

# ACS Summer 2025 Working Group Progress Report

## Developed by the Summer 2025 ACS Working Group:

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## Overview

This document contains a snapshot of the progress that our working group has made so far in designing our Summer 2026 ACS Course Design Institute: Taking the Leap into Specifications Grading. Included you will find:

1. Our plan for next steps;
2. A draft of our learning objectives, general structure, and plan for the series;
3. A curated list of resources that we have collected so far and/or have used to inform the creation of our institute plan

## Next Steps

Now that we have developed a general structure and plan for our course design institute, we plan to use AY 25-26 to prepare materials, test out individual workshops at our respective institutions, revise based on participant feedback, and adapt materials for online implementation in Summer 2026.

### *Tentative next steps:*

- *Fall 2025:*
  - *Use September meeting to plan and assign lead facilitators for each of the individual workshops*
  - *Lead facilitators will work on building out the content for their assigned workshops and bring that content back to the group for feedback and review*
- *Spring 2026:*
  - *Explore opportunities to test out our materials at our respective institutions*
    - *For example: Run a short workshop such as “what is specs grading” all about, getting started in alternative grading, etc.*
  - *Refine materials based on participant feedback*
  - *Adapt materials for online implementation (decide whether to offer an intensive, multi-day virtual institute, or a more spread out workshop series)*
- *Summer 2026:*
  - *Offer virtual institute and/or virtual workshop series for ACS faculty in summer 2026*

- *Pros of an intensive institute: could accept a smaller cohort of participants who could build closer connections and community together*
- *Pros of a workshop series: Participants could attend the entire series or jump in/out of the sessions that are most relevant to them, so we could potentially engage more participants*

# Course Design Institute: Taking the Leap into Specifications Grading

Developed by the Summer 2025 ACS Working Group<sup>1</sup>:

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In *Grading for Growth* (2023), Clark and Talbert ask: “What if there was a way to think about grades built on growth over game-playing, learning over letters and numbers, and productive relationships over adversarial ones? What if we could address, if not entirely repair, so many of these problems, through a quiet revolution in the everyday task of grading?” (3). As they suggest, alternative grading systems that emphasize growth and feedback provide one such way. Moreover, alternative grading creates more inclusive and equitable learning experiences for students by mitigating some negative outcomes associated with traditional grading (see for example: Covington et al, 2017; Feldman, 2019; Kohn, 2011; Malouff & Thorsteinsson, 2016). However, for many faculty, making the leap from traditional grading to alternative grading requires significant investment of time and labor.

This three-day course design institute (CDI) provides faculty (& instructional staff) with the structure, support, and resources they need to take the first step towards alternative grading. Informed by *Specifications Grading* (Nilson, 2015) and *Grading for Growth* (Clark & Talbert, 2023), our CDI is designed to help participants design or redesign a course using specifications grading.

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## Goals for Course Design Institute:

Throughout this course design institute, you will...

- **Recognize** the ways that **our grading systems affect student motivation and student learning**
- **Identify** common **benefits and challenges that students and faculty** experience in specifications graded courses

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- **Create** a communication plan that briefly **explains specifications grading and why** you're using it to unfamiliar audiences (e.g., colleagues, department chair, students)
  - **Draft** a **semester-long plan** implementing specifications grading in a class; this plan should include: 1) a draft of your grading schema (bundles, tokens, an example rubric with standards); and 2) a rough outline of assignment, feedback, and revision due dates
  - **Connect with and learn from other colleagues** who are also designing a specifications graded course
  - **Articulate** how specifications grading can align with a **pedagogy of care and more compassionate, equitable assessment practices** by promoting clarity, reducing anxiety, and supporting student autonomy
  - **Curate** a **collection of tools, resources, and strategies** that you can use to facilitate and design courses using specifications grading in the future
  - **Prepare to adapt** your specifications grading when necessary (e.g., when changes need to be made or in a different course).
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## Before the Institute:

Prior to the institute, please complete the following tasks:

- *Required:*
  - To read:
    - [“Is Specifications Grading Right for Me”](#) (Streifer & Palmer, 2021) – Read the article and consider taking the [readiness assessment survey](#)
    - *Grading for Growth*, Ch 2 “Why Do We Grade?” (pp. 11–23); Ch 6 “Specifications Grading” (pp. 65–81)
  - To do:
    - Complete the [ACS Specs Grading CDI: Pre-survey](#)
    - Determine the course you’d like to work on and bring any materials that you have (syllabus, course description, learning outcomes, assignments, etc.)
- *Optional readings:*
  - For those who have never completed a CDI before:
    - [“Integrated Course Design”](#) (Fink, 2003, 7 pp.)
    - [“Understanding by Design Framework”](#) (Wiggins & McTighe, 2012, 13 pp. -- focus on pp. 1–6)
  - For those new to the concept of “metacognition” or “inclusive teaching”
    - [“Close the Metacognitive Equity Gap: Teach All Students How to Learn”](#) (McGuire, 2021, 4 pp.)
    - [“How to Make Your Teaching More Inclusive”](#) (Sathy & Hogan)

## Schedule with Readings:

DAY 1			
	Topic	Description:	Resources for further engagement
9:00 - 9:30am	Welcome, Introductions	The opening session of the day will invite you to get to know other participants by reflecting on some of your personal experiences with grading (both as a student and as an instructor) and by sharing what is motivating you to reconsider your grading approach.	
9:30 - 10:45am	<b>Workshop:</b> The what & why of specs grading	This session will offer an overview of the research basis/support for alternative grading approaches, and provide a brief sketch of the overarching structure and components that make up a specifications grading approach. You will consider the possible benefits and challenges that students and faculty may experience in specifications graded courses and explore how specs grading can contribute to the creation of a more equitable and compassionate learning experience by promoting clarity, reducing anxiety, and supporting student autonomy.	<b>Book Chapters for a Deeper Dive:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ch 3 in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (pp. 24-32)</li> <li>Ch 4 in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (pp. 33-47)</li> </ul> <b>Other Relevant Resources:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>"<a href="#">From Expectations to Experiences: Student Perceptions of Specifications Grading</a>" (Streifer, Palmer, Taggart, 2024)</li> </ul>
10:45 - 11:00am	<b>Break</b>		
11:00 - 12:00pm	<b>Workshop:</b> Course Design Principles	This session will explore two evidence-based frameworks for course design – integrated design (Fink, <a href="#">Creating Significant Learning Experiences</a> , 2013) and backward design (Wiggins & McTighe, <a href="#">Understanding by Design</a> , 2005) – and provide you with an opportunity to apply them as you begin designing or redesigning one of your courses using specifications grading.	<b>Book Chapters for a Deeper Dive (&amp; for help with your homework):</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ch 11, Step 0-2 in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (pp. 149-169)</li> </ul>
12:00 - 12:30pm	<b>Wrapping up / Looking ahead</b>	We will wrap up the day with individual reflection and small group discussion on the following questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What is one idea or concept from today that challenged your current approach to course design? Why?</li> <li>How do your personal teaching values align (or not) with the principles of backward design, specifications grading, or inclusive teaching?</li> </ul>	

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What assumptions about your students have you uncovered or reconsidered during this institute?</li> <li>• How do you hope your specs course design will support diverse learners more effectively than in the past?</li> </ul> <p>Then, we'll outline the homework and answer any questions about next time.</p>	
12:30 - 1:30pm	<b>Lunch break</b>		
1:30 - 3:00pm	<i>Optional:</i> Individual worktime / Meet in small group to share ideas or co-work together		

## Homework for Day 1

Prior to Day 2, please complete the following:

- **To Read:**
  - [“Alternative Grading: Practices to Support Both Equity and Learning”](#) (Streifer & Palmer, 2020)
- **To Do:**
  - Finalize your course learning objectives
  - Skim through our repository of sample specs grading syllabi and teaching materials

<b>DAY 2</b>			
	<b>Topic</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Resources for further engagement</b>
9:00 - 10:30am	<b>Workshop:</b> Building your Grading Schema	Now that you've reviewed sample syllabi and articulated your learning objectives, you're ready to draft a grading schema for your class. During this session, we'll follow a step by step process to begin to design a coherent framework for specifications grading in your class.	<b>Book Chapters for a Deeper Dive</b> (& more examples): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ch 6: “Specifications Grading” in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (pp. 65-81)</li> <li>• Ch 11, Step 3 &amp; 7 in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (pp. 185-189)</li> <li>• Ch 7: “Examples of Specs-Graded Course Designs” in <i>Specifications Grading</i> (pp. 78-103)</li> </ul>
10:30 - 10:45am	<b>Break</b>		

10:45 - 12:00pm	<b>Workshop:</b> Creating an assignment prototype and rubric	To help you finalize and test out your grading schema for the class, it can be helpful to create a prototype and rubric for one of your core assignments. During this session, we'll review a few different example assignments/rubrics and follow a step by step process to begin to design an assignment prototype and rubric.	<b>Book Chapters for a Deeper Dive</b> (& for help with your homework): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ch 11, Step 5: "Build One Assessment and Rehearse the Feedback Loop" in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (Clark &amp; Talbert, 2023, pp. 177-182)</li> </ul>
12:00 - 12:30pm	<b>Wrapping up / Looking ahead</b>	<p>We will wrap up the day with individual reflection and small group discussion on the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Describe a moment from today when you felt particularly engaged or energized. What made that moment meaningful?</li> <li>What aspect of your course feels the most 'under construction' right now, and what support do you need to keep going?</li> </ul> <p>Then, we'll outline the homework and answer any questions about next time.</p>	<b>Book Chapters for a Deeper Dive</b> (& for help with your homework): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ch 12: "How to Do It" in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (Clark &amp; Talbert, 2023, pp. 194-213)</li> <li>Ch 7: "Examples of Specs-Graded Course Designs" in <i>Specifications Grading</i> (Nilson, 2015, pp. 78-103)</li> </ul>
12:30 - 1:30pm	<b>Lunch Break</b>		
1:30 - 3:00pm	<i>Optional:</i> Individual worktime / Meet in small group to share ideas or co-work together		

## Homework for Day 2

Prior to Day 3, please complete the following:

- **To Read:**
  - ["Whoops: The most common rookie mistakes with alternative grading"](#) (Clark, 2025)
  - ["Why Not to Use Alternative Grading..."](#) (Clark, 2024)
- **To Do:**
  - Finish a draft of your overall grading schema
    - If possible, include: 1) what will be included in each "grade bundle"; 2) how (if at all) you plan to use "tokens"; 3) how you will calculate (if at all) "pluses" and "minuses"

- Finish a draft of one assignment prototype & rubric

DAY 3			
	Topic	Description	References/Resources for further engagement
9:00 - 9:45am	<b>Peer Review Showcase</b>	<p>For the first 30 min, in groups of three, participants will each share drafts of their grading schema and assignment prototype. Each participant will get 10 minutes devoted to discussion of their draft, providing them with an opportunity to gain feedback and to troubleshoot any challenges they encountered during the drafting process.</p> <p>For the last 15 minutes, each group will choose one explanatory draft or troubleshooting solution to share with the whole group.</p>	
9:45 - 10:30am	<b>Workshop:</b> Developing a Comprehensive Communication Plan	<p>This session will help you develop a communication plan to use with students and colleagues to ensure a smooth transition to specs grading. After reflecting on a series of questions related to your audience and your context, you'll draft a statement for your syllabus—a first step to articulating your rationale and methodology to others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Handout: <a href="#">Communication Plan</a></li> </ul>
10:30 - 10:45am	<b>Break</b>		
10:45 - 11:45am	<b>Co-Working Session:</b> Testing and Anticipating Challenges	<p>This session will offer an opportunity to troubleshoot your implementation plans to avoid common pitfalls for those adopting specifications grading.</p>	<p><b>Book Chapters for a Deeper Dive (&amp; more help)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Ch 11, Step 8: “Look for details and Unintended Consequences” in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (Clark &amp; Talbert, 2023, pp. 189-191)</li> <li>● Appendix: Frequently Asked Questions in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (Clark &amp; Talbert, 2023, pp. 221-224)</li> </ul>



12:00 - 12:30pm	<b>Wrap-up / Assessment / Planning next steps</b>	<p>We will wrap up the day with individual reflection and small group discussion on the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is one concrete change you are committed to implementing based on what you've learned in this institute?</li> <li>• What aspect of your course feels the most 'under construction' right now, and what support do you need to keep going?</li> <li>• Looking ahead to the semester, what excites you most about teaching your newly designed (or redesigned) course?</li> </ul> <p>Then, we'll ask participants to take our <a href="#">ACS Specs Grading CDI Post-Survey</a>.</p>	<p><b>Book Chapters for a Deeper Dive (&amp; more help)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ch 13: "What's Next?" in <i>Grading for Growth</i> (Clark &amp; Talbert, 2023, pp. 214-219)</li> </ul>
12:30 - 1:30pm	<b>Lunch / Celebration</b>		

## References and Resources

### Sample Syllabi & Teaching Materials

- *Coming Soon!*
  - We are building a repository of sample syllabi and teaching materials that we will be able to integrate into and/or share directly with participants during the course design institute.
- Clark, D. & Talbert, R. (2023). Specifications grading. In *Grading for growth: A guide to alternative grading practices that promote authentic learning and student engagement in higher education* (pp. 65-81). Routledge.
  - This chapter from *Grading for Growth* offers examples of how professors organize and implement specifications grading in a variety of disciplinary contexts.
- Nilson, L. (2015). Examples of specs-graded course designs. In *Specifications grading: Restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time* (pp. 78-103). Stylus.
  - This chapter from *Specifications Grading* offers examples of different approaches to designing a specifications graded course.

### Facilitator Resources

- Reflection Questions
  - Here is a list of [reflections questions](#) we created that facilitators can use to prompt reflection throughout their sessions. We plan to add more questions to this as we build out the content for individual sessions.
- Communications Plan Handout
  - This [communication plan handout](#) can be used to guide small group discussions and individual reflection during the “Developing a Comprehensive Communication Plan” workshop.
- CDI Assessment
  - We created a [pre-survey and a post-survey](#) that we plan to use to gather feedback about participants' experiences and to assess our course design institute.

### Books, Articles, and Online Resources

The selected bibliography below can be used by facilitators as they build the content and assigned readings for their workshops and by participants who want a deeper dive into recent literature about alternative grading.

Artze-Vega, I., Darby F., Dewsbury, B., & Imad, M. (2023). *The Norton Guide to Equity-Minded Teaching*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Blum, S. D. (2020). *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia University Press.

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- Eyler, J.R. (2024). *Failing our future: How grades harm students, and what we can do about it*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
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- Koenka, A. C., Linnenbrink-Garcia, L., Moshontz, H., Atkinson, K. M., Sanchez, C. E., & Cooper, H. (2021). A meta-analysis on the impact of grades and comments on academic motivation and achievement: a case for written feedback. *Educational Psychology (Dorchester-on-Thames)*, 41(7), 922–947. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01443410.2019.1659939>
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- Sathy, V. & Hogan K.A. (n.d.) *How to make your teaching more inclusive*. The Chronicle of Higher Education.  
<https://www.chronicle.com/article/how-to-make-your-teaching-more-inclusive/#2>
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