

Alternative grading

with Dr Karla D. Rivera Caceres

Talking points

1. What role did grades play in your own educational journey as a student, and how did they shape your motivation and confidence? How might those experiences influence the way you use grades in your own teaching?
2. How do you use formative assessment to assess your students' progress? To what extent does this formative assessment need to be graded? How could an 'ungraded' system benefit the formative assessment you conduct?
3. How do your students respond to and act upon your feedback? How might grades either open the door to growth or close it prematurely?
4. Have you ever felt that a student's final grade failed to reflect what they truly learnt or overcame? How could you better capture that growth?
5. How could your students demonstrate their knowledge, understanding and skills in your subject without a numerical grade?
6. In your classroom, how do you currently recognise your students' skills and attributes, such as persistence, collaboration or intellectual risk-taking? How might these qualities be encouraged and celebrated, even if they are not graded?
7. How have your students' diverse backgrounds, such as language, race or socioeconomic status, shaped the way they experience your grading system? In what ways might traditional grading amplify or ignore those differences, and how could your approach to assessment become more equitable?

Activity

Karla suggests that by removing points and shifting our focus to learning outcomes (LOs), we can create less anxious, more motivated students.

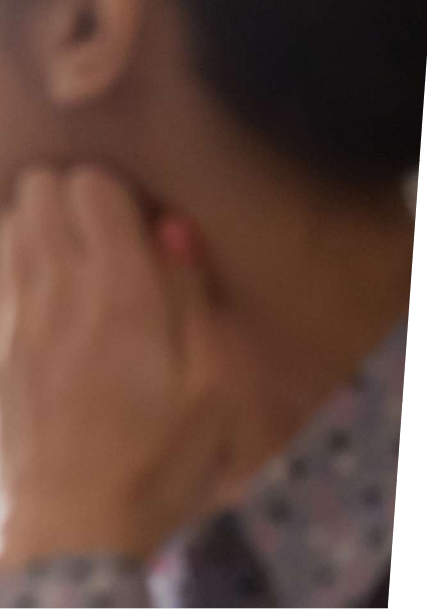
- Select a topic, lesson or unit that you typically assess using points, percentages or letter grades – for example, a lab report, an essay or a unit test.
- Identify 2–3 specific and measurable LOs that students should achieve by the end of this activity. These could be knowledge-based (e.g., “Compare mitosis and meiosis”) or skills-based (e.g., “Construct a clear thesis statement” or “Interpret data from a graph”).
- Fill out the following table, focusing on what you expect students to achieve, how you will measure if they have achieved it and how will you provide additional chances if they fail in their first attempt.

Learning outcome (specific, measurable, attainable)	What resources will I provide for students to achieve mastery?	How will I evaluate mastery?	How can I provide feedback if students fail to master the LO in the first try?
LO1			
LO2			
LO3			

- Deliver your content emphasising the elements that help students obtain mastery. Do not provide points for any tasks or activities that students complete. Instead, provide feedback (Karla encourages the use of rubrics, see example on the next page). Give students 1–2 more chances to improve their work after initial feedback. Focus on helping them master the LO, not just complete the assignment.
- Hold a class discussion or anonymous survey. Ask students:
 - How did this experience feel compared to traditional grading?
 - Did they feel more focused on learning?
 - Did multiple attempts help them understand the material more deeply?

Reflection questions:

- What differences did you notice in student behaviour or engagement during this activity compared to traditionally-graded tasks?
- Did you observe a shift in how students responded to feedback when it was not tied to a score?
- Were students more willing to take intellectual risks or share incomplete ideas? If so, what seemed to encourage that?
- How did this approach allow (or not allow) space for students from different backgrounds and with different needs to thrive?
- What practical challenges did you face (e.g., time, student expectations, institutional constraints)? How might you address them in future attempts?



	Mastered	Not mastered
Use the characteristics of the scientific literary genre in writing		
Paraphrase statements (at least 1)		
Cite statements correctly (at least 1)		
Provide a complete reference list in the correct format and ordered appropriately		
Use formal language		
Use a simple sentence structure		

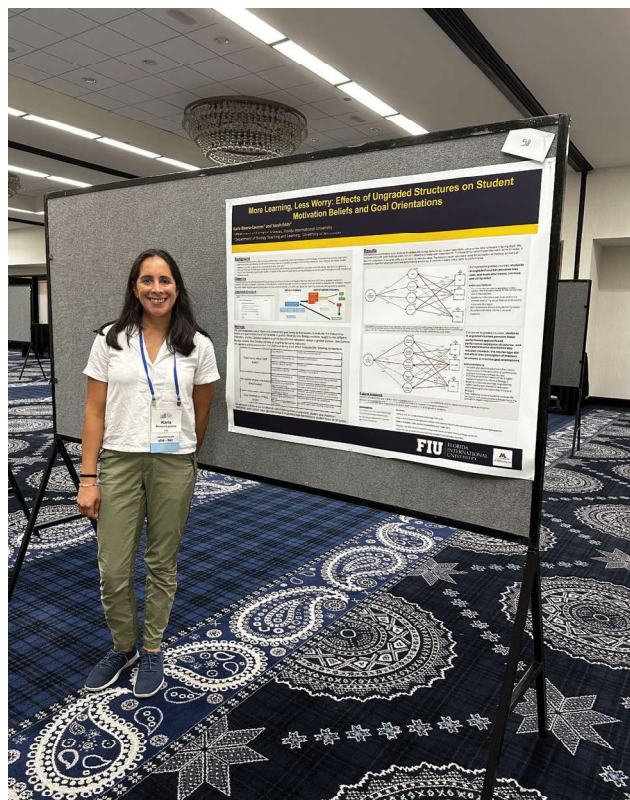


Photo montage

Top: An example rubric to help you track the progress of your students.

Middle row: Left: Karla holding a mated pair of cane-break wren (*Cantorchilus zeledoni*), the species she researched for her PhD.

Right: Karla receiving the STEM Transformation Institute Champions award. This award was designed to recognise STEM faculty at Florida International University who continue to make multi-year, sustained and successful efforts to support improved student outcomes through many different curricular and pedagogical reforms.

Bottom: Karla presenting a poster describing the results of her alternative grading project at the Society for the Advancement in Biology Education Research (SABER) conference, July 2025.