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Evaluating Specifications Grading: A Mixed-Methodology Comparison of Student Perceptions at Three Universities

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Abstract:

Traditional points-based grading systems undermine motivation to learn, are stressful for students, and may fail to accurately quantify learning. Specifications (specs) grading boasts to solve these problems by assessing mastery of course learning outcomes on a Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory basis. Higher final grades are earned from completing more and/or higher-level satisfactory (B-level) work. This paper will share results of a research collaboration that evaluated the boasted benefits of specs grading in comparison to traditional grading at the start and end of the term. We conducted a content analysis on pre-post course student reflections about the grading scheme in Psychology courses taught at three universities (large public and medium-sized private; two minority-serving; 38-50% Freshman Pell Grant recipients). Written reflections were coded for student-centered boasted benefits, such as "motivating to excel and to learn" and "reducing student stress." Each benefit was coded for being MET (i.e., a student perceived the benefit as being upheld; e.g., they were less stressed), FAILED (i.e., a student perceived the benefit as not being upheld; e.g., they were more stressed), both, or not mentioned at all. Additionally, pre-post course survey questions were administered to quantitatively measure students' motivation, stress, and learning perceptions. Content analyses were conducted across the three universities using responses from 109 students. Results indicated some salient pros of specs grading included reports of reduced stress, feeling more

responsibility for their grades (and less like grades are determined by other forces early in the course), and feelings of autonomy. However, a salient con of specs identified was that it may demotivate some students to learn. Quantitative analyses suggested that, at one university, students in the specs class – but not students in the traditional class – reported reduced stress about grades, reduced stress about learning, and increased personal control over learning from early to late in the course. However, those findings were not replicated at the other two universities. Though specs grading may not be a panacea for addressing issues with traditional grading, students do not seem to be harmed by (and may sometimes benefit from!) the use of specifications grading. Specs grading seems worth a try!