A Case for Weighted Totals

By Russell Davidson; Associate Director for Digital Education, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Office of Digital Education

Blackboard's Grade Center (or Gradebook, in Ultra-style courses) is a powerful tool that makes it much easier for both students and faculty to track student performance and share feedback on graded items. As a dedicated grading tool, the Grade Center has a lot to offer. The Grade Center's Weighted Total (called Overall Grade in Ultra-style courses) is a powerful, but underappreciated and often underutilized part of Blackboard's Grade Center.

Why Weighted Totals

If you are not already using a weighted total, the evaluation portion of your syllabus might read something like this —

360 points	Discussion Board Participation (12 units x 30 points per unit)
50 points	Quiz 1 (Chapters 1-3)
250 points	Midterm Exam (Chapters 1-6)
40 points	Quiz 2 (Chapters 7-9)
300 points	Final Exam (cumulative)

In this system, a point is a point. Discussion points are the same as Quiz points and Quiz points are the same as Exam points. If we want an item (or set of items) to be worth more, or to have a greater weight, we give it more points.

On the surface, it seems clean, neat, and sensible. But when we look at the items themselves and how we actually grade them, this system reveals itself to be a bit of a mess. Does a 30-point scale really make sense for a single unit of discussion? If our midterm exam is 60 questions (10 per chapter), does it make sense to make each question worth 4.167 points?

This is the problem a weighted total column solves.

With a weighted total, we can set all the items with the DISCUSSION category to be worth 36%. We can set Quiz 1 to be worth 5%, Quiz 2 to 4%, the midterm to 25%, and the final to 30%. This frees us up to set the points for each of these items to values that make sense for the items. Now you can use a 12-point 4×4 discussion rubric or a 5-point (5-star) scale. When building exams, we can use question points to weigh items within the exam, making our multiple choice questions worth 2 points each, our true/false worth 1 each, our essays

worth 10 each. It does not matter if the exam comes to 55 points or 108.

Setting Up a Weighted Total

If this interests you, you be pleased to hear that a weighted total is easy to set up. Classic-style course sites already have a Weighted Total column waiting to be set up. We have put together an overview of the process of setting up a Weighed Total Column.