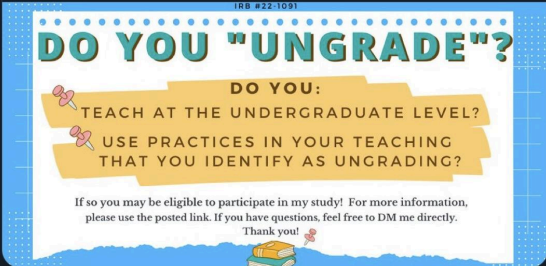
 **Amy Ernstes**
@AmyErnstes

Will you be “ungrading” this semester? If so, I’d still love to hear from you!

Please check out my flyer about my research on [#ungrading](#). Thanks!


 **Amy Ernstes** @AmyErnstes · 1/5/23

Do you “ungrade”? If so, I would love to hear from you! I am a doctoral student conducting research on ungrading. Please check out my flyer. If interested, take a short survey here: forms.gle/XQVM8XSKZGHpEg... #ungrading #highereducation #AcademicTwitter

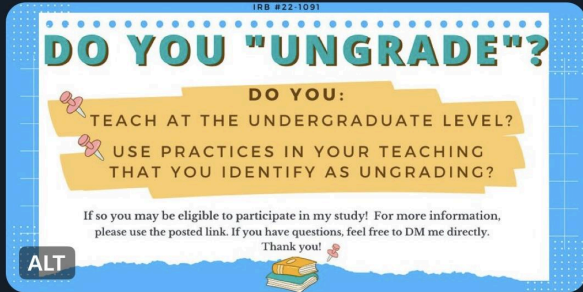


1:41 PM · 1/10/23 From Earth · **366** Views

← **Post**

 **Amy Ernstes**
@AmyErnstes

Do you “ungrade”? If so, I would love to hear from you! I am a doctoral student conducting research on ungrading. Please check out my flyer. If interested, take a short survey here: forms.gle/XQVM8XSKZGHpEg... #ungrading #highereducation #AcademicTwitter



11:02 AM · 1/5/23 From Earth · **5.6K** Views

 View analytics

29 Reposts **1** Quote **38** Likes **4** Bookmarks

Appendix E: Google form survey questions for educator recruitment

1) This study is seeking educators who are teaching at the undergraduate level and who will be using practices of ungrading in one or more courses in the spring of 2023. Will you be teaching one or more undergraduate courses in spring 2023 that will utilize practices you would identify as ungrading?

2) If you answered "yes" or "maybe/not sure" to the previous question, please provide one or more sentences that describe the practices that you do (or might) identify as "ungrading".

3) For approximately how many semesters have you been using practices in your teaching that you do (or might) identify as "ungrading"?

4) If you answered "yes" or "maybe" to question #1, please provide the name of those courses (that you will be or might be using ungrading in) and the affiliated department of those courses.

5) If you listed courses in the previous prompt, please provide the name of the institution(s) through which these courses are being offered.

6) If you listed any courses in question #4, do any of these courses cover topics related to social inequalities? This can include class inequalities, racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and/or considerations about oppression and privilege. If yes, please provide a short 1-3 sentence description of what related topics are covered, and approximately how many weeks of the semester consider these topics.

7) If you are eligible, you may be invited to participate in this research study. This would involve your willingness to complete one interview of approximately 45-60 minutes. This would also involve your willingness to share a recruitment flyer for students (either via email or your institution's LMS) with some of your students in the Spring 2023 semester. If you are eligible, would you be willing to complete one interview and share a recruitment flyer with your students in eligible courses?

8) If you answered "yes" or "maybe" to the previous question, please provide an email address where you may be reached. I will reach out to you so that you may ask any questions that you have about the study. I will also provide an Information Sheet with full details on this study to confirm whether you would like to become a participant. Thank you for your consideration!



Hi, my name is Amy.

And I would love to talk
with you about your
experiences as a college
student!

As you may know, you are in a course this semester that is utilizing the unique practice of ungrading, and I am conducting research on the student experience of ungrading.

IRB # 22-1091

Participation would involve:

- **interviews with me during this semester**
- **compensation of \$60*** 

*Compensation will be provided across the semester. Please see survey link for details. →

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Please follow
the link or QR code below
for a survey:

[https://forms.
gle/SWBzZ7aeu
WAjgm3N6](https://forms.gle/SWBzZ7aeuWAjgm3N6)



Appendix G: Google form survey questions for student recruitment

1. Are you at least 18 years of age or older?
2. What college or university are you currently attending?
3. What course did you receive this flyer in?
4. Approximately how many semesters of college courses have you taken?
5. Have you decided upon a major? If so, what is your major?
6. Prior to the Spring 2023 semester, have you ever taken a course that utilized ungrading practices?
7. If you feel comfortable in doing so, please answer the following demographic questions. You may opt to leave any blank and still submit this survey ...
8. How do you identify your gender?
9. How would you describe your class standing/socioeconomic background?
10. Are you a first-generation college student?
11. If you are eligible, you may be invited to participate in this research study. This would involve your willingness to complete three interviews of approximately 45-60 minutes each, across the Spring 2023 semester (one at the beginning, around mid-way, and at the end of the semester). Involvement would thus include three hours maximum.
12. If you answered “yes” or “I am unsure” to the previous question, please provide an email address where you may be reached.

Appendix H: “Informational Sheet for Participation in a Research Study” form for educators



Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: David L. Brunsmas
IRB# and Title of Study: 22-1091 The Student Experience of Ungrading
Sponsor: N/A

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

My name is Amy Ernestes, and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech. I am conducting this study as a part of my course work. I am studying the pedagogical philosophy and practice of “ungrading.” In this study, I hope to explore the student experience of ungrading. To do so, I am recruiting teachers who will be using practices that they identify as ungrading in one or more of their courses in the Spring 2023 semester. I will be interviewing those teachers and seeking potential student participants in those courses to also interview.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete an interview about your experiences with teaching and your interest in and use of ungrading. The interview will take place over zoom and will be recorded over zoom for the purpose of transcription. The interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will also share a recruitment flyer with students who are taking a course with you (a course that uses ungrading practices) in the Spring 2023 semester. That recruitment flyer may be shared through email or through your institution’s Learning Management System (LMS). If you decide to participate in this study, you will also share your course syllabi for any course that you are teaching in the Spring 2023 semester that utilizes practices that you identify as ungrading.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse

to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be video/audio-recorded over zoom and will then be transcribed. The recording will be stored through the graduate student researcher's secure password protected VT google drive account and will be deleted as soon as the interview is transcribed. The graduate student researcher will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact graduate student researcher Amy Ernstes at ernstes@vt.edu or Principal Investigator David Brunsmad at brunsmad@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix I: Semi-structured interview protocol for educators

IRB # 22-1091

The Student Experience of Ungrading

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Teachers

Preface to interview questions:

I have a set of interview questions that I would like to ask you about your experiences with teaching and ungrading. Please be reminded that you can refuse to answer any questions.

1. Teaching history
 - a. How long have you been teaching?
 - b. What departments have you taught for and what courses have you taught?
 - c. What courses are you teaching currently/in the current semester?
 - d. Do the courses you are teaching in the current semester address social inequalities in any way? If so, can you tell me more about the coverage of related topics in your course(s)?
2. Pedagogy
 - a. How would you describe your pedagogy, as it comes to your teaching?
 - b. What has influenced your pedagogy?
3. Ungrading
 - a. How did you become interested in ungrading? I know there are various strategies and practices that people might put under the “ungrading” umbrella – did you come to one of those first, or to ungrading first?
 - b. How would you define ungrading?
4. Ungrading: Personal Use in Teaching
 - a. What ungrading practices have you used in your courses?
 - b. How long have you been using ungrading in your courses?
 - c. What courses have you used ungrading in?
 - d. Has your use of ungrading in your courses changed at all over time?
 - e. If you have used ungrading practices in more than one semester, what has compelled you to continue using these practices in your courses?
 - f. In your experience, how have students responded to your use of ungrading?

- g. Do you think that student social location (class, race, gender, ability, etc.) impacts student experience of ungrading? Can you tell me more about your answer?

5. Ungrading: Assessment

- a. What do you see as the advantages of using ungrading in your courses?
- b. What do you see as the disadvantages of using ungrading in your courses?

6. Ungrading: Examples

- a. Can you provide me with a specific example of a positive experience you've had in using ungrading in your teaching?
- b. Can you provide me with a specific example of an experience that was not positive in your use of ungrading in your teaching?

7. Ungrading: Social inequalities

- a. (If interviewee teaches courses related to social inequalities):
 - i. Has your use of ungrading impacted how you teach about topics related to social inequalities?
 - ii. Do you feel that your use of ungrading has impacted student learning about topics related to social inequalities?

8. Demographic questions:

- a. I would like to conclude the interview by asking you a few demographic questions about your own social location.
 - i. How would you describe your socioeconomic background and your current socioeconomic standing?
 - ii. How do you identify racially?
 - iii. How would you describe your gender identity?
 - iv. If you feel comfortable in doing so, how would you identify your sexuality?
 - v. If you feel comfortable in doing so, how would you identify your ability/disability status?

Appendix J: “Informational Sheet for Participation in a Research Study” form for students



Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: David L. Brunsmas
IRB# and Title of Study: 22-1091 The Student Experience of Ungrading
Sponsor: N/A

You are invited to participate in a research study. Please note that you must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

My name is Amy Ernestes, and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech. I am conducting this study as a part of my course work. In this study, I hope to explore the student experience of ungrading.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will complete three interviews throughout the Spring 2023 semester. These interviews will focus on your experiences in a course that you are taking that semester that utilizes ungrading practices. Your perceptions of and experiences with ungrading in that course will be the primary focus of the interviews. The first interview will take place towards the beginning of the semester, the second interview will take place towards the mid-way point of the semester, and the third interview will take place towards the end of the semester. The interviews will take place over zoom and will be recorded over zoom for the purpose of transcription.

Each interview should take approximately 45-60 minutes. If you decide to participate in this study, you will receive compensation at the end of each completed interview in the form of a gift certificate (from your choice of Amazon, Target, or Barnes & Noble). You will also receive a bonus compensation amount in the form of a gift certificate at the completion of all three interviews.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study.

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The

investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality. Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be video/audio-recorded over zoom and will then be transcribed. The recording will be stored through the graduate student researcher's secure password protected VT google drive account and will be deleted as soon as the interview is transcribed. The graduate student researcher will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact graduate student researcher Amy Ernstes at ernstes@vt.edu or Principal Investigator David Brunsmad at brunsmad@vt.edu. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

Please print out a copy of this information sheet for your records.

Appendix K: Semi-structured interview protocols for students

Semi-structured Interview Protocol for Students

INTERVIEW #1

Hi! How are you?

Well first just wanted to thank you for participating. I am not sure if I'd mentioned this, but I am doing these interviews as a part of my dissertation – I am interested in teaching and improving teacher practices, and the student experience is an important part of that.

As I've mentioned, this interview will not take longer than an hour as I want to be respectful of your time ... I have a set of questions to ask you that focus on your experience as student, and some that focus specifically on your experiences with the class you are in that is using ungrading practices – which is your **XXX CLASS**

If there are any questions you don't feel comfortable answering – no worries – just let me know and we'll move on ... Do you have any questions for me?

Okay – to start – I am going to set this to **RECORD**. This is just so that I can transcribe the interview – but I will delete the video after that ...

1. General information (*some of these already asked in survey*)
 - a. First, can you tell me your age? I need to confirm you are at least 18 years of age.
 - b. Did you start college directly after graduation from high school?
 - c. What year of college are you currently in? (*or, how many semesters*)
 - d. Are you currently employed? Have you ever held a job while in school?
 - e. Are you a first generation college student?
 - f. Are you involved in any sports or other extracurricular activities at your college?
 - g. Do you speak any languages besides English?
 - h. Have you decided upon a major? If so, what major are you pursuing and why?
2. Student experience this semester
 - a. This is the **third week** of your semester, right?
 - b. How is this semester going so far for you? What other classes are you taking?
3. General student experience
 - a. I know this is a big question – but can you tell me a little about your college experience overall? How would you describe it or summarize it?

- b. Are there any courses you've taken that you would call your favorite? If yes, can you tell me a little more about those?
 - c. Are there any courses that you've taken that you would call your least favorite? If yes, can you tell me a little more about those?

- 4. Experiences with courses that have addressed social inequalities
 - a. I am also interested in your experiences in courses that have addressed social inequalities. This could include class inequalities, racism, sexism, homophobia or other inequalities. Have you taken any courses that have addressed these topics? If yes, what courses?
 - b. Can you tell me a little more about your experiences in learning about social inequalities in these courses?

- 5. Experiences with grades & ungrading
 - a. I would like to know a little more about your experiences with school and grades. This is another big question, but how would you describe your relationship with school and grades? Elementary, middle school, high school, college?
 - b. Can you give me a couple of examples that come to mind regarding your experiences with grades? Whether positive, negative, or otherwise?
 - c. Are you familiar with the practice of ungrading? If so, can you tell me what you know about it?
 - d. Have you ever taken a course in a previous semester that used ungrading? If so, can you tell me about that?

- 6. Current course using ungrading
 - a. You are currently enrolled in a course this semester that uses the practice of ungrading. Can you tell me why you enrolled that course?
 - b. What is your understanding of how ungrading will be used in this course?
 - c. How do you feel about the use of ungrading in this course? (Or, how she structures assignments & assessment for ultimate grades at the end of the semester?)

7. Demographic questions: I would like to conclude the interview by asking you a few demographic questions about your own social location.

- a. What is your current GPA?
- b. How would you describe your socioeconomic background and your current socioeconomic standing? Can you tell me a little more about why you've answered in that way?
- c. How do you identify racially?
- d. How would you describe your gender identity?
- e. If you feel comfortable in doing so, how would you identify your sexuality?
- f. If you feel comfortable in doing so, how would you identify your ability/disability status?

8. LAST: Regarding compensation – are you okay with one of the gift card options mentioned in the email? (Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or Target) ... Which would you prefer? Is the email you provided on the survey (your school email) a good place to send that to? ... Great. You can expect that within 48 hours – but probably sooner!

9. Awesome. So as I've mentioned, I plan to interview participants three times throughout the semester – so after this round, once again mid-semester and once again towards the end or after the semester. So I will be in touch about setting up our mid-semester interview.

10. Again – before we conclude, do you have any further questions for me at this time?

INTERVIEW #2

To take place approximately mid-way throughout the semester

Preface to interview questions:

I have a set of interview questions that I would like to ask you that focus on your experiences as a student. Please be reminded that you can refuse to answer any questions.

1. How has the semester been going for you so far?
2. I'd like to focus most of my questions on the course you are taking that is using ungrading in it. How has that course been going for you specifically?
3. How are you feeling about the use of ungrading in that course?
4. Have your perceptions about ungrading changed since last time we talked? If so, in what ways?
5. How would you compare the course you are in that uses ungrading with your experience with grades in other courses you are currently in?
6. Are there things that you like about the use of ungrading in that course? If so, can you tell me a little more about those things?
7. Are there things that you dislike about the use of ungrading in that course? If so, can you tell me a little more about those things?
8. How do you feel that other students in that course feel about ungrading? Can you tell me more about these perceptions?
9. In thinking about that course generally, can you tell me a little about the subjects you have been learning about?
10. Do you feel that your learning about these topics has been influenced by the practice of ungrading in this course? Or in other words, do you feel that your learning about these topics would be any different in a course that did not use ungrading? Can you tell me more about these perceptions?
11. I'd like to ask a little more about topics related to social inequalities, specifically. This could include class inequalities, racism, sexism, and other inequalities. This could also include topics related to privilege (like white privilege or male privilege). Have any of the courses you are in this

semester covered any of these topics? If yes, can you tell me a little more about what topics have been covered in those courses?

12. If the ungraded course has covered any of these topics, can you tell me more about the coverage of those topics in that class specifically?

a. If you have had experiences with similar topics in other classes (that did not/do not use ungrading), how would you compare the experience of learning about these topics in a course that uses ungrading versus a course that does not use ungrading?

b. Do you feel that the use of ungrading has impacted your own learning about social inequalities? Do you feel that the use of ungrading has impacting the learning environment generally, including the experiences of other students in the class, around learning about these topics?

13. Would you currently elect to take courses in the future that use ungrading? Why or why not?

INTERVIEW #3

To take place towards the end of the semester

Preface to interview questions:

I have a set of interview questions that I would like to ask you that focus on your experiences as a student. Many of these questions are replicated from the second interview. Please be reminded that you can refuse to answer any questions.

1. As we are at the end of the semester, how did this semester go for you overall?
2. I'd again like to focus most of my questions on the course you are taking that is using ungrading in it. How did that course go for you specifically?
3. How are you feeling about the use of ungrading in that course?
4. Have your perceptions about ungrading changed across the course of the semester? If so, in what ways?
5. How would you compare the course you took that used ungrading with your experience with grades in other courses that you took this semester?
6. I'd like to revisit what you like and dislike about ungrading. Can you tell me about what you like and dislike about ungrading? Have these perceptions changed since the last time we talked?
7. How do you feel that other students in that course feel about ungrading? Have there been any new developments since the last time we talked that have influenced these perceptions?
8. In thinking about that course generally, can you tell me a little about the subjects you have been learning about since last we talked?
9. Do you feel that your learning about these topics has been influenced by the practice of ungrading in this course? Or in other words, do you feel that your learning about these topics would be any different in a course that did not use ungrading? Can you tell me more about these perceptions?
10. I'd like to ask a little more about topics related to social inequalities, specifically. This could include class inequalities, racism, sexism, and other inequalities. This could also include topics related to privilege (like white privilege or male privilege). Since the last time we talked, have any of the courses you are in this semester covered any of these topics? If yes, can you tell me a little more about what topics have been covered in those courses?

11. If the ungraded course has covered any of these topics since we last talked, can you tell me more about the coverage of those topics in that class specifically?

a. If you have had experiences with similar topics in other classes (that did not/do not use ungrading), how would you compare the experience of learning about these topics in a course that uses ungrading versus a course that does not use ungrading?

b. Do you feel that the use of ungrading has impacted your own learning about social inequalities? Do you feel that the use of ungrading has impacting the learning environment generally, including the experiences of other students in the class, around learning about these topics?

12. Would you currently elect to take courses in the future that use ungrading? Why or why not?

Appendix L: Semi-structured interview protocols for students

In wrapping up, I would also like to give thanks to the field of sociology for providing the canvas upon which this project was able to come together. Throughout my own ongoing journey as a sociologist, and having taught sociology to undergraduate students for over a decade, I have only grown in appreciating the critical, yet flexible lens that sociology provides.

As C. Wright Mills (1959) explains in his seminal work, “The Promise” (a chapter that coined the term the “sociological imagination”), the sociological imagination grounds the field of sociology in its ability to encourage “a quality of mind” which attunes a person to “the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history,” or in other words, the connection between personal experience and larger societal parameters. As I explain to my students at the beginning of every semester, these connections span the mundane tasks of everyday life, like brushing our teeth,³⁹ to heavier topics like war,⁴⁰ institutional racism,⁴¹ and beyond. I am also constantly reminding students that the central question of sociology isn’t “What is sociological?” - because *everything* is sociological - the question is “How is this sociological?” It is the ongoing practice of wrestling with this question that seeds, nurtures, and cultivates the sociological imagination.

This critical lens articulated by Mills, while specific, also grants flexibility. Given that sociology, and the sociological imagination, are broadly attuned to the complex relationship between individuals and society,⁴² this also situates sociology to embrace interdisciplinary work. As feminist theorist Donna Haraway astutely argues in her work “A Game of Cat’s

³⁹ See the website “Dollar Street” at <https://www.gapminder.org/dollar-street>, and click on the first drop-down box and under “families” and select “toothbrushes.” This should take you to a page which provides video clips of people brushing their teeth, organized by monthly income. This site shows that, while teethbrushing is a fairly universal practice, that the details of this ritual are influenced by socio-economic status. For example, the family on that page from Malawi who relies on a monthly income of \$39 and shows a video clip of a woman brushing her teeth with sand that she has scraped off the side of her house. This individual example can also be contextualized within the broader topic of global inequality, a topic also within the purview of sociology.

⁴⁰ See Mills (1959), in which he summarizes the significance of the sociological imagination to a topic like war.

⁴¹ See DuBois’ (1899) *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*, as just one notable, sociological example.

⁴² Sociologists like to call the back and forth of this dynamic “structuration” (for example, see page 8 of the textbook I use for my intro to sociology course, Giddens et al.’s [2024] *Essentials of Sociology*).

Cradle" (1994),⁴³ "interknitted discourses" (66), or interdisciplinary work, is necessary towards the goal of "effective critical practice" (69). She utilizes the metaphor of the children's game of cat's cradle to make a case for, not only the need for interdisciplinary work, but the reality that what we call "disciplines" are not truly bounded containers in the first place. She describes the cat's cradling of disciplines as "a game for inquiring into all the oddly configured categories called things like science, gender, race, class, nation, or discipline," a physical configuration which depicts that "it is a game that requires heterogenous players who cannot all be members of any one category no matter how mobile and inclusive the category seems to be to those inside it" (69). Harway's cat's cradle, in which disciplines like the social sciences and technoscience work together in the synergistic creation of new knowledge, depicts the value of breaking (already superficial) disciplinary boundaries. Because of its broad scope, I see in sociology an inherent context where space for this type of interdisciplinary cat's cradle is provided. I see this as a foundational strength of sociology as a discipline, and one that provided me with the landscape to undertake this current work on student experiences of ungrading across varying ungrading contexts.

As a result, my dissertation is sociological because it weaves in a variety of strands. My dissertation is sociological because I brought in historical considerations to provide an overview of the history of grades, with a critical eye towards the inequities built into this tradition. As Mills (1959) specifies in "The Promise," an understanding of history is central to the development of one's sociological imagination, as the context of history provides a roadmap for a sociological understanding of current (and future) conditions.

My dissertation is sociological because it is focused on a central social institution: schools. A central aspect to sociology is socialization and the "agents of socialization" which serve as the conduits of the socialization process. School is one of those main institutions (in addition to family, peers, media, and work, see Giddens et al. [2024: 79] or probably any introduction to sociology textbook). School, and the institution of higher education specifically, is the context that houses the student experiences of ungrading in my study.

⁴³ This was an article that was assigned for my preliminary exam for my PhD program in Sociology.

My dissertation is sociological because it highlights and pushes against power dynamics. Concern with societal power dynamics has a rich history in sociology, with Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Michel Foucault representing a few of the heavy hitters in sociological theory. Marxism, or conflict theory, specifically focuses on challenging power dynamics as a means towards challenging social inequalities. My study highlights and pushes against power dynamics by centering the student experience, and in centering the student experience of groups whose voices are not often prioritized. Centering the student experience in my project conveys the importance of the student voice, and it implies, like Friere did, a rejection of the traditional “banking model” of education, which presupposes that the teacher is the expert, and that the student has nothing to contribute to their own learning beyond being a receptacle for information. It further challenges power dynamics by lifting up the experiences of first generation college students and neurodivergent students, who are already disadvantaged at succeeding in academic landscapes that are often not set up to support neurotypical brains and/or the extra challenges of adjustment faced by first generation college students.

My dissertation is sociological because it utilizes the ideas of bell hooks. While bell hooks may not have directly identified with the label “sociologist,” her work is inherently sociological. It is worth noting that the work of people who never identified as sociologists can still be sociological. Karl Marx, for example, considered to be a founding father of sociology, also never referred to himself as a sociologist (Milton 2007). Similarly, hooks’ work is sociological for a laundry list of reasons. One of those reasons is that her work is intrinsically tied to her extensive background in the tradition of Black feminism. Please see my own work, Ernstes (2023), for a more detailed explanation as to how the tradition of Black feminism inherently embodies sociology through the concept of the sociological imagination and public sociology.

My dissertation is sociological because it contains a strand of public sociology. As described by Burawoy (2005), a public sociology is one that is accessible to the public, and that aims towards benefitting the public. Public sociology is the heart of sociology aimed at making the world a better place. While perhaps a small contribution, I view my work as a sociologist, including this dissertation, as always aimed towards that goal. Thus, my dissertation is sociological because of its contributions: it provides rich and detailed cases of

the student experience of ungrading, towards the much grander aim of improving the social institution of education, if even in small ways: beginning with the knowledge it has provided me in my own growth as an educator. Three weeks before my dissertation defense, I presented this work at a conference focused on grading, largely attended by educators (Ernstes 2025). I hope to continue to share my findings from this rich collection of student experiences in ways that can serve as a brick in the limitless wall of inquiry aimed towards expansion in the name of meaningful learning and quality teaching. I see this project, and its contributions as a drop of water in the ocean, a tree in a vast forest, a knot in the configuration of a cat's cradle game, metaphors that all represent that ongoing dynamic between the individual and society that is the heart of sociology.