

Good Practices for setting up the Grade Center

The Grade Center in Blackboard is designed to help you track your students' progress in a course. Whether you're teaching a brand new course, copying one from a previous semester, or inheriting one from another instructor, you can make the Grade Center a useful tool for you and your students. Below are several ideas to consider when setting up the Grade Center.

Preparing ahead of time. To the best of your ability prior to the start of the course, attempt to set up as many of the grade columns - if not all - that you can. Naturally, unexpected changes can come up during the semester, but having as much of the Grade Center ready in advance can save you time once the course is underway. And of course, the Instructional Technology Lab is here to help!

Confirming how the final grade is calculated. It's key to consider is whether you will weight your course grades (e.g., all assignments = 25%, final exam = 35%) or use a points system. The answer to this question determines if you will use the **Weighted Total** (percentages) or **Total** (points) column in the Grade Center. Once you've decided which total column fits the course grading structure, you can remove the column you plan not to use in order to simplify the Grade Center and students' **My Grades** area.

Displaying grades to students and instructors. It's important to think about how students will see their grades. Should they see a numeric score, a percentage, a letter grade? Regardless of display type chosen, consistency can provide students a clearer understanding of their progress in **My Grades**. When clicking **Edit Column Information**, an instructor can choose from several options under **Primary Display** (students and instructors see this display). An optional **Secondary Display** is viewed by only the instructor in the Grade Center. If you plan to display letter grades to students, you'll want to ensure your official grading scale maps to the Grade Center's letter grade schema. This can be viewed and modified from the **Full Grade Center** under **Manage > Grading Schemas**.

Organizing Grade Center columns. Some instructors inheriting a course might want to organize Grade Center columns in a different way. In the **Full Grade Center**, click **Manage > Column Organization**, use drag-and-drop to move columns, and click **Submit**. Bear in mind that students see the Grade Center columns from top to bottom in **My Grades**, corresponding to an instructor's left-to-right view. In **Column Organization**, instructors also can double-check that no columns are hidden from their view that might still be visible to students. Hidden columns are labeled as such and italicized. You can select hidden columns and then click **Show/Hide Selected Columns >> Show Selected Columns**. Then click **Submit**. In the Full Grade Center, you will see whether or not columns are hidden from students (indicated by a red slash mark). You can choose to delete columns not being used in order to streamline the Grade Center view.

Creating manageable column names. If a Grade Center column name is too long, you can click the down-arrow in the column heading, click **Edit Column Information**, and enter an abbreviated name in the **Grade Center Display Name** area. This will change the column display name for easier instructor viewing. Students will continue to see the original name that corresponds to the assignment or assessment in the course.

Filtering the Grade Center view. Grade Center **Smart Views** are focused ways of looking at student progress based on criteria you select. They can make Grade Center viewing more manageable, especially if your roster is long, if you have several graders, or if you need to see group grades, among other things. In the **Full Grade Center**, click **Manage > Smart Views**. You'll see system default views and a button to create your own. If you create a view, you can choose from various criteria, such as a group view or how a specific student is performing. To create a shortcut link to a **Smart View** under **Control Panel > Grade Center**, click the star icon to add a view as a **Favorite**.

Hiding a column while grading work. When grading student work from within the Grade Center, some instructors hide the entire column from student view until all work has been graded. This step can be helpful if an instructor is grading one student's work and realizes changes must be made to an earlier student's grade entry. Click the down-arrow next to a column name and choose **Hide from Students (on/off)**. A red slash in the column header indicates students cannot see the column. When work is complete, click the down-arrow and choose **Hide from Students (on/off)** to make the column visible to students again.

Providing comments and feedback. Instructor feedback can be added to any student grade entry in the Grade Center. File attachments (e.g., rubrics or a document with tracked changes) can be added as feedback. Use the **attach file** option or type directly into the **Feedback to User** textbox when viewing a student's attempt. In addition, the Blackboard **Rubric** tool (see **Control Panel > Course Tools > Rubrics**) allows instructors to create rubrics and use them to grade assessments directly in Blackboard. Scores are then automatically reflected in the Grade Center.

Using Categories for flexibility. Categories are particularly useful when using the **Weighted Total** column. For instance, for calculating three in-class presentations totaling 20% of the final grade, three columns will not divide evenly into 20%. However, the **Weighted Total** column can do the math for you when the three columns are under one category. Another use case is giving a weekly quiz and dropping the lowest score at the end of the term. Putting all weekly quizzes into one category provides the option of dropping the lowest score in the **Weighted Total** column. To see or create categories, click **Manage > Categories** in the Full Grade Center.

Experiencing course grades as a student. Click the **Student Preview Mode** icon (top right of Blackboard window, next to *Edit Mode On/Off*) to complete assignments, tests, or surveys just as a student would. Exit Student Preview Mode and choose to *keep the preview user and data* in order to grade the preview user's work. Enter Student Preview Mode once again and click **My Grades** to find out how grades and feedback appear to students. This can help you determine if adjustments are needed prior to the start of the course or any time during the semester.

Downloading a copy of grades. At various points in the semester, it can be helpful to download a copy of Grade Center content for your records, to keep on a hard drive or other media. In the **Full Grade Center**, click **Work Offline > Download**. On the following page, you will choose to download the Full Grade Center and click Submit. The next page provides a **Download** button for downloading a spreadsheet version of the Grade Center and its content at that point in time.

IMPORTANT: Blackboard is not the final repository of official grades for university courses. All instructors need to submit students' final grades in the **GWeb Information System (Banner)** (accessible from <http://my.gwu.edu>). Blackboard will not do this automatically. For assistance, please contact **GW's Division of IT (202-994-4948)**.

Other questions about the Grade Center? Please contact the Instructional Technology Lab on 202-994-0485 or itl@gwu.edu