

**NONGRADING - AN APPROACH TO SPECIAL NEEDS IN
VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE**

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Nongrading, as an educational innovation, has received much attention in the high schools throughout the United States. School administrators have found it convenient to nongrade college preparatory and general education subjects. However, little attention has been given to nongrading in vocational agriculture and other vocational education subject areas.

What is Nongrading?

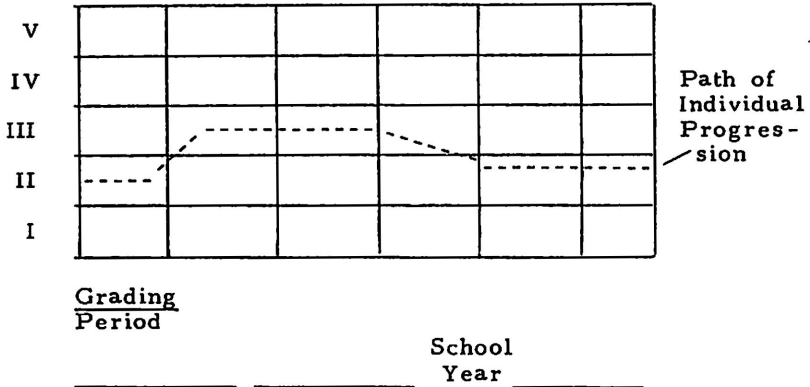
Nongrading is a method of organizing the curriculum. In general education, nongrading has acquired several describable characteristics: (1) phasing students according to selected criteria; (2) individual student progression; (3) frequent reclassification of students for phasing; and (4) matching teaching materials and methods appropriate to student characteristics. There are many variations of nongrading described in the literature, but all incorporate the above characteristics.

Phasing

Phasing, as described in the literature of nongrading, simply means the grouping of students by the use of selected criteria. Such schools as the famous Melbourne High School, Melbourne, Florida have adopted achievement as the measure for grouping students. Many other schools have adopted a measure of achievement for grouping in general education subjects. School administrators have little difficulty applying this criterion since standardized tests are easily available in most general education subject areas.

In schools with as many as 100 students in a subject area, the students may be grouped by dividing them into five equal sized groups by scores on the tests. Or, they may be grouped by centile ranges according to the national norms. These centile ranges often are set up into categories 0 to 20, 21 to 40, 41 to 60, 61 to 80 and 81 to 100. This is not always feasible because of the unequal numbers which may fall into any group, and a different system of categories may be necessary. Thus, the organization of phases within a subject area may be described for a school year as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE I
THE NONGRADED MODEL FOR A SINGLE SUBJECT AREA



This model represents a single subject area broken down into five levels of subject matter complexity with the teaching materials matched to the particular student achievement levels. Each phase, then is divided into units usually tailored to the grading period. This organization facilitates individual progression with movement from one phase to another at the beginning of the grading period.

Individual Progression

Individual progression, as defined in the literature of non-grading, means that students may move from one phase to another as he desires or as testing indicates his readiness to achieve at specific levels. Individual progression may be a down phasing as well as up phasing. As shown in Figure 1, the student may begin the year in phase 2, then move to phase 3 at the beginning of the second grading period. If he succeeds at the phase 3 level, he may continue in this phase for the third grading period. Should he feel that the subject matter becomes too complex during this period he may choose to move to phase 2 for the fourth grading period and continue in this phase for the remainder of the school year.

Nongrading Vocational Agriculture

Nongrading as a method of curriculum organization provides an opportunity to tailor the vocational agriculture program to the student's ability, interest, needs, and level of achievement. The criterion for grouping thus becomes the key for developing courses matched to the characteristics of the students in the particular group. Where work skills, manual dexterity, visual

acuity, audio acuity, reading or math skills are identified as problems, the particular phase can be adjusted to maximize student development in these areas. Grouping by any one of these criteria provides advantages to the student. According to the teachers in the nongraded vocational education program in Brevard County, Florida, the students gain from such advantages as follows: (1) completing with students with similar abilities; (2) materials that take into account the students' reading and math abilities; and (3) the opportunity for successful learning experiences. These same teachers indicate that the major advantage of phasing to teachers is derived from the fact that all students in a given phase learn at approximately the same rate eliminating the problem of bored "fast-learners" while the class work is geared to the "slow-learner".

Criteria for Grouping

Phasing the Vo-Ag curriculum offers an opportunity to account for the special needs of a wide variety of student characteristics. The special needs of the gifted students are provided for as well as the special needs of the less gifted students without undue stress on the student or teacher.

A major concern that must be satisfied before grouping is the selection of the criteria for phasing. The Vocational Agriculture curriculum includes a wide range of subject matter and learning skills including classroom subject matter as well as shop skills. Should grouping be based on learning manual skills development for achievement? Until July 1, 1969 no achievement tests for any vocational area were available. As of this date several achievement tests for Trade and Industrial subjects have been developed in the Achievement Measures Project directed by Dr. Thomas Baldwin, University of Illinois. Unfortunately, no achievement tests in Vocational Agriculture have been standardized to fit the wide range of subject matter in vocational agriculture, even for one year of a specialized course. Since the development of valid and reliable tests is a long term process, it appears that the implementation of nongrading in vocational agriculture must be based on criteria other than achievement until such tests can be constructed.

What Criterion?

The lack of identified phasing criteria in vocational agriculture suggests the need for exploring the application of several measures of achievement and ability. Testing several criteria offers the possibility of discovering student characteristics with a higher level of validity than achievement. If special needs are to become a major emphasis in Vo-Ag, then the use of a measure of special needs may be appropriate for phasing the nongraded vocational agriculture program. The fact that criteria

for phasing have not been identified presents a formidable challenge to the Vo-Ag teacher and administrator to develop phasing criteria that will facilitate higher levels of achievement, and greater student and teacher staisfaction in the schools.

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