



TEACHING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Episode 13

Stress Grades and the American Way! Time for a Re-boot.

An Interview with Joshua Eyer

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STEVEN ROBINOW: This is Teaching for Student Success. I'm Steven Robinow. Let me start this episode with a warning. This episode will refer to student suicide. If this topic is a trigger for you, please turn off this episode now and do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself.

For everyone else, let's talk about student mental health and how most colleges and universities, while trying to provide more mental health services, including training of faculty and staff to identify stressed students, let's talk about how higher education is ignoring perhaps the single biggest issue causing stress in students' lives—grades.

Today we're going to talk about the stress of grades and how institutions need to rethink approaches to decreasing stress by changing how we think about and act on grading. Grading is an old system. It's been around for—since the 1790s, and maybe our guest will talk a bit about that. It's been used a long time, but it's misleading, it's inaccurate, maybe it's time for a reboot, so let's talk about that.

Dr. Josh Eyer, director of faculty development at the University of Mississippi, joins us for this episode of Teaching for Student Success. Dr. Eyer is the author of the award-winning book, *How Humans Learn: The Science and Stories Behind Effective College Teaching*, and an upcoming book, *Scarlet Letters: How Grades Are Harming Children and Young Adults and What We Can Do About It*.

In this episode, we will discuss Josh's March 7, 2022, piece in *Inside Higher Ed* entitled simply, "Grades Are at the Center of the Student Mental Health Crisis." Welcome, Josh. Thank you for joining us on Teaching for Student Success.

JOSH EYLER: Thanks, Steven. Thanks for the invitation.

STEVEN ROBINOW: I'm excited to have you here today. I think this is a very important topic we're launching into now.

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: There's two issues here, grades and mental health. Let's start with mental health.

JOSH EYLER: OK.

STEVEN ROBINOW: It's a crisis. What's the evidence that there's a crisis in mental health right now among our students?

JOSH EYLER: First, I just want to preface this. I am not a psychologist. I'm not someone who currently works in the field of mental health. That's important. The research that I do tends to synthesize findings across the fields of education, psychology, biology often, and more of the social sciences, actually.

So I want—just to make clear, that if anyone is experiencing undue stress or mental health issues, that it's important to seek out professionals in that area. So what is the evidence for the mental health crisis? I'd like to start with a 2019 report from the Pew Research Center, one of America's foremost survey-based research centers.

They surveyed a number of 13- to 17-year-olds, 70% of whom were surveyed believe that anxiety and depression are a major problem among their peers. And the reason that I'm starting with this, it seems odd to start a higher ed podcast by talking about 13- to 17-year-olds, is that that data, now a few years old, means that these are the students who are currently coming to college or have been in college for at least a year or two.

So 70% of them, the ones who were surveyed, believe that anxiety and depression are a major problem among their peer group. When the survey dug into, well, what's the reason for that? Why are so many of your peers experiencing these sorts of bouts with anxiety and depression? What we see in that same report is that 88% of those who were surveyed said that getting good grades was either a lot or some of the pressure. Not only that they personally felt but that they felt was causing some of this anxiety and depression.

And if you drill down into that data even further, 61% of those who were surveyed—so the six out of 10 of these teenagers noted that getting good grades was a lot. They felt a lot of pressure to get good grades and that they felt that that was linked to what they saw as the mental health issues with themselves and their peers.

Now if you add in those who felt some pressure to get good grades, the whole thing goes up to 88%, and it's the top reason. This is an important moment, though, to kind of take a step back and to talk about linkages and causes. What I want to be very careful of at the outset, especially because we're going to be dealing with some pretty serious issues in this discussion, is not that grades by themselves are the single cause of any of these mental health issues.

What I want to make clear hopefully in the course of our discussion is that they are a contributing factor, and in some ways, a leading contributing factor to the stress that students are feeling that leads to the

mental health crisis on our college campuses. So no, grades are not the sole cause; yes, they are a leading cause or a leading contributing factor, I would say.

And what we see in the data I was just talking about is self-reported. This is stress that I feel and that I observe in my peer group. But it says something that it's listed so high among the reasons that they have selected. There's a great book that came out in the last couple of years called *The Stressed Years of Their Lives* that are about college students and really unpacking the crisis with anxiety, depression, other mental health issues among college students, and looks at stress as one of the key factors, and grades are contributing to that stress.

So that's the data I wanted to start with, but I also, then, really wanted to make special note to talk about the American College Health Association's report that they put out every term. So the most recent one that I have is fall 2021. They look specifically at college mental health. And among the things that they're looking at is the incidence, the percentage broken down by a particular mental health issue that college students are reporting.

And so just to give you a sample of what the fall 2021 version of this found, for example, they have it broken down demographically, cis men, cis women, transgender, nonconforming, among the populations that are asking about this. So mental health and well-being, serious psychological distress. 16% of cis men, 24% of cis women, 45% of transgender.

So that is serious psychological distress. Those numbers should really strike anyone in general, but certainly those of us who work on college campuses. Then, though, they ask the question, within the last 12 months—of the same group. Within the last 12 months, have you had problems or challenges with any of the following? Academics is listed at the top. 48% of cis men said that yes, in the last 12 months they've had problems or challenges with that. Cis women, 52%. Transgender, 65%.

So there are linkages here. Again, I'm not going to say cause, but that data is so clear and so striking that there is a linkage. Now does it say grades there? It says academics, and among—academics can encompass a lot of different levels and factors causing that stress certainly.

But if we ignore grades—and this is ultimately the message that I'm trying to send. If we look all around the academic sphere for what is causing the stresses leading to the mental health crisis and we ignore grades, we are doing ourselves a major disservice, we're doing our students a major disservice, and we cannot hope to have the kind of impact on their well-being that we could have if we take grades into consideration.

STEVEN ROBINOW: The American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment Report—

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Also talks about depression for students—not just how they feel, but whether they had a previous diagnosis or treatment for. And in the 10 years from 2009 to 2019, that doubled. So prepandemic—so we're not even talking pandemic yet.

JOSH EYLER: Right.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Prepandemic, the number of students who were previously diagnosed or treated for depression doubled over that period.

JOSH EYLER: That is context for talking about what can colleges do? If we have this data, this information, what do we do about it? We certainly can't ignore it. And you know we're talking also from a bird's eye view here, when you get—when you drill down to individual campuses, the crisis becomes not just more personal, but more deeply felt.

And so one of the things I talked about in this *Inside Higher Ed* piece was a report that Worcester Polytechnic Institute put out in January. Since July of 2021, seven WPI, which is how the school is known, WPI students have died, and three of those students died by suicide. Another two deaths are still under investigation for possibly being deaths by suicide.

Now like many institutions that have faced tragedies like this, the WPI put together a committee, a task force of 35 university employees in this case, to study the problem and make recommendations. So this is a very responsible response to this tragedy. Something has to happen, what can we do about it?

When you look at that report—and this is by no means exclusive to WPI, and I'll talk about that in a second. But when you look at this report, they did a survey as part of the research that led to the writing of the report. In the survey responses that they got back—and they got back 704 student responses, 82% of the undergraduates who responded to it felt that there is too much academic pressure at WPI. 82%. Just—that is an astounding number.

But when they put out the report, when they issued the findings, many of the recommendations, first of all, focused on the students themselves. How do we help students to be more resilient? How do we put campus supports in place, more counselors, things like that? All perfectly appropriate responses to it.

But grades were seldom mentioned in any way in this report. So there was not anything that said, students are feeling a lot of academic pressure, a lot of stress. Part of that must come from grades. How can we help faculty to rethink their grading practices? That is not mentioned in the report at all.

They do talk about helping faculty to develop more inclusive teaching practices, and I would argue equitable grading could fall into that category, but it's not explicitly stated. And they also talk about helping faculty to understand what resources are available, doing a look at their syllabi to look at pain points that might exist in those courses, but nothing about grades.

They are not the first institution to publish a report like this. 2015, Penn put out a similar report because of several tragedies on their own campus. Based on the task force's recommendations, they, too, did not mention grades in any way. In fact, part of the report is really focused on having a competitive academic environment.

And so there's a lot at stake in that reputation, and so no mention of reforming grading practices as a part of helping the students to enhance their well-being.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Stanford also, I think, has a similar story.

JOSH EYLER: They do, yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Prior student tragedies, reports, changes in behaviors, and now more recently a spate of student deaths at Stanford.

JOSH EYLER: Yes, that's true. It really is epidemic on college campuses. And not just the most tragic—the most tragic results of mental illness that we're talking about here, but as we saw in some of that data, the students who are suffering on many different levels.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Absolutely. These are just signposts of the problem, specific ones.

JOSH EYLER: Right.

STEVEN ROBINOW: For example, the doubling of depression over 10 years. Also a doubling—no, a 50% increase of suicides over that same period. So the stress level that students feel comes out in many ways, and occasionally, unfortunately, comes out very badly.

JOSH EYLER: Any student death is tragic. And a single student death is tragic for a community and a campus. What these deaths will often do at institutions is force them to take a hard look at what is happening on those campuses, whereas mental health issues more generally do not often work to pull all the levers to get people together to look at the practices on campus. That, I think, is a part of this conversation as well. Why should it get to that point before a campus would be putting some of these measures in place?

STEVEN ROBINOW: So we have increased mental health issues among students. We have students identifying grades as a main stressor point for them. So I think we should talk about grades for a bit now.

JOSH EYLER: Let's do it.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Because I think this is an important point. Why don't we start with where grades came from in the US.

JOSH EYLER: Grades have been around for a long time. That means something different depending on what branch of history we're looking at. So grades in America more generally came into higher education in the 1790s at Yale. Their president, Ezra Stiles, is either blamed or credited with this depending on your perspective.

But grades for the early part of their history, for about the first 100 years, were solely used to rank and sort students. So he had four categories—best, next best, oh, I forget what the third category is, and then there's the worst. And he used the Latin—the Latin signifiers for that.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So everyone in the year—at the end of the year, for example, there would be this final ranking, and you'd either be in one of four bins.

JOSH EYLER: Right. And we still have a legacy of this in higher ed. We have GPAs, Latin honors, magna cum laude, et cetera. And we also have valedictorians and salutatorians as well. So we still have this. We have ranks, class ranks, all sorts of things are legacies of that. But grades as we know them really we're—did not come into play until the late 1800s at Mount Holyoke.

That was the first college to use—at that time, it was the A through E system of letter grades. F came in a few years later, dropped the E because they were afraid that E could be confused with excellent and F had a very distinct signifier, and that was failure. And so that's really the beginning of the system of traditional grades as we know them.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So here we are, 130 years later using a not very derived system. I mean, if it was A through F in the 1890s, that's where we still are today.

JOSH EYLER: Yes, that's true.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So 130 years later, nothing's changed. And maybe we haven't seriously reconsidered it. So let's talk about that. Let's talk about, then, the problem of grades and stress and then how we can start to think about how to—maybe it's time to reconsider this grading thing, but how we can do it in a way that isn't—I mean, we can't overthrow the whole thing tomorrow, that's unlikely to happen.

JOSH EYLER: Right. Not tomorrow. Maybe someday, but not tomorrow. And so that's a really nice point. So let's talk, then, about where does the stress comes from with grades. This is a model in higher education, of course, one of the most conservative institutions that we have, conservative in the sense of very resistant to change over time.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Mm-hmm.

JOSH EYLER: And so a lot of what we do in higher ed is based on tradition, it's based on the histories of our disciplines, and grades are cemented at the foundation of those approaches. But the stressors from grades come from a number of different angles, and they start immediately upon our entry into the American school system.

So part of that stress comes from the messages that are sent about grades within classrooms. So if you get an A, you are doing the best. If you get a B, you still have to try and get that A. Even our youngest kids in school are getting very clear messages both from teachers and from comparing themselves with the other kids in their class. So that's one avenue for that stress.

Another avenue comes from parents or family or guardians rooted in a lot of different social constructs and sociological mechanisms, I think. But we could talk about the most obvious, and that is that there is a lot of pressure from families onto their children to get the best grades possible, to try to get into the best college possible.

That brings with it a lot of weight, a lot of stress about—on teenagers about what am I going to do with my life? I gotta get all A's, or if I don't get in this college, my life is ruined. I mean, that's a lot for even an adult to handle, let alone someone who's just starting high school and possibly even before that. And so the stressors come from a number of different avenues.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So students are competing for this their entire academic life before they even get to college.

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: And now they come to college.

JOSH EYLER: Yes. When you pair that with the fact that grades are well-known and well-supported by psychologists as true extrinsic motivators, they are the reward, they are the carrot dangling out there. And in a system where students are going for the grade, what gets missed often is the process along the way, and for educators, that means learning.

And so learning becomes a truly strategic endeavor in an environment that privileges grades rather than the end unto itself. And you combine it all, they come to college and they've had at least 12 years, at least, if they're of traditional college age, of being conditioned into a system that is not only stressful, but that has taught them that it's the grade that matters most. Whatever it takes to get the grade, that's what you have to worry about, not the learning that comes along with it.

STEVEN ROBINOW: And then we wonder why our students don't learn when they've been taught, when they've been trained. It's not about learning, it's about the grade.

JOSH EYLER: And I think students do heroic work trying to overcome all that conditioning, try to learn in spite of it. They often learn in spite of us and in spite of the system in many ways. So where do grades fit into that, then? Well sometimes, then—so students at least, at the very least know the game of grades and feel as if that is something that at least they have a handle on. But not having necessarily experienced college-level work before, the game changes for them when they get to college.

The work is harder. There are fewer opportunities to get grades in college-level courses than they may have had over the course of a semester and academic year in high school. The distribution of a grade in a college course over just a few tests or papers adds to some of that stress.

And when you combine that with the use of grades as gatekeeping mechanisms in some of the disciplines, either through what I think of are highly restrictive grading curves or as kind of punishments, they really do send messages about whether or not students belong in particular disciplines.

And if you have wanted to be a doctor your entire life and you get to organic chemistry and get a D, that sends a message to you, intended or not on the part of the faculty member, that you cannot be a doctor. That this dream that you had is no more. And that is a very personal and a very psychological and a very emotional kind of thing.

STEVEN ROBINOW: The way that the faculty arrived at that grade often doesn't recognize change over time. If you're lucky, it's more than one midterm and a final. Maybe it's two midterms and a final. Maybe you don't do well at the beginning, but at the end, you pick it up. Who knows?

JOSH EYLER: Absolutely. That a grade on the test at a particular moment in time captures only your learning at that moment in time. The reason I'm calling my book *Scarlet Letters* is because that's often what they do, they mark you. They mark you, in week 3 of Intro Bio or Intro Psych or US History, as a C student or as a B student or as failing or is unprepared or is underprepared.

When everyone comes from different educational backgrounds and schools with different levels of resources and different opportunities. And so grades arrest the process, they mark a particular moment in time rather than, as you're saying, acknowledging growth over time and learning, which is where some of the newer models and the more progressive nontraditional grading models that people are experimenting with in higher education come in.

Because common to all of them—and we could get in the weeds as much as you want of the different ones, but common to all of them is a recognition that at the very least, we have to acknowledge that the student who comes in on day one will be different from the student who leaves at the end of the semester, and we somehow need our evaluation system to be able to capture progress and learning over time rather than stagnating that and marking them at a particular moment.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So I think we should get into some of those weeds, because I think one of the purposes of this podcast for me is to provide faculty with tools that they can implement out there and impact student success. You've made a compelling argument that there's a mental health crisis, grades are a significant contributing factor to that crisis.

And if the universities aren't going to address that issue, then faculty need to on their own, at least initially, pick up the challenge and say, well, what can I do? What can you do in your classroom—what are the models out there? You're talking—you've mentioned that there's many models out there that people are working out on progressive ideas.

Yeah, what are people doing now? What are the top three ideas, you think? And then let's come to talk about maybe some things that faculty could actually implement. It's April 6. Today, it's April 6 anyway. I don't know when people are going to listen to this, but potentially later this month, they could actually come into their classroom and do something differently.

JOSH EYLER: Right. Yes. OK. I like the way you frame that, because a grading model is different in some ways from how people could alleviate pressure on grades immediately. I'm really glad that you started off with this point about, if institutions aren't going to do something, individual faculty can take it into their own hands, because that to me is kind of the story of higher ed right now, that faculty are asked to do that in all kinds of ways all the time. And this, of course, is a very important way to do that.

I'll just list some of the models that people are experimenting with, and then I'll explain a little bit about their commonalities and their differences. Some people, especially in humanities-based courses and the arts, are moving in the direction of portfolio grading where they give a lot of feedback over the course of the semester.

At the end of the semester, a student puts together a portfolio of their revised work with a reflective introduction, and that's what gets the grade. And still reminiscent of traditional grading, but puts much more of an emphasis on learning through feedback and developing over time.

Others, I find that these models I'm about to talk about are especially common and attractive to STEM disciplines. Those are the related models of standards-based grading, specifications grading, competency-based grading, mastery grading, proficiency grading, they are all cousins. And they all generally have a similar approach of a faculty member developing a set of standards related to content or skill mastery and giving students multiple opportunities and multiple ways of demonstrating that they have met or exceeded a particular standard.

And to get a certain grade—an A, let's say, you have to have met, I don't know, 20 out of the 25 standards—I'm just making up a number, but this is the way the system works. A B would be fewer than that, C, fewer than that. The reason that I find that our STEM colleagues are attracted to these kinds of models is because it still places an emphasis on, you have to learn particular content. You have to know how to do these things before you leave this semester.

In an Introduction to Botany class, it makes perfect sense to me that students would have to know about photosynthesis and have to demonstrate that they really deeply understand both the concept and how it has an effect on the other things they'll learn in that class. Which gets back to your point that we are not eliminating standards, we are not making courses easier. We're reframing the work of our courses as being focused on learning.

So that's another group. Some of the much less traditional models—in some ways, the newer models, although some have been around for a little while. Contract grading. The basic level of contract grading is essentially, if you do X number of things, you get an A. If you do Y number of things, you get to a B. So let's say 15 is an A, 12 is a B, 9 is a C.

In talking to faculty who do contract grading, the psychological hurdle that faculty have to leap over in order to adopt a contract grading model is that you have to really believe and commit yourself to developing assignments and activities that if students complete them at a satisfactory level, they will have met the learning goals that you set out.

So if you're going to adopt a system where if you do X number of things, you get a certain grade, completing those things has to be deeply tied to fulfilling one or more learning goals.

The fundamental I'll talk about that's all the way over here on the nontraditional side of the spectrum is ungrading. It's an umbrella model that shares several attributes. One is that faculty give no grades over the course of the semester. They only give feedback. Students do a lot of self-assessment and metacognitive reflection over the course of the semester, and that is built in as a required part of the course.

And finally, the third thing that a lot of them share is that the final grade is determined through a collaborative conference between the faculty member and the student who has proposed a grade and has marshaled evidence to justify that proposal and then there's a discussion about it. All of these, all of them share several things, the most important of those being the principle of learning that we learn from feedback, not from evaluation. And that is true across the human lifespan, and it's been true of us for most of our existence, that we learn from getting feedback, not from being evaluated.

Now I'll just pause to say that proponents of grades will argue that a grade is a type of feedback, and I have this discussion often, and round and round we go. My argument about that is that yes, grades do give a kind of feedback, but not the feedback that we want them to give. We've already talked about some of the messages that grades send.

What they don't send are the kind of qualitative in-depth feedback that these other grading models prioritize. Deep, meaningful engagement with student work. Mentoring, coaching them to hit new levels for their learning through the user feedback. And that is not something that a single grade can convey.

STEVEN ROBINOW: And as you say that, I'm thinking, each time you get a grade, there's a finality to that.

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: It's rarely, oh, here's your grade, go back and rework it or come back later or you'll have another chance at some later point in time. Rarely are they formative in nature. They tend to be summative.

JOSH EYLER: No. In fact, by their definition, they're summative. Yes, you're absolutely right. Yeah.

STEVEN ROBINOW: What you're talking about are formative assessments. Valuable assessments that students can take back.

JOSH EYLER: Right.

STEVEN ROBINOW: And then use those challenges as moments of learning. Use those moments of, oh, you did this well, you did this well. Ah, you're struggling here, and the student's saying, OK, I didn't fail, I'm struggling, it needs work. I can get better at it, let's focus on that. Never being really given that opportunity or rarely being given that opportunity to do that. I will say, we had Susan Bloom on in episode 6. Great discussion of ungrading.

JOSH EYLER: She's such an authentic voice on that, certainly for the book, but she's been doing it for a long time, and just very supportive of those who are trying it as well. I did want to touch on your last point, which was, what can someone do tomorrow? If you can't revamp in week 12 of a 15-week semester, if you can't on the fly revamp your entire grading model, what can you do?

So I think there are a couple of things you can do immediately. One is that you see you could look at the major graded assignments that you have given students and you could make a change to drop the lowest grade of those assignments or to count the highest grade twice or some way to release the pressure valve. That's something you could do tomorrow.

Another thing you could do tomorrow, if you give exams, is you could give students the opportunity to look at the ones that they got wrong and to resubmit the exam with an explanation of why their answers were wrong and what they could have done to correct them and give them substantial credit back for being able to do that.

I mean, that, to me, really is the point of education. What did I do incorrectly and how can I fix it and do I understand why it was incorrect to begin with? So that could be done tomorrow in terms of releasing some of that pressure.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So really give students a moment to be metacognitive, to think about what it was, and to use that as a learning moment for them.

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: I didn't do well, as opposed to if they got it wrong and there's no recourse, they'll just throw it—they just throw it away and it's like, well, I got that wrong, who cares? Move on. Versus, I got that wrong. Oh, if I explain this and give some thought to this, I can get some—if we're going to play

the points game, I can get some points back and improve my grade. In doing so, whether the students know it or not—

JOSH EYLER: Right.

STEVEN ROBINOW: —that's going to be a powerful learning moment.

JOSH EYLER: Absolutely. And so it accomplishes both of those. And you brought up metacognition again. That is something that, in addition to feedback, metacognition is something all of those nontraditional models really share. Helping students to be more aware of their own learning and how to improve it.

One last point you could do tomorrow. A lot of folks who give exams are starting to do, I think, and that is, you can redesign how you give exams in the first place. So some people give exams to their students individually, then they give it to them again in teams, and they either average or weight the grades for those differently. Or they give it to them in teams at the outset, and a part of the goal there is teaching each other and convincing your partners that you're right.

So the re-engineering, the way that we give exams, and the goal of those exams from the outset, can also take some of the pressure off of that grade and enhance learning in the process.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Yeah. The other thing that was coming to mind was the time problem that we have in exams. We in the US are—I guess we pride ourselves on timed exams, certainly in the sciences. There's a limited amount of time, and boy, if you don't know your stuff, you're going to have a hard time getting through it. Which, of course, disadvantages students who know it fine, but just need more time to get it on paper. And maybe that's a discussion for another time, is what we're selecting for when we give exams at all. What sort of students are we favoring on timed exams?

JOSH EYLER: That's a whole other part of the book project is the way that grades magnify inequities. And part of that has to do with students who come from less resourced schools will often experience opportunity gaps, and when they get to our gen ed courses, those grades are not—they are not revealing who those students are and what they can learn and do. They're really replicating the systemic failures.

STEVEN ROBINOW: And the grades themselves are—they're misleading because we convert them to a number and we think numbers have meaning. And so a student with a 3.0 GPA versus a student with a 3.8 GPA, we think there's a difference there. And once you think about it, for not very long, you can really come to the understanding that that meaning is so subjective. We think they mean something, but we're deceiving ourselves about that.

JOSH EYLER: And it is worth noting—and I just feel the need to pound this drum whenever I talk about grades, there are institutions in America that do not give grades.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So let's talk about that. So Evergreen State College in Washington state—you know others, that's the one I'm most familiar with. What can—let's talk about that for a minute.

JOSH EYLER: Sure. Well, and I feature Evergreen in my book and talked to a lot of their faculty and their provost. New College of Florida is the other public institution that I know of that is gradeless. And then there are a number of private institutions, like Hampshire College, that don't give grades as well.

So yes, most of what they do are narrative evaluations, narrative transcripts. All of the common questions—well, how are students going to get into grad school and how are they going to compete on these board exams and how are they going to get in the med schools and things like that become moot, I think, when you know that there are students at institutions that don't give grades that are doing all of those things.

When we look at that, and we also think about the kinds of changes that colleges and universities made to their grading during COVID, it strikes me that we have the ability to make changes, we don't have the collective will on the part of institutions right now, but I think that can change.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So I don't know if you know these data. Evergreen State College does evaluations, no grades. Are their students less stressed? How is their mental health?

JOSH EYLER: I don't know the figures on that. I do know that the faculty who I interviewed, who worked very closely with students, will say that the students—they are not stressed about grades. There's a lot of—there's stress as there would be in any academic institution, but it's not about grades and not about evaluation. It's not the kind of traditional, nor the intense level of stress that we've been talking about here today.

STEVEN ROBINOW: I'm going to give a shout-out to Clarissa Dirks, a good friend of mine who teaches at Evergreen State, and when she talks about the programs they offer their students, it's astounding. Very interdisciplinary, very collaborative among the students. This notion of competitiveness seems to melt away, and I think the education that she is providing for sure rivals any university. It's amazing. She's an amazing faculty member.

So you've mentioned now a number of very quick things that faculty could do to implement to decrease some stress on grades this semester. Summer is coming. Many of our—well, many faculty teach over the summer. But they also prepare for their fall courses. What would you advise a faculty member getting ready for fall, where might you point them, what direction might you suggest to try in a larger scale of things to—in a larger change in their course?

JOSH EYLER: Right. This is a two-part question for me, because before we even get to course design or what am I interested in or anything like that, we need to ask ourselves. We need to do a little work with ourselves and ask ourselves a number of questions. They all revolve around how we ourselves see grades.

One is, to what degree are the grading models that we use connected to our beliefs about traditional higher education? To what degree are the models we use connected to what we think the expectations of our colleagues are? Because that often drives some of the way that we grade. And the most important question, I think, because it gets to the heart of everything, that is, to what degree are the grading models we use connected to our beliefs about learning?

Once we get to that question and really unpack, are the models we're using connected to what we believe about learning or is there distance between those? And if there is distance, what can we do to close that? If I believe X about learning, but my grading model is far removed from that, how do I close that gap? So that's the first bit I think that we need to really be thinking about.

Once we identify that, then we can start to say the summer is an ideal time not to take on a million things related to this, but just to start. I am a true believer here, both in my own teaching and my work in higher ed, but also working in my teaching center, and that is an incremental change in courses, not necessarily overhauling everything all at once, doing little things over time, you may identify, oh, I'm a biologist, so I want to take a closer look at specifications grading.

And I'd say, that's great. Here's Linda Nilson's book, *Specifications Grading*. Take a look at it. See what jumps out at you as doable for the fall. And we could continue the conversation there. So identify why you grade the way you grade first, and then second, find something within the sphere of these grading models that interests you and think about something you can do to implement in the fall.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Yeah. Bite off a chunk you can chew.

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: And implement. And continue. Rinse and repeat. Continued implementation, continued improvement, continued changes, while potentially talking with your colleagues about these same issues.

JOSH EYLER: Definitely.

STEVEN ROBINOW: One of my favorite quotes I think from Susan Bloom's discussion of ungrading is, when asking why we grade and this notion of, well, they need it for med school and stuff. Her comment was essentially, why are we doing their work for them? Right?

JOSH EYLER: Right, yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Right? They have an entrance exam. They have other ways to do this. What is your grade in organic matter that was four years ago when they can go ahead and test whatever knowledge and skills they want six months before entrance? Especially when things like med school where they're taking years off in between to do other work to expand their resume.

JOSH EYLER: And not to mention the fact that medical schools are, in some ways, leading the charge on changing their grading models. Some of the most renowned med schools in our country have moved to competency-based grading and proficiency-based grades. So in some ways, using them as the fall guy for our resistance to change is a little bit disingenuous. I think Susan's point is a good one.

STEVEN ROBINOW: It was a funny comment, I loved it. OK, well that's great. We follow this progression pretty well through, I think. Is there anything else specific you want to add to that?

JOSH EYLER: There are a lot of people doing this work, many of whom think that they are the only ones who are doing this work. And I think, number one, the more we can build community with people who are trying all kinds of experiments—it doesn't have to be the same model. In fact, I'm not an evangelist for any one kind of model. I want faculty to find the one that will work best for them and their students.

The more we find a community of people who are questioning the hold of traditional grades and are trying to push back on that, I think the more we can gain traction at our institutions and in higher ed across the board. And the other thing I'll say is that yes, as an individual, you can only take so many steps forward.

But if lots of people are taking lots of steps, then that starts to become a movement and people start to take notice. I think we're at the very beginning of that and I'm pretty hopeful.

STEVEN ROBINOW: I am as well. There are communities out there that are online that people can join. There's many, many, many of them. We'll talk to you—we'll generate a list of resources for faculty and we'll put those on our website as well. So before we go, you got your PhD in medieval studies.

JOSH EYLER: Yes, I did.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Medieval English language and literature.

JOSH EYLER: Mm-hmm.

STEVEN ROBINOW: You have chosen a career in teaching and learning.

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So I'd like to know what motivated you to move in that direction. Is there a story you can tell? Was there a transformational moment for you when you thought about your impact in the academy and on students and in the world that made you realize that you wanted to go down this road instead of a more traditional road?

JOSH EYLER: Yeah. Yeah, yeah. There. Is a story. In many ways, it's kind of a simple story that led to all this unfolding. I was hired out of graduate school into the English department at Columbus State University in Georgia, a regional comprehensive as part of their university system. It's right on the Georgia-Alabama line with an open-access admissions policy for surrounding counties.

The work that my colleagues did there was so apparently important for those students in helping to shape meaningful lives for themselves, it really shaped everything that I have done since in thinking about the powerful role of teaching. I loved working with the students and the faculty there.

Eventually when I got tenure, I came to a point where I really wanted to be a part of bringing that kind of experience to students at scale and being a part of a conversation that would continually improve those evidence-based methods that we knew would work.

I loved the impact that you could have in an individual classroom, but wanted to see if it was possible to be a part of a community that could push it even further. And so I moved to George Mason University as an associate director of their teaching center, and then to Rice as director and now at University of Mississippi. All of it has been fueled by the initial experience at Columbus State and working with those students and faculty.

STEVEN ROBINOW: That's great. So we're talking about groups and community and you've identified a community that motivated you. So I want to dig deeper and ask, is there a particular student that you think about in this story?

JOSH EYLER: Wow. There is. I don't know if she would want to be named, so I won't name her. She was in several of my classes. She was at the point, at one point I think in her sophomore year, of wanting to drop out of school. She had a ton of potential and was just really quite brilliant. And it was hard to see life circumstances shaping to take her out of an environment that she was so clearly thriving in.

Worked with other colleagues who also were teaching this student, and we just all banded together and individually approached her and said, if we give you an incomplete for this semester, stretch out the deadline over the summer into the fall, work with you to get this work done, will you stay—will you stay?

She did. We worked with her over the summer. The work was stellar, she just needed time and needed a way to adjust to the new circumstances that were confronting her. And now she's a tenured faculty

member. That was just one story of many that I saw. The students were so talented and so wonderful to work with. They really were just looking for you know someone to work with them and help them. I remember her and many others very well.

STEVEN ROBINOW: That's great. Was she a first-gen student?

JOSH EYLER: Yes.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Mm-hmm. And do you still keep in touch?

JOSH EYLER: We do. Sporadically, but yes we do keep in touch.

STEVEN ROBINOW: That's wonderful. That's a great story. I love these stories. They sort of always surprise me, but at the same time, never surprise me. When you talked about this community and I had to dig, because I knew there have to be individual students, because it becomes very personal.

JOSH EYLER: Right, it does.

STEVEN ROBINOW: It becomes very personal, and that's—I guess that's the power that motivates us. And that it's personal motivates us, even though you're working at a much larger level, a much bigger community level now. You know that you're giving faculty—you're giving other faculty now these stories to motivate themselves and to continue their work.

JOSH EYLER: Absolutely.

STEVEN ROBINOW: So that's great. Thank you. Thank you for that work. Thank you for sharing that story. Josh, I want to thank you for taking time to spend with me today. It's been a fascinating discussion. I think this is a critically important topic, and one that's within the power of the faculty to make changes now to help students succeed to decrease the stresses on these students. To help them. To help them get to where they want to be.

They've signed up for this, we've accepted them, they want to go somewhere, and it's our job to help them get there. So I think this is really an important issue to talk about. Really, thank you for your time.

JOSH EYLER: Thank you, Steve. Thanks for the invitation. Thanks for hosting this conversation. I agree that the more we can get the message out there, the better, so I appreciate it.

STEVEN ROBINOW: Thank you. And when that book comes out, I want to read it and we're to come back and do this again.

JOSH EYLER: Sounds good.

STEVEN ROBINOW: For more information about Dr. Joshua Eyler, his research and favorite books and papers, please go to our website, teachingforstudentsuccess.org. Thank you for spending time with us today. Please share our podcast and website with your friends, colleagues, and administrators.

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