

UGC Proposal to Improve the UO Culture Connected with Grades – *Draft 4-29-09*

Rationale

As reflected in a recent Daily Emerald editorial — “Everyone can’t ‘B’ Winners” — faculty are not the only members of our community concerned about grade inflation and the current culture connected with grades. Students are troubled as well. The Undergraduate Council views their interest and concern as positive signs, opportunities to engage in a campus-wide dialog that we believe will benefit faculty and students alike through increased clarity and more effective communication.

In preparation for this dialog, the 2005-06 Undergraduate Council undertook a systematic analysis of UO grade trends from 1992 to 2004:

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~ucouncil/documents/resources/03082006%20UO%20Grade%20Inflation%20Report.pdf>

gathered examples of responses to grade inflation from UO and other institutions:

http://www.uoregon.edu/~ucouncil/documents/resources/02272006-HO2_Resource_Examples%20of%20Responses%20to%20Grade%20Inflation.pdf

and collected local reactions to this information. The current Council (2008-09) has drawn on this work to consider what grades ought to mean and whether our current grading practices promote an appreciation of that meaning. By “current practices”, we mean both the distribution of grades we award and the way we communicate what each grade means. Below, we summarize the Council’s thinking and propose three ways to improve the UO grade culture.

What do grades mean? The fundamental problem facing colleges and universities is that the original meaning of grades has been lost. There is a strong sense among current students that grades represent rewards for an individual’s effort or good intentions. Innumerable anecdotal accounts go something like this — “Student X thought she or he should get an A or a B just for showing up for class, even though the work was mediocre.” Such expectations, however unreasonable they seem to instructors, likely result from students’ experiences with grades in middle school or high school.

In contrast, we believe that a grade ought to be an assessment of the quality of a particular piece of work, relative to some objective standard. It is neither a gift for good behavior nor a comment on the student as a person. Although a portion of a grade may reflect improvement, independent of the final level of accomplishment, the overall

grade is meaningful only when it communicates a student's achievement relative to course expectations. Providing fair and comprehensive evaluations, in the form of grades, is the responsibility of faculty as educators, and the effort to award grades responsibly should be encouraged and valued by the institution. It is our view that if faculty provide more explicit guidelines and criteria, students will have a better understanding of our expectations, which in turn will result in fewer unpleasant surprises on the part of students, fewer confrontations between faculty and students, and better performance in the classroom.

Beyond awarding grades appropriately, the Council believes that the University has a responsibility to help students understand what grades mean, and that this endeavor requires everyone's active participation. Faculty can spell out their grading criteria on syllabi and can communicate them in class, but this effort will have little impact without the collaboration of the larger community of academic advisors, student affairs staff, and student leaders. Working together, we can correct misconceptions as our new students get started and model a more realistic approach to grades as they progress. Let us explain at the outset how our grading criteria may differ from the ones they've encountered previously. New student orientation programs (IntroDUCKtion and others) provide ideal opportunities for this, and the key ideas can be re-enforced through FIGs and residential experiences during the freshman year.

Do our current practices promote understanding of grades?

Distribution of grades: The Undergraduate Council's grade trend study examined grade distributions in UO undergraduate courses that had large, stable enrollments and that had been taught continuously over the study period (1992-2004). In these courses, the proportion of As increased by 10 % and the proportion of As and Bs together increased by 7 % during the 12-year interval. Meanwhile, the SAT scores of incoming students showed only a modest increase in the math portion of the test and no change in the verbal section. Thus, relative to these nationally-normed indicators of academic ability, it appears that UO grades have undergone inflation. To put these data in perspective, the grade trend study compared the undergraduate GPAs at UO and other universities. We found that GPA increase at UO over the period of the study was 5% -- about the same as the national average for public and private schools combined [see collection of national data at <http://gradeinflation.com/>]. A final conclusion from the study was that there is differential grade inflation on our campus: grade distributions vary considerably by school/college and CAS division, and have shifted upward at different rates among these units.

Communication of what grades mean: At present, the only university-wide statement addressing what grades mean is the definition of letter grades in the UO Catalog: A, Excellent; B, Good; C, Satisfactory; D, Inferior; F, Unsatisfactory (no credit awarded). There is no discussion of the purpose of grades, the university's philosophy with respect

to grades, or the importance of communicating the difference between grading in college and the grading students may have encountered before college. Individual academic units may discuss the qualities that earn As, Bs and so on in their disciplines, but the conclusions that emerge from those discussions are not typically communicated beyond the units, and rarely appear on course syllabi. It is not that syllabi omit the topic of grades, but they commonly deal only with the mechanics – for example, the proportions of total course points that correspond to each letter grade and the relative contributions of papers, lab reports, exams and so forth to the total.

In short, it appears that our current practices do not promote an appreciation of the meaning of grades and in fact, have the potential to do serious harm. Specifically we are concerned about the effects described below:

- **Effects on distribution of students across programs:** Many students seem to be aware of systematic differences in grade distributions across departments/majors and some anecdotal evidence suggests that students respond to these differences. How hard the student will have to work to obtain a UO bachelor's degree with a B average is, in a way, the "price" of a particular major. Students who merely seek a degree, *via* the path of least resistance, may be attracted to programs that are "lower-cost" in this sense. Although programs that are in high demand have little concern about scaring away potential majors by imposing strict grading standards, others may be forced by "market pressures" to move toward lower standards. Uneven grading practices have differential effects on more ambitious students, as well. For example, they favor students in some majors over others in the competition for academic honors such as Phi Beta Kappa and Latin Honors.
- **Influence upon teaching evaluations:** Departments do not generally employ grade distribution information directly in promotion and tenure decisions for faculty. However, there is empirical evidence to suggest that teaching evaluations are systematically related to students' expected grades in a course, and teaching evaluations are routinely considered in promotion and tenure cases. Thus a faculty member's grade distributions, to the extent that they are reflected in teaching evaluations, do factor indirectly into promotion and tenure considerations. Among the most troubling of the anecdotes the Council has received were those indicating that junior faculty sometimes avoid candid evaluation of student work because of the perceived risk to their teaching evaluations, and hence to their tenure cases.
- **Reduction in the usefulness of transcripts:** For grades to convey useful information, there must be a clear understanding of the kind of work described by a grade, and the grading system must have the capacity to distinguish multiple degrees of mastery of subject matter. We understand that academic fields, courses, and individual teachers differ from one another, but we also recognize

that grade inflation leads to grade compression. As a result, A and B grades become nearly the only ones awarded and the significance of our students' transcripts is reduced. We are not being candid with future employers and instructors, and we risk harming our graduates, if we send them into a world that will judge their work more realistically than we have done.

- **Substitution of alternative assessment rubrics for grading:** Responding at least in part to the diluted meaning of grades, accreditation agencies and other outside bodies have begun promulgating alternative assessment rubrics. *Although these may be useful in some settings, they are not inherently better-designed than existing grading schemes, and in the worst cases, devolve to skill set checklists and inappropriate disaggregation of student work in the effort to generate quantitative scores.* Aside from these limitations, such rubrics substitute externally-formulated benchmarks for the deeply internalized standards of intellectual judgment that faculty already possess as members of academic disciplines. If universities fail to reassert the integrity of grades, they may deprive faculty members of a key means to instill these standards in their own students. Grades are deeply embedded in the culture of the university and remain a preferred instrument not only to assess but actively to promote academic quality.

The Council believes that the current situation cannot be sustained, and therefore recommends explicit efforts to change the unhealthy culture that surrounds grades. Below, we outline three strategies to achieve this goal: The first is to promote a thoughtful approach to grading by asking departments to discuss their grading philosophies and make them explicit and public. The second is to put course grades in context by making grade distributions part of the information that is routinely given to individual faculty and departments. The third is to aid the interpretation of grades on transcripts by reporting context information along with the grade itself. We think that this third strategy may be the single most effective way to help students develop a more balanced view of grades since it will protect students who take demanding courses and earn Bs, or even Cs.

Proposal

1. Each department and undergraduate program should discuss its grading practices and formulate a rationale for them that will be available to their faculty and students, as well as to the Provost and the rest of the University academic community. For example, the rationale could appear on the department's website, as well as on the syllabi of its courses. Syllabi should help students understand the qualitative features that distinguish work at the A, B, C, D and F levels in that discipline, as well

as the relative weights given to particular pieces of course work, such as papers, exams, or lab reports. Care should be taken to communicate how grading at the University differs from grading students may have experienced in high school or other institutions of higher education. In particular, students should understand that a University grade communicates a student's achievement relative to course expectations. Such information may be particularly useful and meaningful to entering students, but each academic unit should also provide a clear description of its grading standards to students in its Major, Minor, or Certificate programs.

Departments should also discuss the degree to which grade inflation threatens to compromise their evaluation of student work and, if appropriate, develop discipline-specific ways to prevent or reduce inflation. The approaches will likely vary among units and should suit the design and level of specific courses.

2. Instructors of Record should receive a report of the grade distributions in their Undergraduate courses, plus the average grade distributions in other courses that are considered comparable by their departments. Reports reflecting the past term's grade distributions would be available at the beginning of each term, and would remain available to Instructors as long as they are employed at the University. This would allow instructors and department chairs to examine individual grading practices in relation to the following:
 - an individual's own practice in the same or similar courses over time
 - the department's practice in comparable courses offered that term (if any)
 - the department's practice in comparable courses offered over time

Reports on departmental grade distributions will be made available to both internal and external reviewers when departments undergo their regular program reviews. To see how two institutions report grade distributions, go to

Indiana University: <http://registrar.indiana.edu/gradedist.shtml>

NC State: <http://www.ncsu.edu/registrar/courses/grade.html>

3. Grades reported on transcripts should be accompanied by context information that indicates the frequency with which students in those courses earned higher or lower grades. Several different kinds of context information are in use by universities in the US and Canada: mean grade (Dartmouth, Cornell, U. British Columbia), median grade (McGill University) and percent A-range grades (Columbia University). At this stage, we do not know what context information would be most useful on our campus, but we propose adopting this general approach, with the details to be worked out later. To preserve confidentiality, the context would not be reported for courses whose enrollments were below a specified minimum.