

## Grading, American Style

Haverford College prides itself, justifiably, on being one of the relatively small number of institutions of higher learning in the United States at which students do not speak openly about grades. We take pride in this because it means that students can focus on doing their best and can be guided by their own internal sense of what is important. In contrast, at many undergraduate colleges and universities in this country, boasting about grades, which can create counterproductive anxieties, is not unusual.

Nevertheless, Haverford does in fact grade, and grades can have consequences both within the College and, more importantly, once you move into life beyond Haverford. More specifically, if you hope to pursue postgraduate study in the United States, the level of academic achievement you attained as an undergraduate might matter.

The first rule about grading in the United States is this: make no assumptions. Your past experience will not necessarily prove to be a useful or accurate guide to deciding what to expect or what is expected of you here. Some generalizations may be made, but grading policy is largely at the discretion of the instructor. In fact, rules and norms vary, sometimes considerably, from institution to institution and from department to department within any college or university, just as certain laws and cultural values vary to some extent from one American state to another.

This short guide will provide some information intended to help you to learn how to use grades to measure your academic progress at Haverford College. In so doing, it will focus on four central issues: final course grades (the grades that are reported on your academic transcript, the only official record of your academic performance in college); Grade Point Average or “GPA,” which is the average of all the final grades earned in the courses (excluding summer courses) you complete at Haverford, Bryn Mawr, Swarthmore, or the University of Pennsylvania; assignment grading within courses; and help resources, specifically how and when to access them.

### General Grading Structure, Final Course Grades, and GPA

The following is the general grading structure, in descending order, at Haverford College: 4.0, 3.7, 3.3, 3.0, 2.7, 2.3, 2.0, 1.7, 1.3, 1.0, and 0.0. However, this obviously does not tell one much because grades do not distribute evenly—not nearly as many students earn a 1.0 as do a 4.0, for instance. To put this in context, consider the following:

- The average grade point average or “GPA”—the running average of all the grades a student earns—is 3.42
- Less than 5 percent of students earn a grade below 2.0
- About one-fifth of the grades at Haverford College are 4.0

If your average final course grades and GPA are between 3.0 and 4.0, your academic performance is typical. If your GPA is 3.0, this is below average, but still solid. Even an average of 2.7 is fine, although having an average significantly below 3.4 can make it more difficult to gain admission to American postgraduate programs. The College becomes most concerned when students are consistently earning grades below 2.7.

In addition, please be aware that, if you want a course to count toward your future major, you must earn a final grade of 2.0 in it, and in order to be automatically admitted to a major at the end of your sophomore year, you must have at least a 2.7 average (that is, average of final course

grades) in the courses you have taken in your intended major department. For instance, if you want to be a history major, you must have at least a 2.7 final course grade average in all the history courses you will have taken up to that point.

For courses that meet general distributional requirements, like the Freshman Writing or Quantitative Reasoning requirements, you need only to earn a final grade of 1.0 in order to satisfy the College's most basic expectations. Obviously, we hope you will aspire to final grades significantly higher than 1.0 in all of your courses and that you will achieve that aspiration, but so far as the College rules are concerned, a final grade 1.0 is all that is required in order to earn a credit or half credit (remember: you need 32 credits to graduate).

That having been said, if you earn too many grades that fall below 2.7, particularly if you fail courses, you may end up on "Academic Warning, which is more typically known in this country as "Probation." That means that you will be placed under special academic supervision and that if your performance does not improve, you might have to take time off from college.

## **Grading of Course Assignments and Requirements**

Similarly, if you get a grade below 2.7, particularly if it is a 2.0 or lower, on an assignment in a course, you should take the matter seriously and see the instructor to find out what you can do to improve your academic performance.

Please read each course syllabus, which outlines the expectations for each course, and fulfill every expectation to the best of your ability. It is not an option, unless explicitly stated, simply to choose not to do an assignment. Also, attendance is expected, and failure to attend with regularity can sometimes have a surprisingly adverse impact on your final grade in a course. Even if a professor does not articulate a policy about attendance or specify how much of your final course grade comes from attendance, please assume that the failure to attend will have an impact on your final course grade.

When reading each course syllabus, please note that every professor chooses to assign different values to each course expectation. In one course, a mid-term exam might count for as little as 10 percent of your final grade, while in another it might count for a third or more of your final grade. The same can be said of attendance. In addition, if you simply choose not to submit the final work due in a course—a final exam or paper—you can be failed in the course even if you were previously doing well in the course and the final counted for only a fraction of your final grade. In short, do all assignments, do them as well as you can, and submit them by the required deadline.

Participation is also expected in many courses, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Particularly if a professor states specifically that participation is expected, you should strive to make appropriate contributions to class discussions. Of course, this does not mean that you will meet this expectation simply by offering random observations that are unrelated or only loosely relevant to the discussion. However, if you can say something directly relevant to the discussion, or if you have a question that relates directly to the general themes of the course or course readings, then offer these questions or observations at an appropriate time.

The American emphasis on participation is reflective of an academic culture that puts a premium on the development of informed self-expression and collaborative inquiry, but it also serves more practical purposes. It helps professors gauge whether students are keeping up with and being reflective about course readings and other assignments. It also enables both professors and

students themselves to identify issues that are confusing or unclear. In addition, participation helps students develop the ability to summarize issues concisely and pose appropriate questions, and it provides the opportunity for students to learn from one another.

However, even American students do not always feel comfortable speaking in front of their peers, so if you are reluctant to participate in class, you should consider visiting your professor during his or her office hours to pose questions and to discuss course issues of interest to you. If you are reluctant to speak in class because you do not feel confident about your grasp of the English language, please consider speaking to your professor about your concerns. More often than not, students whose first language is not English speak English better than they perceive, and in any case, the only way to attain mastery of the language is to speak it and to learn from mistakes. While it cannot be said that every person at Haverford is mature and sensitive, overall our students are understanding and will be supportive of those they know are trying hard to improve their speaking skills and other talents.

## **Help!**

**If you are having trouble with an assignment, then you have a number of options. You should first consider visiting the professor to ask him or her for clarification and assistance. If you need additional help, you should consider getting a peer tutor or visiting one of the college's academic help centers: the Biology Questions Center, the Chemistry Questions Center, the Math Questions Center, the Physics Clinic, the Writing Center. Information on such help resources can be found under "Tutors and Study Resources" at the following web address:**

**<http://www.haverford.edu/deans/OAR/website/>**

If, after making every effort to seek help, you are still having difficulty finishing your work by the established deadlines, you might be able to seek additional time, but you must take the initiative to ask for extensions in a timely way, and you cannot assume that you will get extra time. If you need more time during the semester, then contact your course professor as soon as possible to ask if he or she will agree to give you more time. If you need additional time beyond the end of finals period, then you should contact your professor and your dean to ask for additional time. Additional time beyond the end of final examinations period is typically given only if there are unusual circumstances that clearly make it difficult for you to finish by the established deadlines; such circumstances include significant illness, personal distress so significant as to require professional psychological counseling, and acute family difficulties. In addition, even if you are granted additional time at the end of final exams period, you will be allowed as little as 24 hours and no more than three weeks beyond the last day of finals to complete your work. How much extra time you might get varies according to personal circumstances.

In short, do your best to meet all expectations, but if you find that you are having difficulty doing so, contact your professors and/or your dean as soon as possible. While we cannot promise we will be able to grant your wishes, the only possibility for flexibility is to open the lines of communication with those who are here to help you as soon as you suspect that help might be necessary.