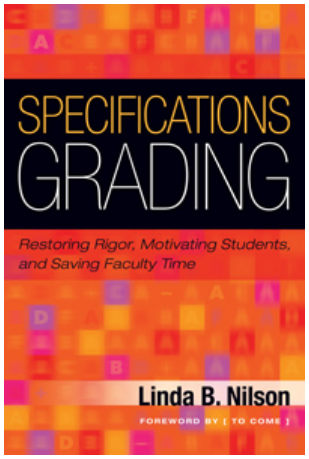

Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time

Nilson, Linda B.
Stylus Publishing, Llc., 2014

Book Review

Tags: assessment | grading | student learning outcomes

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Concerns about mastery of learning outcomes or competencies, grade inflation, student motivation, and faculty time compel reflection on how we assess students in higher education. In *Specifications Grading*, Nilson critiques the traditional, point-based grading system and argues that students should be assessed on whether they have mastered course learning outcomes. She proposes specifications (specs) grading as a positive alternative to the current grading system.

Nilson makes the case for specs grading in ten chapters. Chapter 1 examines critiques of the traditional grading system and offers fifteen criteria for judging a grading system. Chapter 2 briefly introduces learning outcomes and course design. In chapter 3, Nilson shows that grades should correspond to whether a student has mastered learning outcomes. Nilson ties grades to specific learning outcomes: a student can earn higher grades for demonstrating the amount of their learning, mastering more learning outcomes, or both (25). In chapter 4, Nilson argues that assessments should be graded pass/fail because this raises the expectation for a passing grade to the B-level. This also potentially reduces faculty time spent grading as it eliminates the need to justify partial credit. In chapter 5, Nilson outlines some aspects of specs grading: a single level rubric, faculty clarity on assignments and assessment, student choice, and opportunities to resubmit work. Chapter 6 describes how to convert specs grading to final course grades by either employing a point system for assessment or requiring students to complete certain assessments (bundles or modules) to achieve a particular course grade. Chapter 7 offers examples of courses that employ specs grading in diverse disciplines. After addressing theories of motivation, chapter 8 demonstrates how specs grading can motivate students to master learning through student choice. Chapter 9 explains how to design a specs

grading course and introduce students to this grading system. Chapter 10 evaluates specifications grading according to the fifteen criteria set out in chapter 1.

Among its strengths, *Specifications Grading* offers experiential evidence from faculty as well as examples of specs grading from diverse disciplines. These examples encourage faculty to creatively re-envision their courses. Moreover, Nilson challenges faculty to draw on adult learning theories and motivational theory to promote mastery of course outcomes and encourage students to achieve their potential. Nonetheless, Nilson recognizes faculty's hesitation in committing to a new grading system. As a result, Nilson describes (pure) specs grading courses as well as blended courses: courses that employ a mixture of point-based assessment and specs grading. These options enable faculty to slowly adjust to the new grading system or to attend to departmental or institutional grading expectations.

Nilson argues provocatively for the ways specifications grading motivates students and raises the standard of student work. To do this, faculty must know their expectations for student work and be clear in the directions for assignments. Moreover, faculty must expect students to fulfill those expectations – to take responsibility for their own grades and master course outcomes.

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