

## Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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March 11, 2026

ISSN 1094-5296

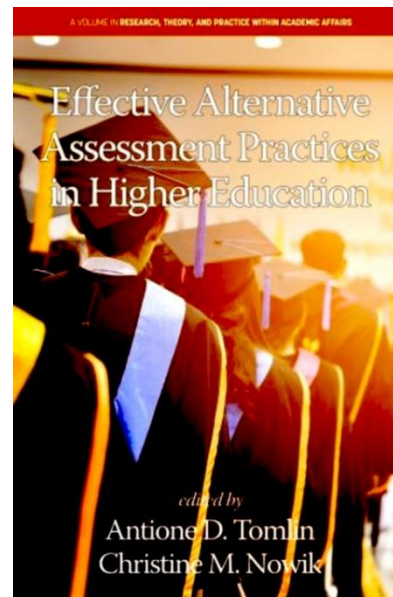
**Tomlin, A. D., & Nowik, C. M. (Eds.). (2024). *Effective alternative assessment practices in higher education*. Information Age Publishing.**

220 pp.

ISBN: 979-8-88730-577-6

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This book is one volume in the series *Research, Theory, and Practice within Academic Affairs* by series editors Antione D. Tomlin and Sherella Cupid. This volume is edited by Antione D. Tomlin and Christine M. Nowik. The chapters are written by different authors, each of whom teaches in higher education in a wide variety of disciplines. They describe their journey to alternative grading and how they use various non-traditional grading techniques in their college classrooms. Written by practitioners who have already implemented alternative grading practices, the authors describe their experiences, their successes as well as their failures, and what lessons they learned along the way. They provide practical and theoretical guidance that can be applied to many disciplines for those who wish to know more about alternative grading techniques, such as standards-based grading, contract grading, labor-based grading, and ungrading, across a wide variety of disciplines. They also address challenges of organizational leaders in higher education and ways for them to support faculty at four-year universities, community colleges, online courses, and face-to-face classrooms. This book was written to provide guidance for practitioners and their leadership.



The editors place this book within the context of using alternative grading practices to increase equity and reduce racism in college classrooms. The editors state that as COVID-19 pushed classes into online and at-home formats, educators searched for different ways to assess students dealing with difficult circumstances. This led some faculty to reconsider radically different approaches as they dealt with barriers to technology access, disruptive environments, and lack of other resources away from campus. The editors further maintain that conversations among faculty and on social media at this time accelerated discussions about alternative grading

Webster, K. (2026, March 11). Review of *Effective alternative assessment practices in higher education*, by A. D. Tomlin & C. M. Nowik. *Education Review*, 33.

<https://doi.org/10.14507/er.v33.4327>

techniques and more faculty became curious about using them in their teaching practices. It also revived conversations about the inherent inequities in traditional grading (p. x).

Most traditional grading systems are unreliable at measuring student achievement because many teachers include measures of other items such as behavior, attendance, homework completion, effort, and class participation. These non-cognitive measures are efforts at classroom management which may or may not be related to learning, while alternative grading seeks to reliably communicate how well students have mastered specific learning goals (Link, 2022).

Because each chapter is authored by a different practitioner, each one covers a different aspect of the topic, and features practices across disciplines, which is one of the prime contributions of the book. The separate chapters are connected by the idea that alternative assessments are not “one-size-fits-all or plug-and-play” affordances (p. xiv). Faculty authors share their personal experiences and journeys to alternative assessments emphasizing that changes in teaching methods evolve over time, requiring an investment of significant time and professional development. Another idea that connects the various chapters is the practicality of the authors as they explain the specific steps they took to set up alternative assessments.

Part one includes Chapters 1-7 where the authors emphasize their personal reasons for adopting alternative assessments. These teachers describe what led them to the alternative assessment procedures they use. Some authors wanted to use alternative grading to overcome inequities of traditional grading by focusing on student learning. Others wanted to move students beyond ‘checking boxes’ under traditional grading practices to increase student engagement. Another reconnected to her love of teaching by leaving “rule enforcement” (p. 40) and developing relationships with students. Yet another author created a sense of shared responsibility with students using self-reflection to achieve a deeper learning as well as student creative risk taking. The authors’ reasons for pursuing alternative grading seem to be predicated on some internal motivation to improve their teaching or their students’ learning and not on external professional development education.

Part two includes Chapters 8-14 which focus on experimentation and risk-taking. One author chose to use gamification, because, as he says, “planning a classroom and planning a game are not so different” (p. 71). Gamification often uses an alternative grading system, like badges for example. One author fostered student creativity and intellectual risk-taking, while another author wanted to change the power dynamic in his writing class in order to move to a more democratic classroom. Another created student teams to collaborate with faculty to problem solve. One author recounts his journey from alternative grading skeptic to adopter while exploring contract grading and metacognitive student self-assessment. The authors’ different journeys are very interesting to read, and I appreciated the accounts of risk-taking, especially the gamer’s story, as this is a personal interest of mine.

Part three includes Chapters 15-19 and emphasizes relationships, as one author uses self-assessment to facilitate relationship-centered online experiences. Another author changes the class dynamics to increase student experiences in an online course, while another used community engagement by supporting student group

coherence and growth of self-management skills. One author built classroom community and fostered student ownership of their own learning, while another used the class community to create better relationships between students and faculty. The variations of relationships, such as student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and student-to-community, was illuminating and emphasizes the wide possibilities for using alternative practices.

Many of the authors cite Susan D. Blum's (2020) *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)* as well as several different works by Alfie Kohn. This book seems to be situated as a type of next generation of alternative assessment as these practitioners describe their personal journeys into alternative practices guided by the previous work. Additionally, these authors seem to be experienced instructors, with a great deal of knowledge of their subject material and looking for ways to continue to improve their teaching. Early career faculty may have their hands full with mastering their content but may try alternative assessments if they believe it will meet the needs of their classes. Many of the authors warn that these practices can be more time consuming than traditional grading, but they have found the change in their classrooms to be worth it. It is worth mentioning that the book is also aimed at administration leadership who wish to support faculty on their alternative assessment journeys. The authors and editors do a good job of demonstrating that a wide variety of institutions, such as four year or community colleges, and a wide variety of disciplines can utilize the wide variety of alternative grading techniques described in the book.

However, there may be ways to save faculty time and extra work. In a separate study done in a statistics course using standards-based grading, the faculty found that while developing their course with the alternative practices took considerable time before the semester started, grading sessions and providing feedback during the semester took less time than traditional grading because they only needed to recognize if the work was successful at meeting the standard. They also pointed out that instructors can use the flexibility of standards-based grading to fit their own needs at meeting the standard as they don't need to change an entire course but can start with separate assignments or assessments (Curley, 2024).

The editors have done a great job describing the difficulties that educators can encounter when switching to alternative grading methods. Many of the chapters include warnings from the authors about their journeys of trial and error, skeptical students, skeptical faculty colleagues, and the additional work involved. They warn that teachers need to have confidence in themselves in order to try different techniques outside their comfort zone and be able to switch quickly when they find that something isn't working. They also maintain that communication with students is key in obtaining student buy-in when they can be unsettled by the change from the traditional system that they are used to. However, I believe that these warnings are general in nature, without details on how much additional work is involved, or how much push-back students may have. Faculty have many demands placed upon them throughout the semester and having a more precise advance notice of increasing their workload would be very helpful before they embark on this journey of using alternative grading practices. Are there any ways to decrease the workload, as suggested by Curley? Specific help would be useful, such as how to get student buy-

in, other than communication being important. What needs to be communicated to students? What is the best way to present alternative grading techniques? The purpose of the book is to help guide faculty in transitioning to alternative grading practices. Many faculty can have difficulty initially envisioning what a classroom using alternative grading looks like, especially since most faculty are comfortable with the traditional practices they grew up with. The wide variety of subjects, disciplines, and techniques used are helpful in establishing some of this vision, but some instructors may be left asking, “How do I do this in my class, with my students, and my subject?” Faculty will need to experiment with their own risk-taking journey.

All in all, this is an excellent book for those who wish to learn more about alternative grading practices and for those already determined to try the techniques outlined in the book, as well as those who wish to support them. Enjoy your own journey to a more equitable and student-focused classroom!

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### About the Reviewer

**Kathryn Webster** is an associate professor at Illinois State University in the Department of Health Sciences where she enjoys teaching medical laboratory science courses to juniors and seniors. After graduating in the MLS program she now teaches in, she worked in hospital laboratories for several years before returning to ISU as an instructor. She is also working on her doctorate in education in the College of Education at ISU and enjoys research in teaching methods, online learning, student stress, and educational technology. When not teaching or researching, she enjoys gardening, reading, and spending quality time with her cat.



### About the Book Authors

**Antione D. Tomlin** is an associate professor at Anne Arundel Community College. He holds a PhD in Language, Literacy and Culture from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Antione Tomlin believes in the value of education and has a passion for learning. That passion has led to a professional career spent mostly in higher education. Since 2018 he has taught in AACC's Academic Literacies, English, Teacher Education, and



Communications departments. As the director of the Academic Literacies Lab, he oversees a program that prepares students for success by teaching them how to critically evaluate academic texts and write at the college level. A first-generation undergraduate and graduate student himself, Tomlin recognizes the transformative power of education, a value intricately tied to his passion for continuous learning. His current research explores the experiences of Black and brown faculty, staff and students in higher education.

**Christine M. Nowik**, PhD, is an associate professor and department chair of English at Central Pennsylvania's Community College and an organizational consultant that specializes in change leadership. She has 25 years of leadership experience across non-profit and higher ed and has a Ph.D. in Leadership and Administration with a focus on power in organizational change. She has served as an organizational consultant to help organizations plan and execute effective change.

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