Describing the Current Landscape of Pass/Fail Grading Schemes Within Skills-Based Curricula

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Background

- The choice of grading systems in pharmacy education has important implications for administrators, faculty, and students.
- An ideal grading system should meet academic standards, reflect learning objectives, support student well-being, and reflect student comprehension.[1]
- Use of pass/fail grading schemes in health professions education, as compared to traditional grading schemes, had no impact on academic performance, while significantly increasing student well-being.[2,3]
- Grading students holistically, rather than numerically, may more accurately reflect clinical skill mastery.[4]
- Optimal methods for grading students in skills-based courses within pharmacy education have not been fully explored.

Objective

- To determine the current landscape of pass/fail grading schemes within pharmacy skills-based courses and their impact on faculty and students.

Methods

- A mixed methods study design was utilized.
- A 29-item, cross-sectional survey was developed and electronically distributed to members of the American Association Colleges of Pharmacy (AACP) Laboratory Special Interest Group (Lab SIG).
- The survey collected demographic information, data on course grading schemes, faculty opinions on the effects of pass/fail grading on faculty workload and student performance, and factors which most impacted faculty and students as a result of implementing a pass/fail grading scheme.
- The survey was validated by pharmacy faculty involved in skills-based courses and modified based on feedback provided.
- After completing the survey, respondents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews.
- Interview data was coded, and thematic analysis was performed.
- Descriptive statistics were used for data analysis.
- The study was approved by the Northeast Ohio Medical University Institutional Review Board.
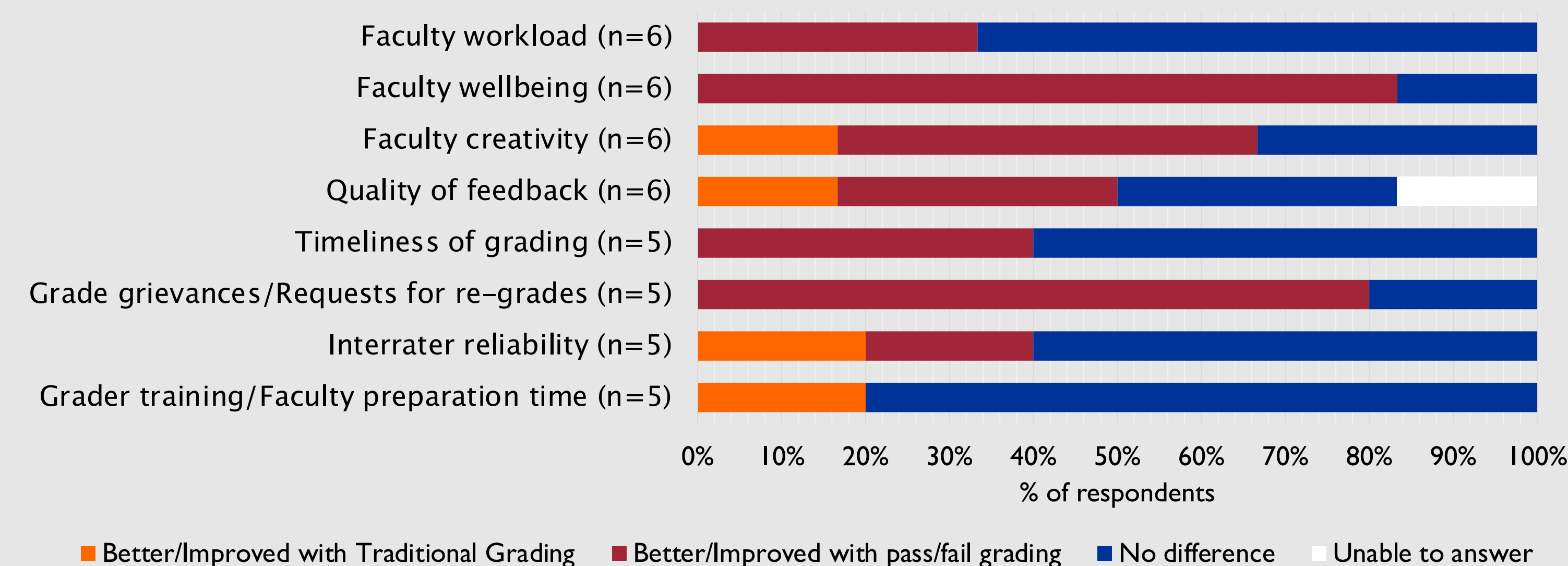
Results

Fifty-five participants responded to the survey, representing 23 US schools/colleges of pharmacy.

- 82% of respondents use a traditional grading system for final course grades.
- 40% of respondents reported using specification grading schemes.
- 64% of respondents use pass/fail grading for specific skill assessments.
- Changes to pass/fail grading was most frequently initiated by the faculty.
- Pass/fail grading schemes have been in place for varying durations, with 18% of respondents indicating >10 years and 45.6% for <3 years.

Demographic Information

Characteristics	N (%)
Geographic location (n=42)	
Midwest	10 (23.81)
Northeast	9 (21.43)
Southeast	16 (38.10)
Southwest	4 (9.52)
West	3 (9.52)
Duration of the professional program	
0 – 6	1 (3.45)
4-year	23 (79.81)
3-year accelerated	2 (6.9)
Other	3 (10.34)
How practice skills are taught (n=23)	
Standalone course	20
Integrated in didactic courses	3

Faculty Factors Associated with Pass/Fail Grading Schemes

Student Factors Associated with Pass/Fail Grading Schemes
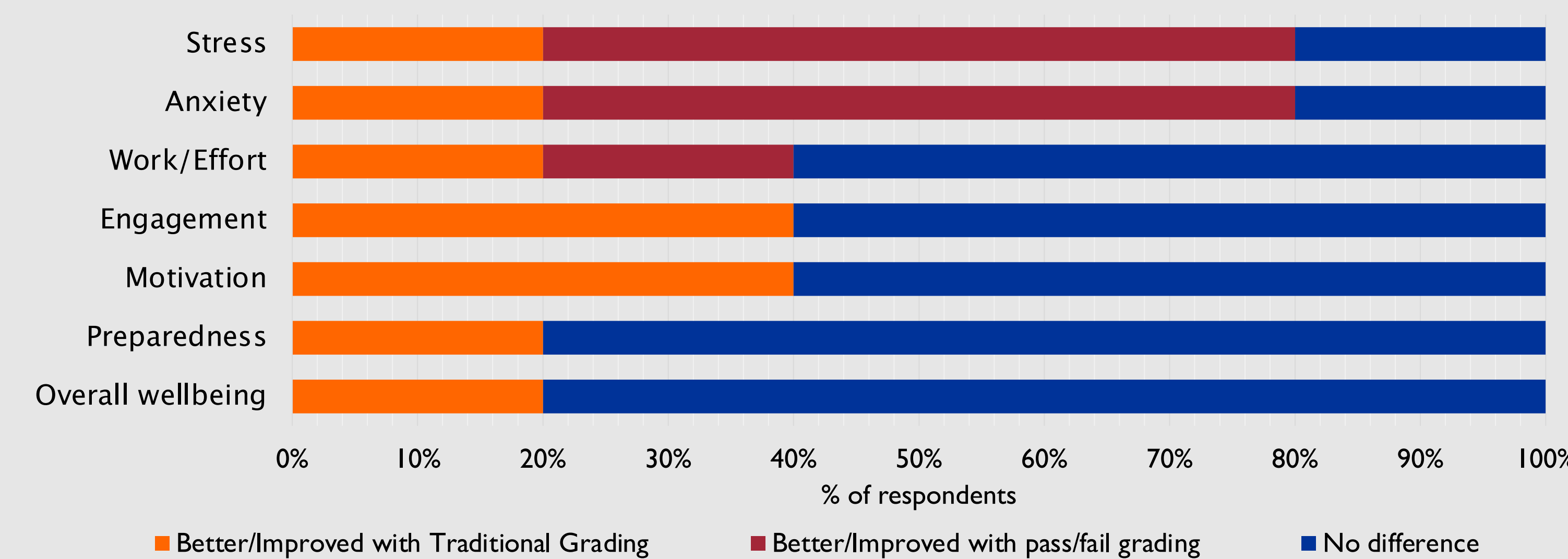
Results (continued)

- The main concern among faculty related to pass/fail grading was decreased student motivation.
- Four respondents provided contact information and agreed to participate in follow-up interviews.
- Key themes identified from the follow-up interviews included:
  1. Need for specific, validated rubrics for pass/fail assessment of skills
  2. Importance of faculty buy-in for transitioning to pass/fail grading schemes
  3. Lack of a significant change in faculty workload to implement pass/fail assessments

Conclusions

- There is variability in grading schemes used within skills-based pharmacy curricula.
- Faculty perceptions of pass/fail grading schemes are positive overall.
- The most common concerns regarding pass/fail grading schemes include impact on student engagement and motivation.
- Study findings may serve as a guide for institutions interested in transitioning from traditional grading.

References

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