

2022

## Am I Doing This Right? The Emotional Labor of Confronting Inequitable Writing Assessment

Amy Flick  
*University of Pittsburgh*

Sommer Marie Sterud  
*Henry Ford College*

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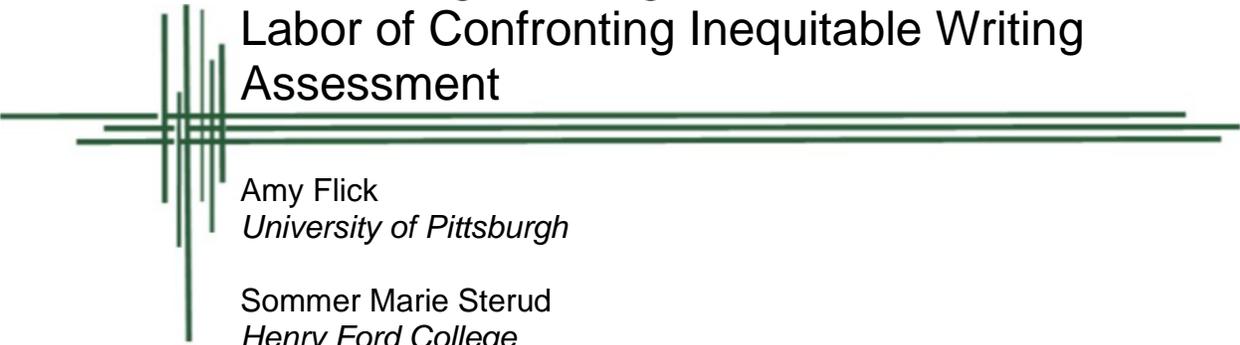
### Recommended Citation

Flick, Amy and Sterud, Sommer Marie (2022) "Am I Doing This Right? The Emotional Labor of Confronting Inequitable Writing Assessment," *Academic Labor: Research and Artistry*. Vol. 6 , Article 5.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/alra/vol6/iss1/5>

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# Academic Labor: *Research & Artistry*



## Am I Doing This Right? The Emotional Labor of Confronting Inequitable Writing Assessment

Amy Flick  
*University of Pittsburgh*

Sommer Marie Sterud  
*Henry Ford College*

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### Abstract

During the pandemic, we, like many others, found ourselves reimagining the practices we engage in to best meet the needs of our students. While adjusting to a new class structure was challenging, we found that writing assessment was particularly fraught. To create the most equitable assessment practices, we implemented Inoue's conception of labor-based grading. Inoue argues that "A grading contract based only on labor is better for all students and undermines the racist and White Supremacist grading systems we all live with at all levels of education" (16-17). These circumstances motivated us to employ labor-based grading given the difficulties many of our students were experiencing as a result of the changed learning environment, as well as the social, economic, and health implications resulting from the pandemic.

As one might expect, there was substantial emotional labor that accompanied letting go of old values and assessment practices. Newman, et al. ask, "How do emotional labor and artful affect translate into our understanding of leadership?" (6). This is an instructive question for many

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Amy Flick is a lecturer in the Composition Program at the University of Pittsburgh. She teaches in the Public and Professional Writing major and directs the Public Communication of Science and Technology certificate program. Her current research examines public health rhetoric and the communication of risk.

Sommer Marie Sterud is a professor of English at Henry Ford College. A feminist researcher who studies the literate activity associated with social movements, she spent a year conducting ethnographic research on a prominent pro-life organization. Her current research interests are the rhetoric of protest, activism, and civic engagement.

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**Abstract, cont.**

reasons. For one, many writing teachers don't often think of themselves as "leaders" per se, especially those of us who value collaborative learning and are averse to the banking concept of education. That said, the decisions about assessment are ours to make. While we feel our students benefited from the practices we employed, actually assessing work in this way was often uncomfortable and left us wondering, "Am I doing this right?" This article will address the tensions we experienced and how to better navigate them moving forward. More importantly, we will discuss the ways in which this has allowed us to engage in the necessary but vulnerable work of reflecting on our own internalized hegemonic value systems and how these systems have inadvertently influenced our assessment strategies.

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*"Feelings can't be ignored, no matter how unjust or ungrateful they seem."*

*--Anne Frank*

*"Emotions are not good, bad, right, or wrong. The first step to changing our relationship to feelings is to be curious about them and the messages they send to us."*

*--Dr. Lane Pederson, Dialectical Behavior Therapy*

**D**uring the pandemic, we, like many others, found ourselves reimagining our teaching practices to best meet the needs of our students. While adjusting to a new class structure was challenging, we found that writing assessment was particularly fraught. Suddenly, students and faculty were being asked to compose and learn in new, digital environments and under unprecedented social and cultural conditions. Writing assessment and questions of equitable assessment practices have been heavily criticized as they have historically favored writing that reflected middle-class white male ideologies, while punishing other styles of writing. We recognized that our students' personal living conditions during the lockdown, as well as issues of class, sex, gender, and race, created important differences in students' work, and we wanted to employ an assessment model that honored these differences and respected our students' lives and their right to their own language.

To do this, we implemented labor-based grading, a model of assessment that both of us were drawn to because of its promise of more equitable student writing assessment. According to the leading scholar on this type of assessment, Asao Inoue, a labor-contract "calculates final course grades purely by the labor students complete, not by any judgments of the quality of their writing. While the qualities of student writing [is]

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still at the center of the classroom and feedback, [it] has no bearing on the course grade” (“*Antiracist Writing*” 3). This style of grading employs labor logs in which students document the amount of effort and time spent on assignments. Inoue contends, “A grading contract based only on labor is better for all students and undermines the racist and White Supremacist grading systems we all live with at all levels of education” (16-17). Understanding this, and the difficulties many of our students were experiencing as a result of the pandemic, motivated us to adopt labor-based grading practices.

Despite our commitment to changing our approach to assessment, changing course assessment practices was very labor-intensive. Expectedly, there was research involved, restructuring objectives, and revising policies. Less expectedly, there was a lot of emotional labor involved in this change. The more traditional assessment practices we had always used, despite their limitations, were part of how we understood our role in the writing classroom; changing them—grading labor, rather than the produced texts—evoked moments of tension, frustration, and doubt, leaving us to wonder, “Am I doing this right?” Moreover, in trying to assess our students’ labor during the pandemic, we found that their emotional labor became more apparent. This deepened our understanding of labor and thus further complicated the goals of assessing labor.

Broadly, this article aims to explore how emotional labor impacted our approaches to writing assessment during the pandemic. We discuss how the move to labor-based grading necessitated engagement in the important but vulnerable work of examining our own internalized hegemonic value systems and the ways in which they have influenced our work. Secondly, while attempting to assess student labor, we found the definition of labor very limited and static and did not account for students’ emotional labor. To that end, we raise questions about whether emotional labor can or should be assessed and how emotional labor complicates the use of labor-based grading.

Emotion is present throughout work, both ours and our students. Our ability to manage how we feel, how we display our feelings, and how we make others feel is vital to feeling effectual. Moreover, emotions are central to the work we do in the writing classroom. Brand stated when things go wrong in the classroom or in the English department, or even in assessment, it is typically related to emotions—same goes for when things go right. Likewise, Kerr contended “communication...*is* emotional, it is ‘touchy-feely’ despite the tendency to want to ‘take it outside’ rather than focus on the emotions at hand” (27). In agreement with these scholars, we contend that by acknowledging the emotions we have and the role they play in our assessments, we can better understand the role that emotional labor plays in assessment and create productive spaces for us to consider our relationships with assessment, with our students, with our departments, schools, and with our field.

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### **Assessment: A Labor (-Based Contract) of Love**

In his book *Antiracism Assessment and Ecologies*, Asao Inoue argues for a new vision of writing assessment. He asserts we must view assessment as an environment comprising unique features. A champion of labor-based contracts, Inoue asks, “How can a conscientious writing teacher understand and engage in her classroom writing assessments as an antiracist project with her locally diverse students?” (Inoue 9). Via an ecological view of assessment is his answer. Pointing out that while many assessment scholars have done similar important work on how we evaluate student writing, none have employed antiracist frameworks (*Antiracism Assessment* 16).

What does it mean to view assessment as an ecology? Inoue describes the ecology of assessment as a “full cycle of writing assessment through a cycle of rubric creating, drafting, judging, revising, and reflecting on the ways students read and make judgments on peer’s texts” (17). When writing instructors do this, students are learning to value their own work, an act that invites agency. And secondly, by having students learn how to assess their own work, the instructor dismantles the hegemonic nature of the educator alone who bestows judgment because students are also participating in the process. Moreover, the curtain is pulled back and the ways of the wizard, so to speak, are revealed and with them, the biases of the assignment, rubric, and the instructor herself.

Within this reimagining of assessment is a commitment to labor-based grading contracts, which Inoue describes as:

essentially a set of social agreements with the entire class about how final course grades will be determined for everyone. These agreements are articulated in a contract, a document, that is negotiated at the beginning of the term or semester, then reexamined at midpoint to make sure it is still fair enough for everyone. It is a social, corporate agreement, which means it may not be a product of full consensus, but instead hard agreements. (*Labor-Based Grading* 129)

Inoue’s contract does not track what work is completed but what is *not* completed. In *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion*, Inoue created a table that shows the corresponding grades for any work or attendance not completed (see Table 4.1 below). He argues that “The calculus is simple: the more labor you do, the better your grade in the course will be, with no attention to the quality of writing turned in (on the part of the teacher)” (130).

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**Table 4.1: The Final Grade Breakdown in the Grading Contract**

	# Non-Participating Days	# of Late Assignments	# of Missed Assignments	# of Ignored Assignments
(4.0) A	3	3	1	0
(3.1) B	3	3	1	0
(2.1) C	4	4	2	0
(1.1) D	5	5	3	1
(0.0) E	6	6	4	2

A different labor-based approach originated from Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow. Their contract focuses on what work must be completed to guarantee a B. This includes, among other things, attending class regularly, meeting assignment deadlines, completing in-class and lower-stakes homework assignments, substantial revision, and thorough peer review feedback. According to Danielewicz and Elbow, a B grade is based on a student's participation in the class and engagement with assignments. "The grade of B does not derive from my judgment about the quality of your writing" (2). To earn an A, however, does rest on the instructor's evaluation of "high quality" writing (2). But how is this quality determined? And how can you show that it is fair? For us, Danielewicz and Elbow's answer is unsatisfactory, but they do point to Inoue as a resource for instructors who wish to give students more agency over their grades:

We use class discussions to explore the student's notions about what constitutes 'exceptionally high quality' writing, and we can often derive our criteria from students' comments. We try to make these criteria as public and concrete as possible—often providing handouts and feedback relevant to these criteria. But we don't profess to give students any power over these high-grade decisions. (2) (For a fascinating picture of a course where the teacher does authorize his students to grade, see Inoue.)

Of course, the models from Inoue and Danielewicz and Elbow are not the first arguments in favor of re-imaging writing assessment strategies. In

*(Re)Articulating Writing Assessment for Teaching and Learning*, Brian Huot talks about assessment in terms of “instructive evaluation” (69). This term gets at a primary objective of Huot’s writing classroom: he wants students to learn the vocabulary of judgment and to examine and problematize the process of writing evaluation. The difference between Huot’s and Inoue’s perspectives, however, is that Huot fails to explicitly discuss race in his vision of “instructive evaluation.” Inoue points out that while Huot does call for more “context-sensitive” evaluation and proposes a “very intriguing model for teachers and students,” he fails to directly “interrogate or understand racism in practices in the model” (*Antiracist Writing* 20).

The above evaluation methods lead to vital questions more teachers should be asking. For example, “Is my course ecology punishing other students for who they are? Is it punishing students who are other than the ones who embody the ideal habitus that your standards and grading practices use to grade so-called quality?” (Inoue 240). While these are indeed important questions, another perhaps more immediate question arises in a time of pandemic: How do I adequately “interrogate and understand racism” (or any -ism for that matter) from behind a computer screen? How can I gauge labor when faced with a flurry of muted mics and black boxes on Zoom? And how can I ensure the entire class has a voice in crafting the course contract from miles away? It seems that during a time of social distancing and even more social unrest, the calculus is not “so simple” after all. In what follows, we grapple with these questions and present new questions about emotional labor and assessment, while unpacking the challenges we faced incorporating labor-based grading practices during the pandemic.

### **Emotional Labor**

Ashforth and Humphrey assert, “...emotions are an integral and inseparable part of everyday organizational life. From moments of frustration or joy, grief or fear, to an enduring sense of dissatisfaction or commitment, the *experience* of work is saturated with feeling” (98). Emotions are imbued in everything that we do as professionals, and the labor of navigating, understanding, and managing these emotions is an important, if often under-examined, part of our work.

Hochschild defines emotional labor as the labor required “to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” or “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (7). Simplistically, emotional labor is the act of suppressing, repressing, and/or altering one’s emotions to be in accordance with social expectations about feelings and expressions of feelings or “feeling rules.” Hochschild notes that feeling rules, “govern how people try or try not to feel in ways ‘appropriate to the situation’” (552). Thus, if an individual assumes that a certain level or kind of emotion is appropriate for a given situation, that

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assumption is essential to the expression or suppression of emotions. Moreover, the response to feelings rules often appears as expressing emotions the individual may not feel or checking their emotions to see if they are appropriate to a situation. Emotional labor occurs when the individual's emotional response does not match the emotion dictated by the feelings rules—the result of this dissonance being that the individual must either change his or her emotional response or change the situation.

The definition of emotional labor has evolved to include management of other individuals' emotions. England and Farkas state that emotional labor also pertains to “efforts made to understand others, to have empathy with their situation, to feel their feelings are part of one's own” (qtd. in Steinberg and Figart 11). Thus, emotional labor can be expanded to pertain to both the labor of regulating one's own emotions and the labor of understanding and engaging with others' emotions.

Grandy, Diefendorf, and Rupp build on the definition of emotional labor, synthesizing scholarship on emotional labor in the fields of sociology, organizational behavior, and psychology. They argue that emotional labor can more usefully be defined and examined as a combination of occupational requirements, emotional displays, and intrapsychic processes (17). Occupational requirements refer to managing feelings as a direct part of a job. This type of emotional labor requires the worker to suppress or manufacture emotions to induce feelings in those they are caring for. Emotional displays refer to “*displaying* the emotions specified by the organization” as part of “job performance” (Grandy, Diefendorf, and Rupp 10). This might include smiling or making eye-contact. Lastly, intrapsychic processes refer to “effortfully managing one's emotions when interacting with others at work” (Grandy, Diefendorf, and Rupp 8). In combining these approaches, Grandy, Diefendorf, and Rupp maintain that emotional labor is the “the dynamic interplay of occupational expectations, expressed emotions, and emotion regulation strategies” (17). Defined in this way, emotional labor speaks to the totality of how workers display and create emotions that are at odds with their authentic feelings and how the effort involved in this practice is felt and is internalized by workers.

### **Emotional Labor in Teaching**

As educators, emotional labor is inextricably intertwined with every aspect of our professional position and identity. Hargreaves writes,

Teachers, learners and leaders all, at various times, worry, hope, enthuse, become bored, doubt, envy, brood, love, feel proud, get anxious, are despondent, become frustrated, and so on. Such emotions are not peripheral to people's lives; nor can they be compartmentalized ... Emotion, cognition, and action, in fact, are integrally connected. (812)

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Emotion is omnipresent in the work we do as teachers, not only in our relationships with or responses to students, but in the decisions, we make as teachers, the pedagogy we employ, the professional and political structures we encounter, the evaluations we receive from students and superiors, and public criticisms and projected ideologies about teaching we face. Jacobs and Micciche contends emotional labor in composition studies is apparent in the “daily work” of “building relationships with students and colleagues, reading and responding to student texts, constructing and implementing conceptions of rhetoric that shape curricular design and research practices, excavating rhetorical history in the service of contemporary contexts and purposes, and administering writing programs” (2). Emotion and the management of emotional responses and displays are core to our work as writing teachers. Some scholars have expanded upon this position, stating emotions are central to personal identity in teachers.

Zembylas writes, “Issues of emotions and teacher identity inform each other and construct interpretations of each other both on a conceptual and on a personal level” (214) and, subsequently, “emotions can become sites of resistance and self-transformation” (214). He urged a deeper examination of emotions as they pertain to a teacher’s identity and sense of professionalism that allows for teachers to “identify how their emotions inform the ways that their emotions expand or limit possibilities in their teaching, and how these emotions enable them to think and act differently” (232). Zembylas claimed that in identifying and analyzing emotions, teachers could regain and enhance their sense of agency and personal power and could resist pervasive tropes seeking to shape teacher identity.

In feminist research, scholars have explored how analysis of emotion can be used to trouble pervasive, colonist ideologies that create barriers to social change and increased equity. Worsham defines emotion as “the tight braid of affect and judgment, socially and historically constructed and bodily lived, through which the symbolic takes hold of and binds the individual, in complex and contradictory ways, to the social order and its structure of meanings” (216). She further claims that emotions are shaped, informed, and instructed by what she terms “pedagogic violence” in which emotions are often silenced and associated with the “other” as a way of enforcing existing power structures.

Similarly, Jacobs and Micciche see the examination of emotion as a mechanism for challenging inequity in the field of writing studies. “Composition’s familiar claims for creating equity in the discipline and in classrooms may be expanded through analyses of emotion at multiple levels, including analyses of the institutional structures that circumscribe our activities as teachers and administrators” (Jacobs and Micciche 6). They argue that emotion is not bound to private lives but is woven throughout our work.

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For the purposes of this article, we are particularly interested in how emotional labor affects writing assessment. O’Neill, Schendel, Williamson, and Huot (2007) state:

The time and energy—a large percentage of our professional resources—that go into reading and student writing is often invisible to colleagues across the disciplines, yet very visible to composition teachers and scholars who spend much of their professional lives involved in it. What’s not so visible to compositionists, however, are the structures, assumptions, and values that inform the assessment work we do. (78)

Assessing student writing is an important part of the work we do, made more important because of the real-world implications of grades for the student, ourselves, and our programs more broadly. Though O’Neill, Schendel, Williamson, and Huot were not speaking to emotional labor per se, value systems, assumptions, and prescriptive structures which shape assessment practices discussed in their work can become critical spaces for the examination of emotional labor in relation to how we assess and why we assess. Moreover, as they point out, assessment has been used historically as a mechanism of “gatekeeping” (80). The role of determining who will be successful and who will not is fraught with feelings of guilt, sadness, fear, and even anger.

Steinberg more directly explicates the role of emotion on assessment, maintaining that assessment is never a neutral act, that it always involves the judgments, beliefs, and emotions of the teachers who perform the assessment. In her meta-analysis of teachers’ emotions during the assessment process, she notes that with regards to assessment, “Teachers experienced fear-based emotions—nervousness, anxiety, defensiveness, and anger-based emotions—annoyance, irritation, and frustration in relation to anticipated and real student responses” (50). These feelings were borne out of perceptions of students’ efforts (48), fears over students’ reactions to grades (50), and teachers’ pedagogical beliefs and goals (50).

Caswell similarly recognized that responding to student writing was an emotional practice and often triggered powerful emotions in the assessor. She states, “responding to student writing is one activity where teachers’ emotions become relevant, but there are limited scholarly conversations directly discussing emotion as a component of teachers’ response practices” (1). Caswell found that the act of teachers responding to student writing adheres to a pattern of values, triggers, emotions, then actions. Within what she calls a “dynamic, recursive emotional episode,” Caswell evaluates how emotions occur in relation to the response act. While Caswell’s research notes the ways in which assessment, and particularly responding to student writing, can trigger emotions in teachers and how those emotions participate in the response act, there is a lack of

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discussion about how individuals manage those emotions and how they have been trained to manage those emotions.

### **Implementing Labor-Based Contracts**

Both of us independently began implementing labor-based grading practices at the beginning of the pandemic. When the CFP for this journal asked us to consider how our labor changed in the pandemic, we began talking to each other and discovered that we both turned to labor-based assessment. We discussed why we did it, how we did it, pitfalls we experienced, and the impact of COVID on assessment work. As we continued these discussions about what labor-based grading was like for us, the focus of our conversation shifted away from the minutiae of changing assessment practices to the feelings and points of felt difficulty we experienced about assessing labor. It was through sharing our own teaching stories that we were able to better understand our feelings and experiences. Pagnucci explains in his advocacy of narrative research that, “Stories reach us in a form that naturally matches our basic modes for understanding the world” (17). He further writes, “Stories from my life can illuminate the ideas I am talking about, can help readers connect back to the stories in their own lives” (28). Sharing our stories with each other helped us to articulate feelings and ideas that before we had been unable to name. Moreover, in sharing, we found validation and support. Because of the impact our personal stories had on each other, we chose to share them here as a way to connect with others and organically explore the challenges we faced in employing labor-based writing assessment.

### ***Sommer’s Story***

For several semesters leading up to the pandemic, I had made it a priority to employ more anti-racist pedagogy in my courses. Specifically, I was working on cycling in Asao-esque labor-contract assessment strategies. I had already implemented a contract-style syllabus in which I explained to students on the first day that a syllabus is indeed a contract: it is my promise to them of what I will do, what I hope they will do, and what we can do together. I even ask students to sign the syllabus just like any other legally binding contract, assuring them they could opt out of signing with the caveat that they had to present to the class their concerns for discussion and suggestions for syllabus revision. As mentioned above, one primary goal of contract grading is to give students more agency; making the syllabus a signable contract itself was the first symbolic act of inviting them to have a say in their learning.

When I was teaching during the shutdown, my administration told me to be “flexible” and “lenient” with attendance and late assignments. I took this suggestion—that we all need to be more understanding during this “challenging time”—as an opportunity to implement a new labor-based grading system. If I was expected to cut my students slack, perhaps my higher-ups would also give me a break as I introduced this new system

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because no doubt there would be hiccups. And there were. What I quickly learned is that being “flexible” and “lenient” with attendance and late assignments seriously challenged a labor-based grading contract; moreover, it seriously challenged my identity as a writing instructor who was raised on the fundamentals of outcome-based learning. This was especially so because my students were coming to me with increasing mental health issues, stemming from anxiety over racial tensions, grief over the deaths of people of color at the hands of police, and fear about loved ones who were or could be infected with COVID (among other things). What does labor look like when one takes into account these issues and is asked to remain “flexible?” What does “fairness” look like? And what emotional toll does it take on a teacher?

Moreover, I discovered that while I might be able to pat myself on the back for urging my students to challenge my labor and syllabus contract at any point, most would not because no matter how much I tried to dismantle the classroom hierarchy with open dialogue and collaborative peer-review guidelines, students still saw me as the boss because I am the giver of grades. Labor-based contract or not, I can directly affect students’ GPAs, and, in turn, their opportunities and even their identities as students.

For me, there were three emotionally fraught areas throughout COVID teaching, all related to assessment: worry that my students did not have enough of a voice in the matter, preoccupation with being flexible enough, and, conversely, the fear that I was being too flexible and thereby not adequately preparing my students to write within academia and the world at large. But the last concern was always top of mind, further complicated by the term “contract grading.” The very nature of a contract is meant to place limits on a thing, not broaden its boundaries with flexibility. I have always felt a responsibility to be mindful of my students’ unique needs. However, there is an equally critical responsibility--one that I earned two higher education degrees to be able to handle. No matter how we slice it, there are objectives for every course; there are learning outcomes. When a groom pays for dance lessons before his wedding, he wants to come out of those lessons prepared for the big day. Why should it be any different, especially when the financial burden of attending college is so great? Likewise, I was charged with teaching students how to achieve these objectives and outcomes; more importantly, I had the task of teaching my students to communicate in a world with *inflexible* genres. Therefore, as our title puts forth, “Am I doing this right?” became a question I asked myself time and time again when faced with the question of fair and equitable grading.

One anecdote in particular exemplifies the emotional complexity of an instructor’s attempt at any new pedagogical approach, but it also reflects our students’ dynamic interior lives. Additionally, this story reveals how versatile and present instructors must be if they are to accommodate their students, especially when it comes to assessing their writing. This versatility is an example of England and Farkas’ expansion

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of the definition of emotional labor to include the management of other's feelings. Indeed, it shows the recursive nature of emotional labor—how when an instructor labors to manage her students' emotions, she in turn has emotions about doing such work and vice versa.

It is sad but unfortunately not surprising that the following scenario involves sexual assault. This student not only had to start her freshman year isolated on a new campus, but she also had the added trauma of being sexually assaulted within the first week of classes starting. Compassion and flexibility are key attributes for a teacher dealing with any student during such a challenging time, but it was even more vital for me to model them with a student who experienced such a traumatic event like sexual assault. After missing the first week of classes, she asked to meet virtually, explaining what had happened to her and that she had contacted the proper authorities, as well as a counselor. I briefed her on the layout of the class and what we did the days she missed. She seemed to be holding up remarkably well and was sincerely enthusiastic to get to work despite what she had gone through.

Cut to a muddled email and even more jumbled text message the next day that implied this student was not holding up as well as she conveyed in our Zoom meeting. According to the email, she had taken “all the pills she had” because she was so devastated by what had happened. Luckily, she made it to the hospital in time and returned to class within a week. After assuring me she was seeing a professional to help her work through her trauma, she made a plan to catch up, and, once again, things seemed to be on the mend.

Of course, I was relieved the student was okay. But in the weeks that followed, I found myself struggling. If she missed a class, I would panic. If she was late to post on the discussion forum, I wanted to reach out. Essentially, I had turned into a helicopter teacher. Moreover, when she would miss meetings or fail to complete an assignment, I was frustrated, even a little annoyed. She would often appear in our class Zooms eating lunch with friends, driving her car, or at her job. I was conflicted. Knowing what she had been through, I thought I needed to be compassionate now more than ever. This is the flexibility that my department chair requested of me, right? But when her essays would lack cohesion, a thesis statement, or even a topic sentence, should I show compassion and flexibility then too? Should I evaluate her labor differently than the others? Isn't that what contract grading is all about, acknowledging all students communicate differently and the work is what matters? But how do I judge effort, especially when the amount of labor she is putting into the class may involve a lot of behind-the-scenes, emotionally complicated hoop-jumping just to muster the energy to get something on the page?

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*The Invisibility of Emotional Labor*

These questions highlight an underestimated aspect of the emotional labor that both students and instructors engage in and is often invisible. This feature of emotional labor makes it all the more difficult to assess. Early emotional labor scholars describe emotional labor as “performed through face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact” (Steinberg & Figart 10). Initially, Arlie Hochschild pointed to “observable” facial and bodily action (10). Later, scholars expanded this to include spoken word, tone of voice, and other effects. Research needs to broaden even more to include the invisible emotional work that accompanies trauma, mental health issues, and other factors that affect how both teachers and students perform. Furthermore, instructors must also acknowledge that invisible emotional labor is and has always been present, regardless of newly emergent circumstances like pandemics.

As for how this invisible labor affects assessment, scholars who study grading equity give a fairly simple answer to the complex questions this issue poses: consistent dialogue and transparency. Researchers like Peter Elbow, Richard Haswell, and Jaclyn Royster suggest encouraging students to be honest about issues they are having that make completing an assignment difficult. These scholars also imply it is important to explain to students that there will likely be a work or school situation where they must write a memo, email, research paper, report, or whatever the genre may be. And those who read it will have expectations related to what that genre of communication looks like. Those expectations may be unfair, exclusive, or otherwise prejudiced. These expectations might also be complicated by the student’s own life. The key here is that 1) students can recognize and then discuss the features of the genre of writing that seem unfair, exclusive, or otherwise prejudiced; and 2) they know the features of a particular genre and can execute this type of writing if they so choose. This is critical thinking, something writing teachers are charged with teaching because it is part of the writing process.

That said, dialogue and transparency become murky with a situation like my student who experienced sexual assault, and even murkier when involved in distance learning. For one, as my therapist would tell me, managing another person’s emotions is a fruitless endeavor made even more cumbersome from behind a screen. Nevertheless, the reality is that instructors do feel compelled to manage their students’ emotions or at least try to avoid inflaming the emotions students may feel as a result of trauma. This emotional work is further compounded when it comes to assessing our student’s labor. This relates to what Grandy, Diefendorff, and Rupp argue about the interior and exterior displays of emotion in workplace settings. As we mention above, they suggest that this type of emotional labor requires the instructor to repress their own emotions based on what their training has indicated or implied is appropriate in order to honor the emotions of students. And while yes, many instructors, including myself, feel compelled to tend to our students’

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emotions, we also feel competing responsibilities to our field and our institutions to help students complete course objectives, and so the interior and exterior emotions about assessment are often at war.

This responsibility is further highlighted when instructors must provide evidence to their institutions that students are meeting these expectations. For example, the school where I taught during COVID required us to submit our grades, as well as our students' final writing projects, to our department chair to comply with the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) requirements. What does it look like when I give a student a B because of the checked-off labor requisites, but upon closer examination by my department or the HLC, they deem this work to be less than B-quality? I have often felt concerned that evaluating labor with flexibility and compassion leaves me vulnerable to the criticisms that not only do I not know how to accurately assess, but I am also not delivering on the promise to help students achieve course objectives. This conflict leaves me wondering whether it is more important that the student feel validated and understood or that they learn to write the sort of research paper their political science professor can validate and understand? I am not suggesting an instructor should not aim to do both, but we must acknowledge it is a tricky thing for a teacher to navigate.

Additionally, if writing instructors do favor understanding, inclusion, and emotional awareness in our teaching philosophies, then perhaps we need to reimagine not only assessment but also college teacher training to include emotional intelligence training. I made myself extra available for this student by giving her my cell phone number and checking in with her regularly when I hadn't heard from her. We would start our conferences with a scan of how she was feeling about everything, not only schoolwork, giving her space to express herself if she needed. Nevertheless, I was uncomfortable handling this students' emotional and mental health issues—not because I am uncomfortable with emotions or mental health, but I am not a licensed therapist. How can I be sure if I am not doing more harm than good? What if slack is not what some of these students need? Or perhaps they need more? These questions make assessment emotionally fraught, even when it is purely based on labor. Who is to say what enough effort looks like? How can I really decide when some of my students produce truly amazing work in a day, while others need a week or more because of whatever their circumstances are?

In addition to potentially reimagining assessment and teacher training to include emotional labor, writing and assessment scholars across all curricula would do well to reimagine the role of emotion in both our work and the work of our students. Anuj Gupta argues for this very thing in his article "Emotions in Academic Writing/Care-Work in Academia: Notes Towards a Repositioning of Academic Labor in India (& Beyond)." A situation similar to mine happened to him with a student in India who wrote about her sexual assault. The discomfort he felt assessing this student's work led him to interrogate the value we place (or fail to place)

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on emotion. He wisely points out that, especially for sexual assault victims, personal traumas are not validated the same way public traumas such as war or mass shootings are (Gupta 118). This may cause feelings of alienation and shame, emotions that add another layer of invisible labor which is/often impossible to assess. His suggestion is to acknowledge with the student the often “unpreparedness” we feel as instructors and the concern to not “make things worse” (8). Instead of trying to hide our ineptness at handling others’ emotions or trauma, admit it so that we might normalize it. Such honesty leads to trust, which is vital in learning situations. We cannot learn if we do not feel safe to fail.

Asao Inoue poses one fundamental question in his labor-contract scholarship that was ever present in my mind when assessing my student who was a sexual assault victim: “Is my course ecology punishing other students for who they are?” And whether I assessed the student’s writing quality or labor, one could argue I would be punishing her. She wasn’t writing what I had been trained to assess as high-quality work, and she wasn’t displaying A or even B-level effort in participation. Nevertheless, I am certain she was doing significant emotional labor that was indeed invisible to me. In the end, I admittedly had to be intuitive about my assessment practices, balancing what I knew of her circumstances with her actual work. In essence, I was looking at the ecology of the student.

Looking at the whole student, however, meant that I did assess her differently than I assessed my other students, something that was incredibly uncomfortable for me to admit. On the one hand, I felt strongly that I was doing what my teaching philosophy dictates—considering the whole student and approaching each student uniquely. But on the other hand, while assessing her labor, or lack thereof, could yield a failing grade, perhaps that’s what this student needed—to slow down and heal, then try the class again when she was mentally and emotionally up to it. Inevitably, this gets into financial aid issues as she was on scholarship. Thus, she could feel penalized for her trauma. As Gupta remarked, he did not want to make things worse for a student who experienced such victimization. Just as assessment scholars have argued for instructors not to punish students when they use their own language in their writing, I did not want to punish my student for being affected by her own life. Ultimately, balancing what I knew the student had experienced, her potential, and what she actually did felt like my best option.

### *Amy’s Story*

On March 11, 2020, while my university was on spring break, university faculty, staff, and students received notification that because of the pandemic and state regulations, in-person classes were not going to resume, and the remaining month of class was to be delivered in a fully online environment. Students and faculty were given an extra week of break. During this time, students were asked to move from the dorms if they could, and faculty were to adjust their courses to an asynchronous,

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online learning space. At the time, I remember being both relieved and worried. Moving to an online course format was the best way to ensure the safety of everyone involved and allow the students to complete the courses they had already begun. Nevertheless, the shift in course delivery was abrupt and jarring, particularly for my students who had never taken an online class. I was very concerned about my students' ability to successfully adapt and my own ability to change the course in a way that accounted for the myriad of ways their lives were being impacted by the pandemic, but still met the goals of the course.

In the end, I tried my best to continue with the course as planned. I felt that because we had such a short time left in the term, changing major assignments, types of course work, goals, and habits was going to be more difficult for everyone. Instead, I made modifications to major assignment deadlines, eliminated a number of smaller assignments, and created new guidelines for things like peer review and discussion that would need to take place in digital spaces and asynchronously. I emailed my students before we resumed classes, sharing with them my plan and asking for feedback, specifically about the manageability of the work. With no objections, we moved forward, trying to create a new sense of normal.

However, things were not normal; we were living and working in unprecedented cultural contexts. Students communicated with me regularly about what they were going through, sharing their struggles, not even necessarily with the course per se, but with their mental and physical health, sense of safety, financial stability, family, and even residence. The pandemic had created very real difficulties for students. Awareness of these personal difficulties created new considerations and challenges for me as a teacher, particularly with regard to the assessment of student work. Assessment has always been difficult for me, more so in the last few years as more scholarly attention has been paid to the ways in which assessment upholds bigoted cultural and institutional practices. With this in mind, and with consideration for the challenges created for my students by the pandemic, I adopted a labor-based approach to assessment, one that accounted for the completion of work and engagement with the course, efforts that were unquestionably made more onerous because of COVID for the following semester.

#### *Implementation of Labor-Based Grading*

Implementing Inoue's recommendations for labor-based grading, my assessment of student work emphasized production, rather than the quality of what was produced. Students completed drafts, revisions, peer workshops, and commentary on readings. They received substantive feedback from me on their work, but their actual grade was based on their completion of the task and their adherence to the assignment (e.g., they included source material if that was an expectation of the assignment). Initially, this approach went very well. Labor-based grading facilitated greater equity and transparency in the assessment process. Students knew

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very clearly what they needed to do to be successful in the course, and everyone had the same ability to succeed. As Inoue explained, in a labor-based grade contract, “all final course grades are more accessible to every student in the room, regardless of the languages they practice, their linguistic backgrounds, or most other social dimensions” (p. 140). Having definitive expectations for work that were not only explicated but accounted for in their grades seemed to motivate them to attend, participate, and fully commit to the course.

This transparency and accessibility undoubtedly benefited students, and I found that I benefited as well from not having the pressure of determining a grade. I was able to work with students without applying prescriptivist ideas about writing quality. For me, labor-based assessment alleviated some of the tension and pressure that I have always felt when grading. Providing feedback without a grade penalty created more of a dialogue about their writing and an opportunity for students to articulate their goals and expectations for their work. I was excited to see that a number of my students envisioned their work in spaces beyond my classroom. One student worked with me extensively over the course of two semesters on a paper advocating for the release of people imprisoned for cannabis-related offenses. The paper was initially submitted as an op-ed for a public writing course, and she wanted to have it published in a local newspaper. Seeing her investment in her words, ideas, and the way she envisioned the piece having public and political power was exciting for me. I don’t know if that would have happened had I been more focused on product and attaining the outcomes set by me and the university.

Despite these successes, changing my methods of assessment was unexpectedly hard. As a scholar, teacher, and researcher, I recognize the ways in which hegemonic structures—racist, classist, sexist, and ableist structures—are embedded in our institutions and our pedagogies. Social justice is an important part of my pedagogy. But when I really tried to actually resist these dynamics in my assessment, I was afraid. I was afraid of what letting go of outcomes-based assessment meant, what letting go of conceptions of “successful” meant for my class and for me as a teacher. I was almost chronically worried about how my grading practices would be understood and evaluated by my students, writing program directors who might look at my students’ work, those in administration looking at grade distributions, and accrediting bodies. To be clear, my institution was incredibly supportive of faculty during the pandemic, and they were also encouraging of labor-based grading contracts. The fear of judgment was an internalized fear, rooted in my experiences in academe, both as a student and teacher. Performance-based assessment is so pervasive in education that I felt like I should be able to speak, not only to student labor, but also to the quality of their work as a professor in this discipline.

Like Sommer, my doubts and fears were heightened in moments where there was a potential for surveillance. When I submitted final grades, I remember questioning myself and thinking that there was

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something wrong because I had so many students receiving A's. I worried that if my chair or dean saw these grades, they might think my course lacked rigor or, worse, that I wasn't seriously engaged with my students' work. Similarly, at the end of the academic year, I was required to submit a teaching dossier that included syllabi from the courses taught that year, samples of assignments, rubrics, and student work. In this space, again, I could not help but wonder whether my approach to assessment made me vulnerable to criticism.

My experience with labor-based grading also made me confront how much I have ascribed to potentially harmful assessment practices as a part of my professional identity. Even though I want to challenge practices that disadvantage students and rob them of their authentic voices, lives, and ideas, I also struggled to let go of the familiar. Lehn confronted this dissonance in her discussion of pedagogical failure, writing, "While I may purport to be committed to justice, I recognize that I am a participant in a system I want to resist. By virtue of that participation, the reenactment of ideologies that harm our students and that harm ourselves may be hard to avoid" (150). I have internalized hegemonic values about what "good writing" is; these values have influenced my own writing practices and pedagogies. Attempts to confront and dismantle these left me feeling vulnerable and uncertain.

Micciche writes, "Rather than characterize emotion exclusively as a reaction to a situation or a tool used to create a reaction in an audience, we need to shift our thinking to examine how emotion is part of the 'stickiness' that generates attachments to others, to world views, and to a whole array of sources and objects" (1). I was far more emotionally attached to outcomes-based assessment than I ever imagined because I equated my ability to assess performance to some degree with how I viewed my capabilities as a teacher. Even after we returned to in person teaching and I planned for a new term, I am still grappling with what this means for me and how to use my frustration, fear, and anxiety productively. A big part of that process for me is becoming more comfortable with questions rather than answers. Occupying spaces of not knowing invites dialogue and open, recursive engagement, which is useful in trying to attain fairness and equity in assessment. Questioning myself and working in new and different ways was emotionally labor intensive. I was intensely uncomfortable. But maybe being uncomfortable is how we know we are doing something right, how we know we are growing.

#### *Students' Emotional Labor*

Early on in my utilization of labor-based grading, I began to encounter difficulties assessing labor, at least how it has been assessed in model grading contracts. For example, Inoue (2019) identifies the following metrics for assessing labor: adherence to deadlines, guidelines for participation, earnest engagement in revision, and self-reported time spent on tasks (labor logs). Within the first week of digital learning, I began

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getting reports of students who had been diagnosed with COVID. If students were asymptomatic, this did not affect their work. Conversely, I had instances where students reported being very ill. They might log on to our class's Zoom session to avoid missing material, but they were not able to participate in discussion or activities. Even though they were not active in these class sessions, I did not take away points because I recognized the effort being put forth just to attend.

I then started to get reports about students' mental health issues. The isolation they were experiencing coupled with the fear they felt about their safety and that of their loved ones lurked persistently in the backgrounds of their lives. I received so many emails and saw so many students during office hours. Some students just wanted to talk to someone; others were seeking help with their work or extensions on deadlines. As a teacher and not a mental health professional, I was limited in what I could do. I was empathetic. As someone who is treated for anxiety, I understand how oppressive a burden it can be, how even aimless fear can be crippling. I passed on information on student resources. And I made so many exceptions for students. I gave more time without question. I excused absences. I worried about my students and their well-being first and my obligations to assessment after. From a labor-grading standpoint, I wondered if I was being too lenient. After all, if I exempt students from almost all of the grading criteria, what's left?

One of my students, Drew<sup>1</sup>, had been in one of my courses when the pandemic began; he then took another course with me in a subsequent term. During this time, Drew was very open with me about his diagnoses of PTSD and depression. Though he was a strong and committed student, he began to have difficulties meeting deadlines, completing assignments, and focusing on school. He emailed me about the shame he felt in not meeting expectations and his feelings of "being underwater" and "overwhelmed." Drew missed almost every deadline for the second half of the class. But he got everything in, and his work showed clear effort. His writing reflected the feedback he received from me and his peers. He always attended class, even if at times his camera was off, and he did not speak. If I had assessed Drew's labor in accordance with the grading criteria above, he would not have done well in the course. These metrics, devised to assess labor, failed to recognize or account for the emotional labor Drew was experiencing. This anecdote illustrates the limitedness of a definition of labor that centers on time spent on tasks and the completion of tasks; while these metrics can seem equally achievable to everyone, regardless of background, the inattention paid to physical, emotional, and intellectual effort as part of labor creates inequities. Drew exerted a great deal of effort to complete the course. His labor was real. His emotional

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<sup>1</sup>Students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

labor, while invisible to us, was a shaping force in his ability to interact with course materials and his own writing.

### **Discussion**

In their book, *Very Like a Whale: The Assessment of Writing Programs*, White, Elliot, and Peckham (2015) asserted, “Consideration of all who may be intentionally or unintentionally influenced by an assessment is the preferred axiological stance for writing program administrators in their instructional design and program assessment roles” (p. 151). The authors use ecology as a metaphor to understand the situatedness of writing program assessment and its relationships within the university and other invested entities. While the authors are discussing writing program assessment, we feel that the same metaphor of an ecosystem can be useful in articulating the relational aspects of classroom writing assessment as they extend beyond the classroom.

Since the 1970s, ecological metaphors have been used extensively in our field to study literacy practices and learning. Scholars like Richard Coe, Shirley Bryce Heath, Brian Street, and James Paul Gee, to name a few, have employed ecology as a metaphor long before contract grading became as popular as it is today. More recently, Inoue has addressed ecology as it pertains to writing assessment, stating that an ecology accounts for the “full cycle of writing assessment through a cycle of rubric creating, drafting, judging, revising, and reflecting on the ways students read and make judgments on peer’s texts” (17). He contends that, “An antiracist classroom writing assessment ecology provides for the complexity and holistic nature of assessment systems, the interconnectedness of all people and things, which includes environments, without denying or eliding linguistic, cultural, or racial diversity, and the politics inherent in all uneven social formations” (Inoue 77). This body of scholarship speaks critically to the interconnectedness of writing practices and writers’ private lives and experiences. There is intrinsic value for individual writers, for teachers of writing, and for our field in examining not only a final product, but the forces shaping the writer and their work.

Similarly, in thinking about our own approaches to writing assessment, it is useful to think about our work as part of a larger ecosystem while striving to understand the influences shaping our own assessment approaches, goals, and values. Thinking about our specific roles in this way has helped us to locate one of the most salient points of tension about making changes to our assessment practices: we don’t feel like assessment choices, even in our classes, are entirely ours to make. The writing classroom and its stated learning outcomes are part of a larger system that includes students, ourselves, our programs, and our universities. In discussions we had about our experiences with labor-based grading during the planning of this article, we talked extensively about feeling anxious and worried about how we were grading, how our grading practices would be viewed by programmatic directors and chairs, and

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whether our students achieved the goals of the course. How effective would feedback be if students knew quality was not being assessed as heavily as effort? How might others view our grade distribution? Were we even capable of truly assessing labor? In short, while we believed in our choice to use labor-based assessment, it seemed so antithetical to what we had always done that we were left wondering, were we doing this, the work of assessment, right?

Much of what was creating this doubt for us was simply that we had come to understand outcomes-based assessment of writing “the right way” to teach and assess writing. Accreditors and political bodies have given the outcomes-based approach power—financial, political, and social power. Outcomes-based approaches are also largely used in K-12 programs and standardized assessments, leading students to equate assessment with the meeting of stated learning goals in produced work. Lastly, through our own educational and professional experiences we have developed ideas about “good writing” and the importance of evaluating performance, ideas that have been shaped by groups who have historically held power and then reinscribed onto our students through our approach to assessment. Furthermore, expectations about our ability to teach these values and assess our students’ ability to meet set outcomes are intrinsic to our professional identity and sense of self-efficacy, making any attempts to change emotionally fraught.

We adopted a labor-based approach to assessment during COVID because we hoped it would help account for the complications of learning during a shutdown. What became most apparent is that labor is 1) difficult to define; and 2) even more difficult to assess, especially because the two of us writing this article came out of a tradition of outcomes-based learning assessment. What does labor look like and what is *enough* labor? Moreover, we learned that labor is also affected by race, gender, and socioeconomics (among a host of other factors) just as “quality” is. How should we judge labor if a student has a disability and cannot complete his readings within 20 minutes? What about when a student is a new mother? What do their labor logs look like if they are being truly honest?

Finally, we learned that regardless of whether we are implementing labor-based grading or outcome-based grading, the buck stops with us, and, thus, we cannot escape a certain hierarchy when it comes to writing assessment. Despite our best efforts, we had to confront the idea that grading based on labor may even be an assessment of *quality*. For example, when describing what B-level labor looks like, Inoue explains that it involves revisions: “When the job is to revise your thinking and work, you will reshape, extend, complicate, or substantially clarify your ideas—or relate your ideas to new things” (334). Such “reshaping, extending, complicating, and substantially clarifying” for us equals “quality.” Thus, while it is always crucial to attend to the inequities that accompany hierarchies, we must admit they are already always present.

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So what can instructors do to address these inequities that are always present because racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism are systemic? We arrived at one answer: vulnerability. Instructors must be allowed to acknowledge they do not know all the answers. This obviously is an uncomfortable thing. An instructor's concern with her institution or an accrediting body thinking that her evaluation is too easy gets at the ever-looming sense that someone is constantly watching and, as a result, assessing her progress in addition to her students'. Interestingly, this feeling, what we have deemed the "internalized panopticon," only intensified for us while teaching during COVID. That is because many writing instructors (we would argue many academics in general) feel they need to be held accountable by someone, *anyAone*. As a result, vulnerability is a tough pill to swallow because even if no one is watching, it feels like they are because accountability is a high expectation in our field. Empirical data and source attribution are what the field of rhetoric and composition relies on. Nevertheless, there are some occupational hazards where this standard is concerned, a primary one being the institutional angel on our shoulder telling us, *Grade harder. Challenge them. That's the only way to prepare them for what's to come.*

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