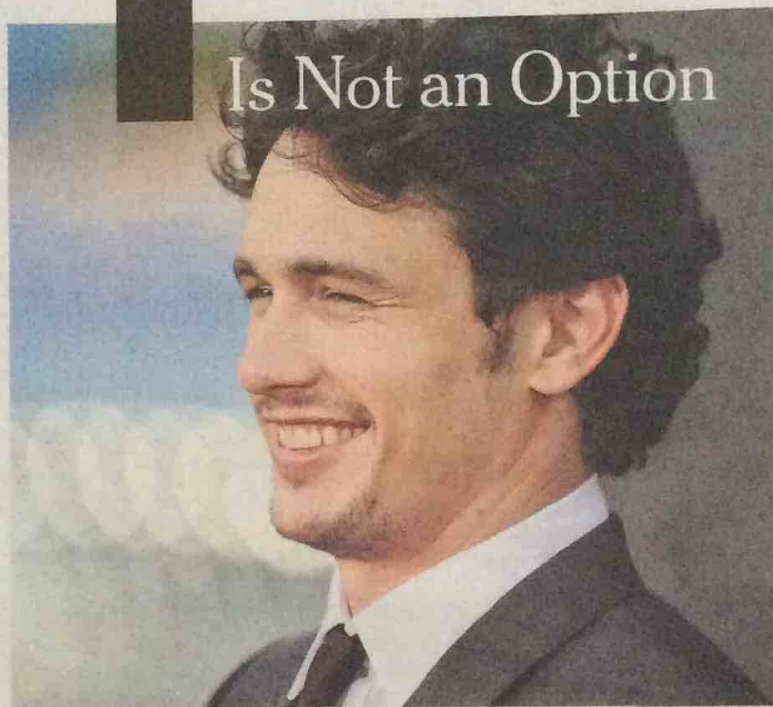


F

ailure

Is Not an Option



ROBYN BECK/AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE — GETTY IMAGES

NO 'A' FOR ABSENCE James Franco was given a D in a class he attended only twice.

JAMES FRANCO, America's favorite graduate student, has been hailed as a multitasking savant for his intellectual pursuits: fiction writing at Columbia University and Brooklyn College, poetry at Warren Wilson College, filmmaking at New York University. Not to mention current studies in English at Yale, and digital and media art at Rhode Island School of Design.

But some wonder how he has managed to juggle the likes of John Milton and André Bazin while maintaining a thriving acting career. The answer, it seems, is that he hasn't — at least, not entirely.

"You know what I got a D in at film school?" he asked, sheepishly amused, in a 2010 interview with Showbiz411. "Acting

Maybe because they're older or are given a slide, few graduate students flunk out.

class," he said, adding: "I did all my work and finished the film that was required that year." He acknowledged, though, "I missed a lot of the classes."

The class in question was "Directing the Actor II," a seminar taught by José Angel Santana, an assistant professor and then head of the acting program in N.Y.U.'s graduate film division. "In the two classes he attended, he actually made a contribution," Mr. Santana says now.

In August, Mr. Santana was relieved of his teaching duties, a year before his three-year contract was up. In December, he filed a lawsuit in Supreme Court in Manhattan against N.Y.U. for wrongful termination, citing blowback from Mr. Franco's D as one reason. An N.Y.U. spokesman, John Beckman, takes issue: "We don't believe he did a good enough job in his assignment. It certainly had nothing to do with any grade he gave to any student."

In an e-mail, Mr. Franco said: "I was not in the least bit surprised by the D. He told me at the beginning of the semester that I would get a D if I decided to go to Utah to shoot '127 Hours.'" And this: "Grades are meaningless in M.F.A. programs. No studio and no editor is not going to take your movie or book because you got a bad grade in a class."

However the case plays out, it raises larger questions about grading in master's programs. After all, if missing all but two classes isn't grounds for failure, what is?

Not much. Indeed, it's almost impossible to fail a graduate course, even for students who are not Oscar nominees. A no-credit F at N.Y.U., Mr. Santana explains, could affect a student's ability to graduate: "I didn't think that was warranted" for Mr. Franco.

Robert Neuman, former academic dean of students at Marquette University and author of "Are You Really Ready for College? A College Dean's 12 Secrets for Success,"

says that before there's an F, there will be a W — for "withdraw." "You probably aren't going to find graduate school transcripts with F's on them," he says.

Research corroborates this. According to Christopher Healy, an associate professor of computer science at Furman University who compiles grade distributions, about 75 percent of grades in master's programs are A's, 22 percent are B's and 3 percent are C's. Less than 1 percent are D's or F's.

"At the graduate level, the percentages of C, D, F grades has always been low," he says. "The big change has been the boundary between A and B grades. A's have gone up from about 50 percent 40-plus years ago." In 2008 at the University of Utah, for example, 73 percent of grades were A's, compared with 45 percent in 1965.

Certainly, C's, D's and F's are more common among undergraduates. Educators say that the grad-school grade distribution is due in part to the fact that graduate students are older adults (average age: 32) who want to be there. But it's also a result of escalating grade inflation and the practice of passing even students with lackluster performance.

Schools, of course, are businesses, and master's programs lucrative, so keeping customers is essential. At the N.Y.U. graduate film school, tuition hovers around \$50,000 annually for the three-year program. "There's pressure to retain students," Mr.

Santana says. "Once the class is formed in the beginning of an academic year, that class is formed for the next three years. You can't enter the program midstream. So if you lost any amount of students, you're losing \$150,000 for three years."

Rachel Louise Snyder, an assistant professor of literature in American University's M.F.A. program, which is pass/fail, believes the economic downturn may have intensified fear among faculty members of the consequences of failing students. "No one has ever come up to me and said explicitly, 'You must pass these students,'" she says. "But the expectation is that they're adults, they're paying money, and as long as they're doing minimal work, they should pass. My guess is that probably most grad schools do that."

To that end, schools go out of their way to help floundering students succeed. That includes giving extra credit options, or letting the student take an incomplete and make up the class at a later time. Rather than let students fail, many schools will suggest a leave of absence. Or "counsel them out."

At Harvard Business School, for example, which is pass/fail, only about 3 to 4 percent of students "hit the screen," Harvard parlance for being brought up for review by a faculty-administrative committee. "Each case is examined individually to find out the root of the student's problem, and recommendations are made or support is provided."

Grad School GRADES

U. OF AKRON (OHIO)

A's	63%
B's	27%
C's	8%
D's	1%
F's	0.5%

CALIFORNIA STATE, LOS ANGELES

A's	64%
B's	28%
C's	7%
D's	0.4%
F's	0.3%

FURMAN U. (S.C.)

A's	83%
B's	15%
C's	1%
D's	0%
F's	0%

U. OF GEORGIA (ATHENS)

A's	78%
B's	20%
C's	2%
D's	0.2%
F's	0.4%

GEORGIA TECH

A's	68%
B's	28%
C's	4%
D's	0.6%
F's	0.3%

INDIANA U. BLOOMINGTON

A's	71%
B's	27%
C's	2%
D's	0.1%
F's	0.3%

Grades are for fall 2008, 2009 or 2010; numbers are rounded. Source: Christopher Healy and Stuart Resnicar

Do Grades Matter?

JAMES FRANCO survived his D and now teaches a graduate-level class at New York University. But what about the little people? Do grades matter?

That depends. While most grad schools require students to maintain a B-minus or higher, not two programs — or graduate schools, for that matter — are alike.

"With arts and sciences, it depends on whether your study is directly related to the work you want to do," says Sheila Curran, president of Curran Career Consulting in Providence, R.I. "The more you have relevant work experience in a particular area, the less important grades are. But if you want to become a professor, then grades are absolutely essential. You won't even get into a Ph.D. program without stellar grades in your master's program." (That said, a smart master's thesis could speak as loud as a 4.0 G.P.A., since it indicates that a student can identify and complete a doctoral dissertation.)

If, on the other hand, your goal is to write the great American memoir, then grades are pretty much irrelevant. "As long as you don't bomb and flunk out, grades don't matter very much in M.F.A. programs," says Elise Blackwell, director of the M.F.A. program in creative writing at the University of South Carolina, Columbia.

That's not quite the case in law school,

where top firms typically scour the country for high G.P.A.'s. "Some law firms just won't look at candidates who have below a certain G.P.A., irrespective of what school they come from," says Sarah Zearfoss, senior assistant dean for admissions and career planning at the University of Michigan Law School. "There are, somewhat astonishingly, law firms that will continue to look at your grades till the day you die."

While Michigan requires only a 2.0 G.P.A. to pass, she says, it's unlikely that student would land a job with any well-regarded law firm.

The more real-world experience you have, the less important grades are for future legal employment, which is also the case with an M.B.A. program, many of which are pass/fail.

"Some companies might say, 'We only want people with a 3.5 G.P.A., from these schools, with this concentration,' but that matters less with work experience," says Chris Sparks, the founder and editor of MBArecruiter.com, a job search site. Grades are a small part of who a person is, he says. When he was a recruiter for finance and technology companies, he looked beyond grades. "I would say: 'Let me see who you are. Does your personality match our company culture? What are your ethics? Do you have work experience?' As long as it's a good G.P.A., I'm going to look at who the person is rather than the grades." **ABBY ELLIN**

ed," says Brian C. Kenny, a spokesman. "Oftentimes, rather than flunking out a student, which is very rare, we will encourage them to take a semester or even a year off. Most students who do that return to graduate."

The top 15 to 25 percent at Harvard Business end up in Category I, the next 65 to 75 percent in Category II, and the bottom 10 percent in Category III. Rarely does anyone end up in Category IV, or failure.

Dr. Neuman is a fan of counseling out. "Schools that advise you are really trying to help you," he says. "Five, 10 years later they may decide to go back. They don't want to have a bad grade on record."

Anthony Gutierrez, 27, was given a chance to plead his case. Admitted in 2009 as a conditional student in global and strategic communication at Florida International University, he was required to maintain a 3.25 grade-point average. Instead, he ended up with a 3.20 — hardly terrible, but below the requirement.

At the time, he had been taking classes in music production at Miami Dade College, and was studying for an online master's degree in entertainment business, doing an internship at Sony Music, and working as a marketing promoter. Like many graduate students trying to balance family, work and school, he was over-extended and exhausted. He had one semester left, and was set to move to New York for a job.

He told the dean of students: "I am one of those students you're going to talk about."

The school was unimpressed. And so Mr. Gutierrez left, dejected and fretting over what to tell his mother. But then one of his teachers, Fernando Figueredo, went to bat for him.

"We let Anthony stay, following the appeals process available to all students," Mr. Figueredo says. "The dean of the graduate program agreed with our recommendation and allowed him to remain, based on his continued improvement in grades, which he did the following semester."

Professors and administrators do have genuine compassion for their students, who spend exorbitant sums for that piece of paper — without which they may be saddled with debt and have no means to pay it back.

But there are frustrations as well. An adjunct at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, which is graded pass/fail, recalls a student who missed class repeatedly and did not hand in a final project. "I gave her an F, but the chair of the department said that students had to do a lot worse to fail. He was implying that if you have a pulse you can pass."

Bill Gruesskin, dean of academic affairs in that school, says no statistics are available on how many students have failed. But he says students in danger of failing are notified in writing, and "some kind of plan is put in place to try to correct the performance in such a way that they can pass."

Richard Ingersoll, a professor at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Pennsylvania, says the issue is often discussed by the faculty, and is a source of disagreement. "The tension is: How high a bar do we set, how many do we counsel out and how many do we allow to continue?" he says. "It's hard to weed out students because we faculty have different ideas of how rigorous are our standards."

"Because of the funding and the investment of the institution," he adds, "from my viewpoint having rigorous standards is all the more important." ■

who would have
thought?



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*The Huffington Post, June 30, 2011
†InsiderCollege.com, Feb. 27, 2012
‡CollegeProwler.com, March 14, 2012