

Alternative Grading as a Way to Disincentivize Unauthorized AI Use

Ryne VanKrevelen and Nicholas Bussberg

Elon University

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Introduction



Academic integrity is a large conversation in teaching currently because of the relatively new access students have to generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT).

Students cheat (including unauthorized AI use) for many reasons, including (Bertram Gallant, 2024):

- They are extrinsically motivated, caring more about grades than learning
- Opportunities/temptations to cheat exist and are easy to do

Introduction



Proponents of alternative grading have suggested that the grading policies can disincentivize cheating (Talbert, 2023)

In our research, we:

- Implemented alternative grading policies in various introductory and intermediate statistics courses
- Surveyed student perceptions of those policies
- Reflected on how those policies affected academic integrity

Overview of Policies



Approach #1: Standards + Specifications-based grading

- The course was broken into six modules with 4-5 standards for each (24-26 total).
- Each standard showed up on four quizzes over the semester.
- Students received N (Needs revision), R (Revisable), or S (Successful) as the "grade" on each standard.
- They need to achieve an S twice to pass a standard (with only a limited number of Successfals that can be earned via revision).

Overview of Policies



Approach #1: Standards + Specifications-based grading

- Required AI-free demonstration of learning (quiz/exam)
 - Emphasis on preparation, feedback, and improvement. All that mattered was eventually learning the topic.
- Activities and homework were graded on effort, not accuracy
 - Allowed for practice without worrying about penalties for mistakes.
 - Students could also earn points for visiting office hours and tutoring to reward working with a human over turning to an AI.
 - Reflective activities and questions were used when possible

Overview of Policies



Approach #2: Ungrading + Specifications-based grading

- Students must pass/complete a certain number of assignments within a category to receive a grade.
- Each assessment is marked as Pass/Complete or Not Pass/Incomplete (i.e., no grades on any individual assignment)
- On most assignments, there are opportunities to revise and resubmit work
- Students complete reflections and propose a grade for themselves based on evidence
- To finalize the grade, the instructor meets with each student one-on-one

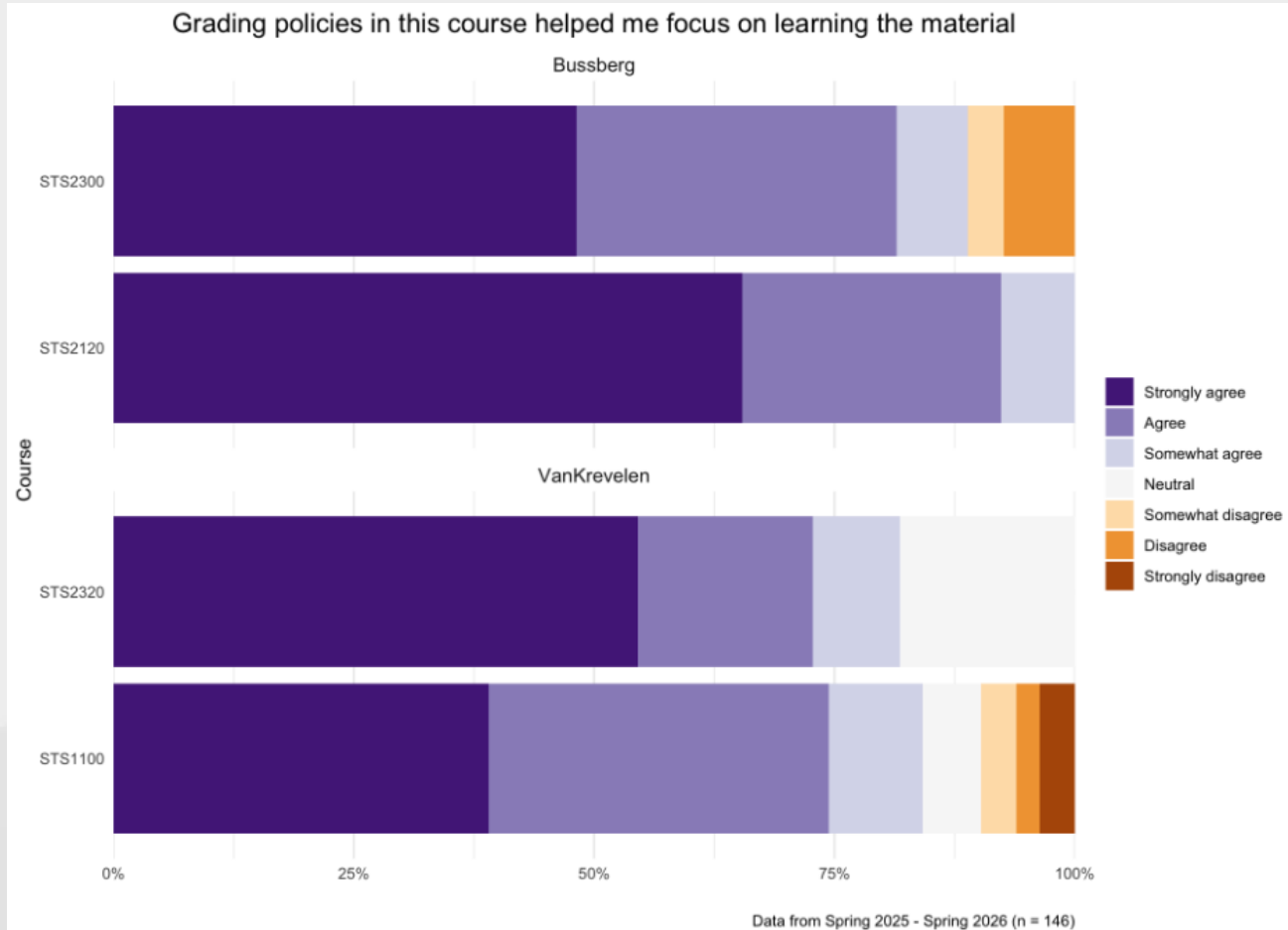
Overview of Policies



Approach #2: Ungrading + Specifications-based grading

- Syllabus policies were either that AI could not be used on code (SAS or R depending on class) or must be cited, and text could not be fully AI-generated.
- Assignments were completed out-of-class.
 - This does allow the *opportunity* for AI use.
 - Because most assignments had resubmission opportunities, the *motivation* to improperly use AI tools was reduced.

Student Feedback

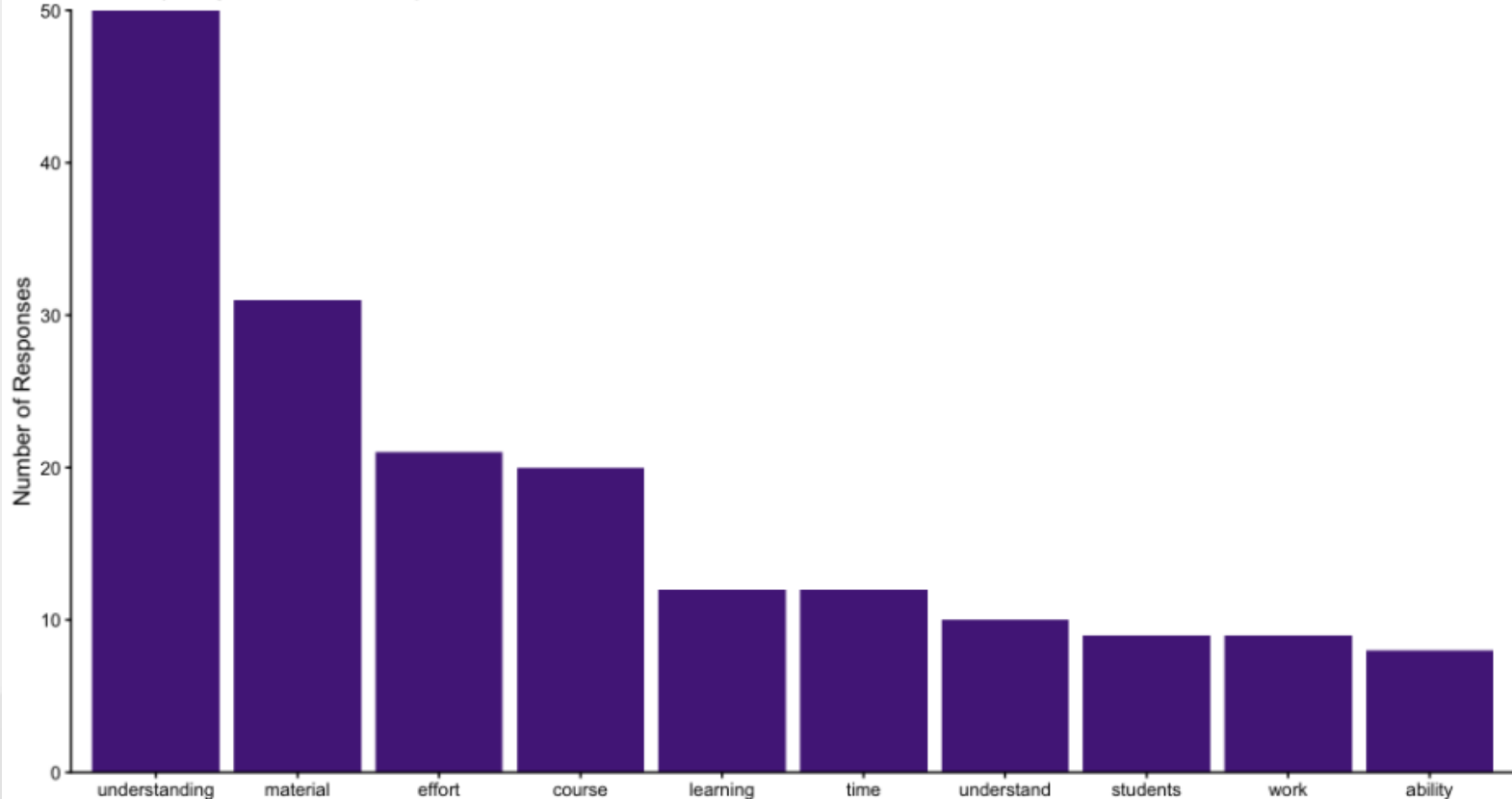


Student Feedback



Finish the following sentence. Grades in this course demonstrate ____

Most frequently used words in responses



Student quotes:

- "I feel like this grading system allowed me to ***be more focused on learning*** the material rather than the score I get on the material, particularly the homework and activities."
- "I liked alternative grading method because it helped me ***focus more on learning*** the material rather than stressing over every single point and grade on exams. The opportunity to revise work encouraged me to actually understand my mistakes instead of just moving on. I felt like this approach supported a growth mindset and made the class environment less intimidating."
- "I greatly prefer this grading method to the method commonly used by universities and believe students are ***freer to truly learn*** with this method."
- "I loved the grading style I thought it ***made actually focusing on the material easier*** because I wasn't as stressed about testing."

Instructor Perspectives



Instructor takeaways:

- Though a course grading policy cannot eliminate unauthorized AI use (or other forms of cheating), it does seem to reduce the incentive to cheat.
- Students who seemed to use AI tended to perform worse in the class overall relative to students who did not use AI.
- Alternative grading can reduce anxiety that leads to cheating and move the focus from the product to the process (De Lis, 2026).

Contact Information



Nicholas Bussberg, Elon University
nbussberg@elon.edu

Ryne VanKrevelen, Elon University
rvankrevelen@elon.edu

Further Reading



UNgrading

Why Rating Students
Undermines Learning
(and What to Do
Instead)

EDITED BY

Susan D. Blum

With a foreword by Alfie Kohn

SECOND EDITION

Grading for EQUITY

What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can
Transform Schools and Classrooms

JOE FELDMAN

GRADING FOR GROWTH

A Guide to Alternative Grading Practices
That Promote Authentic Learning and
Student Engagement in Higher Education

DAVID CLARK AND ROBERT TALBERT
FOREWORD BY LINDA B. NILSON

References



Bertram Gallant, T. (2024). *How Do We Maintain Academic Integrity in the ChatGPT Era?* Liberal Education, AAC&U.

<https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/articles/how-do-we-maintain-academic-integrity-in-the-chatgpt-era>

De Lis, I. S. (2026). *AI, Academic Integrity, and the GOAL Framework*. Growth-Oriented Assessment for Learning (GOAL) Framework.

<https://www.goalframework.org/ai-academic-integrity-and-the-goal-framework/>

Talbert, R. (2023). *Does alternative grading make cheating more likely?* Grading for Growth. <https://gradingforgrowth.com/p/does-alternative-grading-make-cheating>

Approach #1



Standards-Based Quizzes + Specifications Grading

Example Standards

Module 1 – How and why we collect data (Notes 1 – 3)

- 1A - I can identify the population, sample, parameter, and statistic in a real-world example.
- 1B – I can identify which sampling method was used in an example, evaluate the representativeness of the sample, and contrast it with other approaches.
- 1C - I can identify whether a study was observational or an experiment and explain why that choice was made and the impacts of the decision on study conclusions.
- 1D - I can identify elements of an experiment (e.g. treatment/control, randomization, blinding, confounding variables, placebos) and explain their impacts.

Standard 1D – A software developer wanted to explore how AI use impacted his productivity. For six weeks, before starting a new task, he would estimate how long it would take and then flip a coin. If it came up heads, he used AI tools to help with the task, and if it came up tails, he did not. On average, his tasks took about 50% longer than he estimated when he used AI tools and about 8% longer when he did not.

- Identify the treatment and control groups for this experiment.
- Would it be possible for the developer to incorporate a placebo? Why or why not?
- What role did flipping the coin play and why was this important for his experiment?

Example Quiz Question

Approach #1



Standards-Based Quizzes + Specifications Grading

- Project
 - Students completed a project that had five parts. Each part received a grade of Excellent (3 points), Sufficient (2), Needs Revision (1), or Incomplete (0). Explanations were given for what constituted grades of Excellent or Sufficient.
- Practice, Engagement, and Reflection (PER)
 - Students earned points for completing activities, scoring 70% or higher on homework (with a reattempt), and visiting office hours / tutoring. This section was to reward the efforts and practices that help one learn.

Approach #1



Standards-Based Quizzes + Specifications Grading

- Grades in the three sections were averaged (with Standards counting double). A minimum level was required in each category to pass the course.

Grade	Standards	Project	Practice, Engagement, Reflection
A	22 – 24 passed	13 – 15 points	50+ points
B	20 – 21	11 – 12	42 – 49
C	17 – 19	9 – 10	34 – 41
D	14 – 16	7 – 8	26 – 33
F	11 - 13	5 – 6	18 - 25

Approach #2



Specifications Grading + Ungrading

Grade	Criteria
B	• Show mastery on 9 Objective Assessments <u>and</u> attempt the other four. • Receive a Pass on 6 Homework Assignments <u>and</u> attempt the other two. • Pass both projects (group portions). • Pass one project individual assessment <u>and</u> attempted the other. • Completes the final grade reflection <u>and</u> one other reflection.
A	• Show mastery on all 13 Objective Assessments. • Receive a Pass on 7 Homework Assignments <u>and</u> attempt the other one. • Pass both projects (group portions). • Pass both project individual assessments. • Completes all three reflections.