

An Education Leadership Program's Continuous Improvement Journey Toward a Standards-Based System

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Abstract. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to evaluate the perceptions of graduate students enrolled in an education leadership program that used standards-based grading (SBG), about their perceptions of the effectiveness of SBG and their inclination to use it later in their own classrooms. Data and conclusions from this study will help the authors refine the ways they are using SBG in their courses and programmatically. Results indicated that SBG facilitated ownership of learning and deep levels of thinking and engagement. Students observed that they benefitted from the ongoing and substantive formative feedback, which they report is often neglected, even in their professional evaluation processes. Further, they reported the ability to better track their progress toward standards. In spite of these benefits, students were mixed in their predictions as to whether they would ultimately incorporate SBG in their own classrooms. As such, the authors have committed to a more comprehensive transition to a standards-based learning, assessment, and grading model in their educational leadership program. They have expanded their inquiry of SBG's effects, and have advanced discussion about its appropriateness in other areas of the university. Ultimately, they encourage others in higher education to become more conversant in SBG principles and to conduct classes in a manner consistent with preparing educators for standards-based environments.

Keywords: Standards-based grading (SBG); higher education; education leadership

Introduction

With the emergence of the Common Core State Standards and a heightened emphasis on 21st century skills, what PK-12 schools and districts want their students to know and be accountable for has perhaps become clearer than it has ever been. However, in our roles as professors of education leadership, working with teachers and administrators from across our state, it is evident that, while much work has been done to align local curricula and instruction with the standards, the methods of assessing, grading, and reporting students' progress

toward these learning targets often remain mired in outdated, highly subjective practices devoid of any research base. Further, it has become obvious, the more we examine the literature and engage with students, teachers, and administrators, that these practices are not just benign vestiges of past models, but are actually counterproductive to students' intrinsic motivation to learn and even, perhaps, to efforts to diminish the achievement gap.

As such, we set out to study exemplars of grading and assessment that were tied to progress toward standards, and thus were more conducive to student ownership of learning and consistent with Dweck's (2006) concept of growth mindset. One of our articles based on case studies of these early adopters, *Our Grades Were Broken: Overcoming Barriers and Challenges to Implementing Standards-Based Grading* (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014), revealed a couple of key issues that were particularly relevant to our work: 1) Schools and districts attempting to innovate with standards-based models viewed institutions of higher education as potential obstacles to such efforts, based on a perception that college and university admissions offices and learning environments were generally averse or disadvantageous to students coming from these schools; and 2) School administrators were finding a dearth of educators and leadership candidates with prior training or background in standards-based practice.

In our subsequent work with K-12 school leaders who are adopting standards-based grading initiatives, we have consistently had this reinforced for us by these practitioners—simply put, they and their stakeholders tend to view institutions of higher education more as hindrances to implementation rather than facilitators or partners. As a result of this feedback, our education leadership faculty felt compelled to explore the relative merits of utilizing standards-based assessment and grading strategies as part of our own continuous improvement efforts. It has been a gradual process, influenced by emerging reform initiatives, a critical literature base, and our own research on the topic. As our program continues its transition to effective formative and summative assessment and grading methods that are conducive to learning, we have had success with such exploratory practices in our individual classrooms. The purpose of this paper is to describe the empirical research data gathered thus far and discuss its implications.

Review of the literature

It stands to reason that, as learning and professional standards are increasingly being developed and promoted in content areas and professional realms—and as curricula and instructional methods are increasingly being aligned with these standards—that assessment, grading, and reporting of student proficiency should similarly be aligned. Without this alignment to standards, what grades signify is blurred by the many purposes they serve. This conveys the basic problem inherent in a single letter grade: It must communicate such a range and mélange of information—about achievement, effort, and behavior—that it is often impossible to discern its real meaning (O'Connor, 2009).

Reeves (2013) asserts that our underlying purpose in assessment and grading should be the improvement of teaching and learning and that, to achieve this, educators at all levels must provide information that is precise and relevant to student success. By using standards as a conduit for assessing and reporting student achievement, instructors are able to provide students with more accurate and actionable information about what their grades signify and how to improve. This practice of providing more actionable feedback is also an issue of fairness, which Reeves identifies as the foundational quality upon which educational decisions should be established. He goes on to note that student achievement in a fair system should be associated with proficiency in identifiable standards versus “wading through mysterious, changing expectations (p. xiv).” While acknowledging the right of academic freedom for teachers, Reeves (2013) warns that this does not include the freedom to ignore standards that have been established as explicit targets for student learning. He also adds that higher order thinking and intellectual growth are best advanced via clear objectives, frequent formative feedback, and an expectation for students to edit and revise work that is less than proficient.

While still in the minority, ever-increasing numbers of progressive secondary schools have begun to adopt such standards-based assessment and grading models. In spite of this growing popularity in the K-12 ranks, this research suggests a dearth of evidence for corresponding efforts in institutions of higher education. As Beattie (2013) notes, grading practices at the post-secondary level continue to vary widely from instructor to instructor and often obscure academic achievement by incorporating components like class attendance and participation, or by norming practices that compare students to each other rather than to a standard (O’Connor & Wormeli, 2011). Guskey and Bailey (2009) found such practices unreliable and lacking in clarity about student skill attainment or understanding. This variance between levels and instructors’ practices is also problematic in that it holds the potential to complicate the transition of students from standards-based high schools into college, and may thus provide a deterrent to the broader propagation of SBG principles (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). Certainly, it at least presents a discontinuity for high school graduates who have learned to self-assess and been acculturated to direct, actionable feedback on their performance relative to learning standards. Such students, upon entering college, are often confronted with a system in which grades are again meted out in a variety of subjective, non-standardized formats—a developmental step back toward an inordinate sense of dependence on the teacher. Further, by perpetuating the practice of blending assessment of content knowledge and skill with unrelated behavioral components, professors may be exacerbating the systemic problem of grade inflation (Johnson, 2003). And the absence of SBG in colleges of education may ultimately have the effect of limiting the prospects of aspiring teachers and administrators when they enter the job candidate pool.

Rundquist (2012) presented a rare exception to this lack of reported standards-based grading efforts in higher education, noting positive results after implementing SBG design in an upper-level physics course. All assessments

incorporated student voice and choice, allowing students to demonstrate proficiency of their learning standards by means of oral exams, face-to-face discussions with the professor, or submission of videos in which they narrated proofs or problem solutions. Beattie (2013), too, reported on the implementation and subsequent positive effects of SBG during the course of an introductory, calculus-based university physics sequence. He described his standards-based design and the students' reactions, as well as successes and challenges of the process, in an effort to generate conversation about the prospective benefits and drawbacks of such initiatives in higher education, and to aid professors who might be inclined to attempt a standards-based model.

In a similar vein, the current study was designed to examine student perspectives and lived experiences with regard to standards-based grading principles introduced in a university graduate level education leadership course on research, measurement, evaluation, and planning. It sought qualitative responses from students as they engaged with a standards-based classroom. The employment of student voice is critical; as Mitra (2004) pointed out, students—particularly those at the graduate level—should have meaningful input in reform efforts. If the intent is to understand a process and its prospects, it defies logic to ignore those who will soon be directly responsible for decisions concerning its application in the field. Further, research shows that such efforts can empower students, as well as enhance classroom practice and student/teacher relationships (Cushman, 2000; Daniels, Kalkman, & McCombs, 2001; Kincheloe, 2007).

The origins of, and rationale for, standards-based grading

Students have the right to a clear understanding of their level of progress. Grades are not only the primary source of that understanding, but a sacred tradition in education that has largely gone unchallenged and is highly resistant to change (Olson, 1995; Marzano, 2000). Yet, traditional grades issued in most university classes do not offer enough specificity regarding student performance. Unfortunately, according to Bailey and McTighe (1996), without this, grading's other purposes cannot be effectively carried out.

Marzano (2000) has observed that our current grading system is over a century old and has evolved without a meaningful body of research to support it. He notes that fundamental problems associated with grading's traditional use by instructors include merging behavioral factors with academic knowledge and skills, arbitrarily weighting assessments, and blending a wide range of divergent elements into single assessment scores. And due to a lack of professional learning and development concerning the grading process in higher education, most of what faculty members do in this regard likely reflects what they themselves experienced as students or as new faculty, thus perpetuating what is arguably a broken system. This dysfunctional and outdated model of assessment and grading seems difficult to justify, given its residence in academic institutions that are founded on empirical principles, statistical data, and a charge to explore, describe, and explain existing ideas and practices. O'Connor (2009) concurs, advocating for a general examination of grading practices and challenge of long-held beliefs. Without such scrutiny, grades will likely continue to serve as

“inadequate reports of inaccurate judgments by biased judges of the extent to which students have attained undefined levels of mastery of unknown proportions of indefinite amounts of material” (Dressel, cited in Kohn, 1999, p. 201). Marzano (2000) echoes this, asserting that traditional grades are so imprecise as to be practically meaningless.

This challenge to the relevance or defensibility of traditional grading is reiterated by Guskey (1996), who has criticized assigning zeros to late or missed work, which is a reflection of student effort and organization, as opposed to learning. He notes the disproportionately negative effect this practice can have when averaging, since outlier scores can significantly skew final grades. Further, penalties for late work create disincentives for students to complete work and often cause them to miss opportunities to learn. Such practices deter the most important purpose of grades—providing timely, accurate formative feedback to students.

O’Connor (2009) cites the inclusion of more formative assessment relative to standards as another best grading practice, since making all assignments summative (by assigning them points that contribute to the final grade) can inhibit students from taking risks or being creative, as they become overly focused on accumulating points instead. Research clearly supports the significance of such formative feedback to achieving specific learning goals. Hattie (2009), in a comprehensive review of meta-analyses on achievement, reported that providing students with frequent and specific information about their performance relative to standards led to significant learning gains. Further, grades should be updated regularly to reflect the most recent evidence; since learning is a continuous, iterative process, its level of quality should be prioritized over *when* it occurs.

In addition, O’Connor (2009) recommends thorough conversations with students concerning the assessment and grading process at the beginning of instruction, since one of the primary aims of education should be to have students gain the capacity to self-evaluate. Standards-based grading can provide a structured framework for such meaningful conversations about student work and opportunities for self-assessment. This, in turn, provides students with the feedback they need to ensure that their efforts at improvement are better focused and more likely to succeed (Guskey, 2001).

A growing consensus seems to be that it is time to de-emphasize traditional grades, to better align and systematize the grading process and refocus on the learning and progress of individual students (McTighe, 1996). As this occurs, teachers will be better positioned to integrate assessment and grading into instruction so that it does not merely measure students, but becomes part of the learning process itself (NASSP, 2016).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the perceptions of graduate students enrolled in an education leadership (school principal preparation) program that used standards-based grading (SBG), about the processes involved in SBG, their

general effectiveness, and students' inclination to use it later in their own classrooms. The authors of this paper all use some variation of SBG in their graduate courses. Data and conclusions from this study will help the authors refine the ways they are using standards-based assessment and grading strategies in their individual graduate courses and help determine to what extent the processes should be used programmatically.

Research questions

The researchers in this qualitative study sought to understand how students in a graduate school principal licensure program perceived the processes involved with standards based grading. To that end, the primary research question was: What are the perceptions of education leadership students enrolled in a course that utilizes SBG, about the effectiveness and defensibility of the model? Sub-questions were: Did the students think SBG was a fair means of assessment? Compared to other university courses using a more traditional, points-based grading system, what were the relative strengths and weaknesses of SBG in this course from the students' perspective?

Methodology

The researchers used qualitative case study methodology to study Dr. Buckmiller's use of SBG in his Research, Measurement, Evaluation and Planning course. The course took place in the fall of 2014 at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The researchers used a qualitative approach in this study to obtain rich and naturalistic data (Stake, 1995). This approach is most appropriate when it investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life contexts (Yin, 2003). The phenomenon under investigation was graduate student perceptions of SBG processes in a higher education graduate class.

Participants and confidentiality

The bound system for this case study was a graduate course. The units of analysis were the students in the course. All 17 students in the class agreed to participate in the study and were consented via the process approved by the university IRB. Of the 17 students, ten were female and seven were male. Nine of the students were teachers in an elementary setting, six worked in secondary schools and two worked as education consultants. Each of the students held current state teaching licenses; four had completed a previous master's degree.

Data Collection

The students were assured that participation or non-participation in this study would not affect their final grade. The instructor did not have access to the qualitative data until after the final grades of the course had been given. To add further confidence, we ensured that when the instructor did look at the data, it was de-identified.

Data were collected at three different points: on the first day of class, at the mid-point of the class, and on the final day of the class. Data were collected via various student writing responses to prompts by using Qualtrics. Another source of data included the final course evaluations (quantitative and qualitative); these were triangulated to provide a rich understanding of the

perceptions of students in this course. The data from the Qualtrics writing prompts were organized for analysis and the names were eliminated in order to ensure confidentiality. In total, every student participated in three such surveys (each with 4 or 5 prompts/questions).

Analysis

With regard to thematic analysis, the researchers employed a range of successive and complementary elements rooted in the grounded theory tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), with the intent of highlighting themes to better understand how students perceive SBG as an assessment strategy in a graduate class. First, the researchers worked through the transcribed data systematically using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), giving attention to each item and identifying interesting aspects that formed repeated patterns. Patton (2002) described this as "the data [being] spread out for examination" (p. 486). The next iteration involved thematizing the data in order to grasp the greater structure and meaning of the responses (van Manen, 2003). In this case, the process meant clustering invariant elements of data from the research into thematic labels. This logical shift from the raw data—including the participants' original language—to the newly created thematic descriptions was accomplished via individual and shared analysis (Polkinghorne, 1989) in order to better triangulate and audit the data. The new themes captured important aspects of the data relative to the research questions and represented a more refined level of patterned response within the data set (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The next analytical step employed a textural-structural synthesis, which integrated previous themes and descriptions into an account of the ranges of experiences representing the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). In the end, our analysis sought to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the challenges and solutions of the study participants, many of whom were experiencing SBG as students for the first time. Finally, word clouds were generated to provide visual representations for the researchers so that common themes were made evident or reinforced.

Case (Course) Context

Standards based assessment and grading principles were utilized to more effectively communicate students' strengths and areas for growth relative to the learning standards of the course. At the time of the data collection, Dr. Buckmiller was an assistant, tenure track professor in his fourth year at the University. Dr. Buckmiller's graduate level "Research, Measurement, Evaluation, and Planning" class was based on six course standards and met over the course of three weekends during a semester. Students were required to complete assignments that encompassed one or more course standards. The six course standards were based on the following topical areas: basic educational research statistics, basic qualitative research, basic quantitative research, standardized test interpretation, planning, and data presentation. Throughout the course, the instructor used various formative assessment technics including practice tests, class discussions, small group projects and individual conversations. The instructor designated a summative assessment to determine whether or not students demonstrated proficiency in each of the standards. As a

concession to convention, the summative assessments were transformed to a letter grade for the purpose of reporting the students' progress to the University for record keeping. In order for a student to receive an "A" for the class, he/she needed to demonstrate proficiency in all six standards. If a student demonstrated proficiency in five of the six standards, it would result in a B for the final grade. If the student demonstrated that they were proficient in four of the six standards, he/she would receive a C.

Three of the course standards were assessed using short answer tests. For a student to reach proficiency on the written tests, he/she was required to answer more than 90% of the answers correctly. Rubrics were developed to assess the projects associated with the other three standards.

Generally re-assessment and re-submission are foundational elements of SBG. If a student initially failed to demonstrate proficiency on a test or assignment, re-assessment was an option. To encourage students take greater ownership of their learning, the re-assessment was offered at students' requests and with a learning plan for addressing the previous gap area(s). Re-assessments were held on the final day of class.

Another component of SBG is the separation of academic and non-academic factors in the assessment process. The education leadership program created a Professional Habits Matrix to assess non-academic behaviors such as integrity, growth mindset, preparation, and collaboration. Program leaders have identified these habits as being essential for future successful school administrators, and although they are not directly related to the course content standards, students are still held accountable for them. As non-academic factors, the results on this matrix do not impact in the final academic grade for the course, but the feedback from this assessment plays an important role in the development of the aspiring administrator. Professors and program advisors will have crucial conversations with students who do not meet the proficiency mark on the Professional Habits Matrix as this instrument is leveraged to help the program faculty make decisions regarding clinical placement and final licensure.

Findings

Data was collected at the beginning, mid-point and end of the course. Many of the graduate students in the course had experience with standards-based grading practices in at least one other graduate course. A number of students also had experience in their own K-12 school setting with standards-based grading practices to varying degrees. To fully understand the perceptions of students and their understanding of SBG this section will highlight the data as it was gathered chronologically throughout the course.

Preliminary Student Report

An initial question asked students, "In looking at the six learning standards for the course, which one or two will be the easiest for you to demonstrate?" The overall perception was that "basic education research statistics" would be the simplest part of the course to learn. Conversely, another question asked the

students to consider what would be the most challenging part of the course. The data suggested that students perceived the topic of “basic qualitative research” as posing the greatest challenge. These responses may reflect the fact that, while most teachers have dealt rather extensively with statistics and other data in this era of accountability, many have had comparatively fewer experiences to learn about and generate formal research, in spite of the fact that much current educational legislation places the burden of being “research based” on K-12 educational practices. Other initial thoughts expressed by students about SBG were instructive, as well; respondents seemed both eager for and, at the same time, somewhat anxious about, a new type of grading for their higher education graduate course. Three general themes emerged from the first set of student responses that are substantiated with a representative sample of their clarifying comments.

The initial response was that being graded according to the standards was “intimidating and pressure inducing.”

A number of students reported that the prospect of being graded in a standards-based fashion felt somewhat more intimidating and imbued with pressure than grading methods that they had previously experienced in traditional graduate courses. One student noted, with a vague sense of unease, that, relative to prior grading experiences, the standards-based approach would “really hold me accountable for understanding the content.” One of his colleagues observed that the idea of any new grading system was “nerve-wracking,” even given her prior knowledge of SBG, because of the different set of expectations for her as a student. She elaborated, “It is a gut reaction to worry about my grade because I don’t yet know how to succeed in the new system.” There was not complete consensus in this regard, however; a minority of these respondents’ peers remarked that they believed the process would actually diminish the pressure to achieve a good grade, since they would have more ownership of their learning outcomes. The apprehension from some students seemed to be self-induced since at the time of the survey, minimal information about the course or course-assignments had actually been shared yet.

Greater focus on learning as opposed to grades

Another theme that emerged in initial thoughts about SBG was that students valued the potential for an increased emphasis on learning in the new system. Various students commented optimistically on this theme, with one surmising, “I think I will like it...More of a focus on learning rather than the grades being issued is good.” Another noted, “I’m excited about SBG because I believe it shows the growth in learning.” A colleague with prior experience in a standards-based district enthused, “I’m a huge fan of SBG because to a teacher, parent, or student, a letter grade doesn’t really mean anything. Standards-based grades allow all stakeholders to understand how much the student knows.” Yet another student with little previous exposure to SBG observed that, “it seems to make more sense than just taking a few tests and being done with it.”

Experiencing SBG from the students’ perspective

An interesting subset of data was related to feedback from multiple students who were well acquainted with SBG principles but who were nevertheless

excited about the prospect of engaging with SBG from the student perspective in a university level course. Many of these graduate students were utilizing SBG in their own classrooms and had clearly embraced the new grading model. A typical insight was that of a teacher who remarked: "This manner of assessment in a university course will assist me in gaining the perspective [of my students] and will help me grow in this style of grading myself." This sentiment reflected a common theme of empathy for, and solidarity with, the students these teachers work with each day. Another educator reiterated this, noting, "I am a huge proponent of SBG and am implementing it in my classroom next year so I am glad we are using it here." The comments pertaining to this overall theme might be summarized with a final observation from a practitioner who endorsed the process: "I love standards-based grading and am excited to be on the student side of assessments for a new perspective."

Perceived strengths of SBG

The majority of students perceived the strength of the SBG model of assessment to be the feedback they would presumably receive throughout the learning process. This, in some cases, was noted as being in marked contrast to the relative lack of feedback that participants reported being given in their own teacher evaluation processes. Examples of this were seen in appreciation for "feedback on learning and the ability to better understand strengths and weaknesses," as well as an enhanced knowledge of "the areas I will need to improve on and [an acknowledgement] of what I already know." Another interviewee predicted that SBG would "provide students with a more accurate picture of their learning and abilities," and a "more objective portrayal than traditional grading." And a peer expressed a preference for getting "constant feedback throughout the class so the end result can be the best possible product."

Another common theme was that students perceived a high value in being encouraged and empowered to discern their own strengths and areas for growth through SBG practices. One participant observed that, "SBG allows both teachers and students to determine where exactly [students'] performance strengths and weaknesses lie," while others appreciated the opportunities this presented for productive formative discussions. Another one pointed out that, "knowing specific strengths and weaknesses is a good starting point for improvement" and "as students we will be able to better balance our strengths and weaknesses." Comments such as these suggested that most students appreciated the chance to be more personally engaged and invested in assessing their levels of skill and understanding.

A student who noted, "It is comforting knowing we have multiple chances and methods to show what we know," exemplified a third, but less frequently mentioned, benefit to standards-based assessment and grading practices. This decidedly non-traditional component of SBG is a departure for most professors, and it is ironic that many teachers had heretofore expressed grave reservations about the concept of retakes and "redo's" of work, in spite of the many instances of such iterative practices in the "real world" of most modern workplaces. It is

also reflective of the idea that the act of learning should take precedence over its timing.

Drawbacks of SBG

Perceived drawbacks of an SBG grading model in a university graduate course were also solicited from students by way of an open-ended response format. A number of students did not list any perceived drawbacks to the system, while the ones who did provided responses that could be reduced to a pair of overarching themes. The first was a fear that they would not be able to master everything expected of them throughout the course. Although, as previously noted, students appreciated the anticipated feedback inherent to SBG as a strength, they also recognized that a corresponding reality meant that such feedback would come with an implicit expectation to act in a manner that would not only be challenging at times, but would also demand learning and growth.

The other perceived drawback was related to the unique format of the course, which transpired over the course of three full weekends spaced two weeks apart. One student voiced this concern, worrying that “in a short three weekend course, it might be difficult to [have] ample time to meet standards.” Another observed that, being new to both the students and the professor, the implementation of SBG “may bring with it some glitches, as you’d expect with any new initiative.” The course model of weekend classes, however, was a fixed model that could not be changed for this graduate course.

Mid-course Student Report

At the mid-point of the graduate planning, research, measurement, and evaluation course, students were asked to complete another short survey to provide feedback about the grading practices to date. The data provided was used to generate the following mid-course themes:

Student ownership of learning

In a multitude of ways students had begun to recognize and communicated that their levels of empowerment and self-actualization were generally higher with the standards-based approach than in traditional grading practices. One student remarked, “I think it (SBG) is valuable because it forces student ownership of learning.” Others made similar comments, such as, “More students will reach proficiency and understand the standards,” and “I feel like you will actually *learn* the content and keep it rather than forget it after the class is over.”

Effectively tracking progress

Another theme that emerged from the data concerned students’ ability to track their own progress relative to the course objectives. Because routine feedback and expectations for regular self-assessment were part and parcel of the grading process, students were better able to reflect on and gauge their own learning and proficiency. “The value of SBG is clear criteria and expectations for each standard, not to mention where I stand in relation to those criteria,” one student asserted. Another student expressed appreciation for the chance to narrow his learning needs and priorities based their progress in the course: “I am tracking

my own proficiency. I can pinpoint specific standards where I need to improve.”

Concerns about SBG

Students were again asked to provide feedback regarding concerns they had regarding the use of SBG in class. Almost a third of the class – more than at the beginning – responded with “No concerns.” Of those who responded with specific concerns at this point, most again conjectured as to whether they would be able to meet all of the course standards and/or whether they would have to redo assessments to accomplish this.

Post Class Report

At the conclusion of the course, students were asked to complete a post-class survey instrument. The researchers were interested in getting student perception data after they had experienced all aspects of standard-based grading throughout the entirety of the course. A range of themes emerged from the data, to be further outlined in this section.

Improved learning through SBG

Students, more strongly and in even greater concentrations than before, indicated that they had felt more ownership of their learning. One explained, “It (SBG) allowed me to focus and reflect on the learning and put more application to the content instead of just checking things off.” Consequently, because of this self-actualized approach to learning, the instructor reported that students seemed more motivated to learn new ideas and embrace areas that had heretofore been needs for growth and development. Students expressed appreciation for being encouraged, empowered, and indeed, expected to monitor their progress and self-assess their learning relative to the course objectives. One reiterated this, noting: “I liked the standards-based evaluation because it allowed me to self-assess and know exactly where I was at.” The rubrics used in class were also highlighted as effective learning tools. A student emphasized this, pointing out, “Clear rubrics and quality feedback helped me know exactly how I was doing and what I needed to know.”

Clearer direction toward standards

The majority of students reported clear direction toward course standards because of the SBG practices utilized in the course. Multiple students addressed this concept in their surveys, including one who noted simply that he “knew and understood the goals for the class,” as well as his progress toward those goals. Beyond mentioning the clarity of the formal course standards, students also remarked that informal and developmental expectations were also clearer. “It (SBG) allowed me to know exactly what was expected and how I was going to be assessed [in all areas],” commented one student, while another added, “I just like it because the learning targets are clear and it’s about mastery – not failure.”

It should be noted that not every student expressed unequivocally that the SBG strategies in the course always provided clearer direction for him or her. One responded, “I do not think the SBG process necessarily helped my progression in this course,” yet the same student mentioned later in his survey that he did

gain an awareness in the course that, “I *can* achieve and my grade is actually the one that I earned.”

Big ideas about an SBG class

One reflective question posed to students in the survey pertained to big ideas they might have taken away from being in a graduate class that used SBG assessment strategies. Students provided ample communication regarding their thoughts and ideas with this prompt. One student stated succinctly, “It is about growth in my learning and meeting the objectives.” Such sentiments, taken in the context of a student having completed the course, might help future graduate students become less anxious about standards-based practices. A colleague identified his big idea as being that, “You always know where you stand as far as proficiency toward the standard.” Another student substantiated this, when she observed, “I think it is easier to understand the goals professors have. Also, it is clearly outlined with expectations so that students are not afraid to [make mistakes] because the feedback will help them get back on track.”

Transferring SBG to their classrooms

A final question on the post-class survey prompted students to provide feedback about how a graduate level class utilizing SBG strategies might be useful to their own professional practices as educators. Answers ranged from, “I like that SBG provides feedback to students about learning versus collecting points” to “I believe SBG could be used in the classroom; however, I also believe behavioral aspects that might otherwise be missed are important in the development of students.” In the end, it was apparent that the takeaways from students in the class were diverse and related to some degree to the students’ own learning, perceptions, and readiness to apply new concepts in grading.

Discussion and implications

As we strive to build a leadership preparation program that is rigorous, defensible, and supportive of student learning, our aspirations and commitment are, in part, to “practice what we preach” by leveraging effective assessment and grading practices that clearly communicate student achievement through formative feedback relative to standards, which is consistent with Hattie’s (2009) powerful findings on this practice. We hope that, as students experience SBG in the role of learners, they will be better prepared to thoughtfully advise and, potentially, train their future faculty members on this topic.

Moving forward, as this study suggests, instructors in leadership preparation programs and practicing school leaders alike will need to be aware of the general anxiety surrounding reform of assessment, grading, and reporting processes, and work to alleviate it. It will take ongoing engagement with current and future teachers and administrators—not to mention community members, college and university admissions personnel, decision makers in the state department of education, and even legislators—to build consensus that SBG potentially offers a more fair and accurate assessment and reporting model. As Heflebower, Hoegh, and Warrick (2014) observe, because of the magnitude of this work, it is not for the “faint of heart.” It requires long-term commitment, a tenacity to do what is right for students, and a strategic, well-planned approach.

This is evidenced, to some degree, by the following inconsistency: Most interviewees in this study were clearly, repeatedly, and articulately able to convey that SBG facilitated more ownership and deeper levels of thinking and engagement in their own learning. They observed, further, that they benefitted greatly from the ongoing and substantive formative feedback throughout the course, a responsibility that they report is often ignored or neglected even in their professional evaluation processes. They reported clearer direction and enhanced progress toward their personal and professional goals. And perhaps most significantly, they acknowledged that the model encouraged productive risk-taking, in an educational climate that is otherwise rife with constructs that inordinately discourage and even penalize mistakes, first efforts, and innovation. Somehow, though, in spite of all of the evidence of obvious benefits gained from this model, a number of students nevertheless felt unable to fully endorse its immediate implementation in the K-12 ranks. The only apparent reasons for this irony that come readily to mind are that the respondents either felt that the cultural and historical barriers to implementation were too great, or that they themselves were so fully immersed in, invested in, and products of, the existing model that change would be difficult – if not impossible – on a personal level.

With these deep, systemic challenges in mind, we have committed to an even more comprehensive transition to a standards-based learning, assessment, and grading model in our educational leadership program. We have formalized this to a degree by documenting these efforts in advance of our impending accreditation site visit. We have also brought in a series of nationally recognized speakers, and facilitated faculty conversations, on the topic of standards-based grading and assessment models. These conversations have had the involvement of everyone from new faculty to administrators, and have been well received in our institution.

Further, we have expanded these professional conversations into the realm of academic inquiry, beginning with the aforementioned examination of how schools and districts are overcoming barriers and challenges to implementing standards-based grading (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014). With a like-minded colleague who has integrated standards-based principles into his classes at our university, we have undertaken a study using student voice (from interviews and focus groups involving his students) to assess the lived experience of a college student in a teacher preparation program. We have also submitted an article based on similar student survey data from a high school in the state that has been an early adopter of SBG at the secondary level

Finally, in response to the feedback mentioned earlier from K-12 practitioners with whom we have worked, we have engaged in inquiry of college and university admissions offices, to determine their attitudes, policies, and practices toward grades, transcripts, and applications from schools employing standards-based models. The intent of this endeavor was to help either dispel or confirm the perception that colleges' and universities' policies and practices are obstacles

to SBG models. And, using the results of these studies and our own experiences as a foundation, we have expanded our network and continued to collaborate extensively with schools, districts, and individuals who are investing in the implementation of standards-based models.

Recommendations and questions for future consideration

As this study illustrates, in spite of extensive advocacy for standards-based approaches, the logic of the system's alignment with learning and professional standards, and the positive results experienced by the participating students, further acceptance of, and adherence to such models will continue to pose formidable challenges. It is within the context of, and in order to encourage resolution to, these challenges that the authors submit recommendations and questions/implications for further research and practice. As we have noted previously (Peters & Buckmiller, 2014), in order to enhance the likelihood of SBG practices being implemented with integrity in any setting, a purposeful plan carried out within a reasonable timeline, high quality professional development and collaboration, and effective two-way communication about their underlying philosophy and purposes are needed. Aspiring teachers and administrators, such as those in this study, need opportunities for safe, honest conversations about their beliefs relative to the process, blended with a low-risk environment to experiment with and pilot innovative grading practices to merge with those beliefs. Ultimately, grading and assessment reform will require generating a sense of urgency and mission around the essential goals of education – including that the work of fostering learning for a lifetime is the *right* work. And based on our experiences with the individuals in this study and many other educators, educational leaders, and professors of education, advancing the discussions and practice surrounding SBG seems to require a growth oriented mindset or disposition.

Working from that assumption, and based in part on the general dearth of extant research conducted on the use of, and instruction on, standards-based grading and assessment at the post-secondary level, we submit that those individuals in higher education who are charged with preparing teachers and school and district administrators should consider a number of actions. First, they should accept the challenge to become more conversant in SBG principles and practices, while exploring the feasibility of working with colleagues in higher education and K-12 practitioners/early adopters alike to better ensure effective transitions for students from high school to institutions of higher education. The rationale for this is, regardless of one's perspectives on standards-based practices, that without question there will continue to be ever-growing numbers of students entering college after having been immersed in, and accountable to, standards-based grading and assessment systems. Without efforts to reconcile these often-divergent structures, these same students may face unduly difficult transitions, lose ground academically, become less engaged in their learning, and experience diminished chances for success.

Secondly, professors should make a commitment to conducting their classes in a manner that will adequately prepare educators for standards-based environments. Again, regardless of one's philosophical leaning, there is a

responsibility to create knowledge and opportunities that are conducive for aspiring teachers and administrators to thrive in the school and district settings where they will soon be seeking employment. As they gain confidence in standards-based grading principles, such instructors may decide to progress toward offering standards-based assessment and grading for their own postsecondary students.

As the number of districts and schools enacting standards-based assessment and grading practices increases, another worthwhile contribution will be to engage with PK-12 partners in research collaborations, regular review of the literature, and the lending of expertise in SBG to districts implementing the model. Finally, university personnel are encouraged to become better connected to the small-but-growing national network of SBG work being done in higher education.

To guide this work, we will conclude with some questions that are conducive to advancing the reform of assessment and grading practices, and that may suggest potential areas for further inquiry:

1. Based on what we have discerned from schools that are early adopters of SBG regarding their successes, challenges and ongoing questions and concerns, how can we, and our institutions, become catalysts in supporting their efforts?
2. Most secondary schools and practically all colleges and universities continue to utilize traditional grading and assessment practices. If we continue to use archaic means to assess, grade and report while promoting innovative methods for teaching and learning, what are likely to be the consequences? To what extent do changes in assessment and grading models have the potential to become key leverage points for effecting systemic change?
3. A student-centered system should develop self-efficacy/agency, engagement, ownership of learning, and intrinsic motivation. It is rare to see most or all students demonstrating these qualities across most of their schooling. What actions need to be identified and leveraged in order to develop these types of environments, and what role can SBG play in such environments?
4. What are the gaps between the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that new teachers and administrators bring into their respective K-12 environments and those that are needed to advance success in standards-based initiatives? How can and should these gaps be addressed?
5. What are the gaps between knowledge, skills, and dispositions being used in our college and university classrooms and those that are needed to advance success in standards-based learning? How can and should these gaps be addressed?
6. What successes and advancement are observable in postsecondary institutions' knowledge, dispositions, and use of principles related to standards-based education, particularly as they relate to admissions and financial aid? How might these be expanded or further developed?
7. What questions, reservations, and concerns do you have about standards-based education models, including those featuring standards-

based grading and assessment? How might these be addressed or mitigated?

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