

**TO: University of Oregon Senate**

**FROM: Ian F. McNeely**  
**Chair, Undergraduate Council**

**RE: Grade culture at UO (supplementary report)**

**DATE: June 3, 2010**

### Synopsis

The twofold purpose of this report is to summarize the Undergraduate Council's study of grade inflation at the UO from 2005-10 and to lay a firm basis for possible legislation by the UO Senate on this issue in 2010-11. Having gathered extensive feedback from a variety of constituencies campuswide, the Council recommends that the University enact four specific policies to improve the grade culture on campus:

1. Discipline-specific explanations of grading standards
2. Comparative statistics available to instructors
3. Contextual information on transcripts
4. Better orientation for GTFs, NTTFs, and new faculty

Details on these proposals and how we arrived at them are found in the pages below. Our final recommendations can be found on **page 15**; these amplify and extend the proposals outlined on **page 5**.

### Study of grade inflation (2005-06)

Grade inflation refers to the tendency of the average grades in a given course, or at a given school, to creep upward over time without evidence that students themselves are performing at a higher level. In 2005-06, economics professor Mark Thoma, then an Undergraduate Council member, conducted a study of grade inflation at UO.<sup>1</sup> The study focused on a sample of regularly offered UO courses in a range of disciplines and levels between 1992 and 2004. It found that:

- The percentage of As awarded went up by about 10 points (from 31.3% to 41.6%)
- The percentage of As and Bs together went up by 7 points (from 65.6% to 72.6%)
- The average overall GPA at UO went up by 5.1% (from 2.95 to 3.10)

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Thoma, "Trends in Grades Awarded at the University of Oregon, 1992-2004" (March 2006), archived at <http://gradeculture.uoregon.edu> under "Background Documents."

- The high school GPAs of entering students went up by a similar percentage (5.2%, from 3.30 to 3.47)
- The average SAT Math scores of entering students went up only slightly, whereas the average SAT Verbal showed virtually no change

These findings strongly suggest that grade inflation is a problem at UO. If one takes SAT scores as an outside control, i.e. as an independent measure of student aptitude, then the absence of an increase in SAT scores suggests that the climb in grades does not simply reflect the increased quality of our students.<sup>2</sup>

Grade inflation is a well-documented problem nationwide and is routinely discussed in publications like *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the *New York Times*. However, there is no coordinated effort to combat grade inflation nor any institutional means to do so nationwide. Universities are left largely to their own devices. In 2004, for example, Princeton limited the percentage of A grades that individual departments can give out. By contrast, Loyola Law School in Los Angeles this year *retroactively inflated* its students' grades to improve their competitive advantage.

Among our comparator institutions, UO falls comfortably in the middle with an average overall GPA of 3.1 in 2004.<sup>3</sup> Nationwide, the comparable figures are 3.3 for private institutions and 3.0 for public institutions. The grade inflation problem at UO is, by and large, no better and no worse than it is elsewhere.

No one knows the precise causes of grade inflation. As a secular trend, it extends back a half century or more. One dramatic upward surge in grades came in the 1960s. A gradual but more sustained upward climb in grades began in the 1980s. This may be connected to the widespread introduction of student course evaluations of their instructors.<sup>4</sup>

The more recent trend may also reflect declining or at least changing standards in high schools, where grade inflation is also a problem. Incoming students' expectations of higher grades have been unmatched by efforts at the university level to counter these expectations by articulating and defending our own intellectual standards. It is suggestive that between 1992 and 2004, the differential between UO and high school GPA has remained almost constant (0.35-0.37). As high school GPAs have risen, GPAs at the UO have kept pace almost precisely.

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<sup>2</sup> While the Admissions Office raised standards somewhat in Fall 2003, half the nominal increase in UO GPAs occurred before this bump-up.

<sup>3</sup> Average GPAs at our comparator institutions are as follows (2004 unless otherwise indicated): Indiana-Bloomington (3.10), UC Santa Barbara (3.00), Colorado-Boulder (3.08), Iowa (2.97 [2008]), Michigan (3.22), North Carolina (3.10), Virginia (3.21), Washington (Seattle) (3.18). Source:

<http://www.gradeinflation.com>, accessed on May 17, 2010. This is a database maintained by Stuart Rojstaczer, a retired Duke University geophysicist.

<sup>4</sup> See Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy, "Grading in American Colleges and Universities," *Teachers College Record* (Mar. 4, 2010), with useful speculations on the causes of grade inflation in the 1960s and 1980s; for a useful dissent, see Alfie Kohn, "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 49 no. 11 (Nov. 8, 2002), p. B7.

## Other problems with grade culture

Besides grade inflation, the Council also identified other threats to the health of the grade culture at UO:

- **Grade compression** at the top of the scale, making it increasingly difficult for instructors to distinguish between the truly excellent and the merely very good. Even if rising grades actually reflect higher student achievement, a system designed to make distinctions of academic quality cannot accommodate rising grades indefinitely unless more grades are added on top of the A+.
- **Discrepancies among departments** in the grades they assign. A recent analysis conducted by Glen Waddell and Larry Singell uses UO course-level data sorted by subject code to demonstrate that there are systematic differences in the average GPA across disciplines, which range from 2.6 to 3.9 at the lower-division level and from 2.9 to over 4.0 at the upper-division level.<sup>5</sup> (Note that in one UO subject code, the *average* grade is *above* a straight A.) While it is inappropriate to require that all departments conform to a standard average and distribution of grades, GPA calculations rely on the comparability of grades across departments by weighting each grade equally for a given number of credits. Unless GPAs are to lose much of their meaning, the grades they average together must be at least roughly comparable.
- **Migration from hard courses and majors to easy courses and majors.** While this has yet to be proven statistically, it is borne out by copious anecdotal evidence. Popular websites such as MyEdu.com (formerly Pick-a-Prof.com) already provide average GPAs for specific courses at UO and at other universities nationwide. (However, the data it provides are often inaccurate.) A stated aim of the website is to help students raise their GPAs by “managing time, balancing *hard classes* with *easy classes* and taking the best professors [*sic*].”<sup>6</sup>
- **Grade “grubbing,”** the practice of lobbying an instructor for a better grade. This is a very common complaint among faculty members, and matched on the student side by legitimate concerns that in a GPA-driven universe, lobbying for better grades is often a necessary and appropriate course of action.
- **General loss of meaning.** Paradoxically, the perception that GPAs matter more to students’ futures than ever before has also led to a situation in which grades are losing their meaning. As students seek advantage in graduate school admission or in the job market, they often pressure their instructors for higher grades. Many

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<sup>5</sup> Prof. Larry Singell, Associate Dean of CAS for Social Sciences, personal communication, May 17, 2010. This variation in average GPA was found to correlate inversely with the technical rigor of the subject matter. According to the study of grades nationwide in Rojstaczer and Healy, “Grading,” average grades in science courses are 0.4 points lower than those in humanities courses; average grades in social science courses are 0.2 points lower than those in humanities courses.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.myedu.com>, accessed on May 17, 2010 (italics in original).

instructors wittingly or unwittingly collude in this arms race, raising student grades without evidence of superior achievement. A vicious circle sets in, leading to further grade inflation and further dilution of meaning as the threshold of genuine quality creeps ever upward.

- **Increased reliance on standardized testing and “assessment rubrics.”** Both of these alternative modes of assessment have a legitimate place in the academy, but neither should be allowed to usurp the longstanding role of grades as a universal mode of measuring achievement. The limits of standardized testing and the pedagogical destructiveness of “teaching to the test” are well-known. So too, recent calls for formalized “assessment rubrics” strike many faculty as alien impositions all too often couched in jargon-ridden terms and/or as top-down bureaucratic mandates. While assessment rubrics may ultimately prove useful in monitoring learning outcomes, universities must also shore up the integrity of their grades as critical components in the assessment of learning.

### Guiding principles of the Undergraduate Council

As the Council moved from studying grade inflation to wider issues of grade culture, and then to the development of specific policy recommendations, we operated with several guiding principles in mind.

- Instructors should retain the freedom to determine grades for the students in their courses.
- Disciplines have legitimate reasons to grade differently and these differences must be respected.
- We should avoid penalizing our students or putting them at a disadvantage relative to their peers at other campuses.
- The UO should first act locally to improve the grade culture on this campus, and then actively consider contacts with other universities.
- Reform should be an open, collaborative process driven by educational objectives, not by administrative imperatives.

Together these five principles imply a sixth:

- The policies we formulate to combat grade inflation should aim to provide information and start conversations rather than dictate deflationary solutions.

Implicit in the Council’s shift from “grade inflation” to “grade culture” is the belief that providing information and starting conversations will have a gradual, salutary, non-detrimental effect that in the end will be more effective than any get-tough measures one might devise to knock grades down. This belief underlies our specific proposals.

## Initial proposals to improve the grade culture at UO

By the end of the 2008-09 academic year, the Undergraduate Council formulated three proposals to improve the grade culture at UO.

- **Proposal #1: Discipline-specific explanations of grading standards.** 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 the rest of the university academic community, through the department/program website. Departments should also discuss the degree to which grade inflation threatens to compromise their evaluation practices and, if appropriate, develop discipline-specific ways to address inflation.
- **Proposal #2: Comparative statistics available to instructors.** 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. These summaries would not be publicly posted, but the information 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
- **Proposal #3: Contextual information on transcripts.** Grades reported on transcripts should be accompanied by contextual information that indicates the frequency with which students in those courses earned higher or lower grades. This contextual information provides a way for transcript readers to more effectively evaluate grades in a grade-inflated environment. Several different kinds of context information are in use (e.g., mean grade, median grade, and percent A range grades). The Undergraduate Council proposes adopting this general approach and deciding later the specific information to be reported. To preserve confidentiality, the context would not be reported for courses with low enrollments (e.g., fewer than 20 students).

## Campuswide discussion and feedback

In 2009-10, the Council took these proposals to a large number of groups and individuals across campus. As far back as 2005-06, the Council had discussed grade culture with the UO Senate, the ASUO Senate, the CAS department heads, and others. This year's effort was much more systematic: we attempted to gather as much feedback as possible in a variety of venues, and actively welcomed input on aspects of grade culture that had not occurred to us before.

The groups we contacted in 2009 and 2010 included:

- Individual departments (given presentations by individual Council members mostly but not exclusively in CAS)
- CAS department heads (who were asked to share our proposals with their departmental colleagues and relay their responses back to us)
- Top UO officials (the President, Provost, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, all of whom attended a Council meeting)
- UO Leadership Council
- ASUO President
- ASUO Senate
- UO Senate

In Spring 2010 we also invited the entire teaching faculty, undergraduate student body, and GTF staff—over 20,000 people—to contribute to several public forums established for the sole purpose of discussing grade culture at UO:

- <http://gradeculture.uoregon.edu>, a blog featuring a FAQ, background documents, and opportunities to comment on our proposals or on any other aspect of grade culture. This blog attracted around 80 responses, all of them civil, thoughtful, and productive and many of them quite lengthy. Participants could contribute anonymously if desired. The blog will remain open for comments and postings.
- [ugcproposals@uoregon.edu](mailto:ugcproposals@uoregon.edu), a dedicated email account to which people could send private emails. Together with emails sent directly to the Undergraduate Council chair and the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, we collected about 20 pieces of feedback.
- A brief digest of about 75 confidential emails sent to the UO Senate President.
- Two Town Hall meetings held April 20 (afternoon) and April 29 (evening). These were sparsely attended but generated valuable in-depth discussions with the few who did come. Videos of these meetings will be posted on the blog.

#### Quantitative summary of blog feedback

The Council deliberately chose to rely on these open-format venues rather than conduct a quantitative survey so as to maximize opportunities for considered discussion and solicit contributions on a range of issues, including problems we had not ourselves identified. We did not aim to survey a representative random sample of the campus population, in

other words. But we did tabulate postings to the blog to generate a rough sense of how popular or unpopular our proposals were.

**Proposal #1: Discipline-specific explanations of grading standards.** Of the 19 responses posted to the blog by early May, 8 expressed approval for the proposal, 5 expressed disapproval, and 6 did not express an opinion.

**Proposal #2: Comparative statistics available to instructors.** Of 11 responses posted to the blog, 6 expressed approval, 2 were clearly against, and 3 could be described as neutral (expressing both positive and negative views in varying proportions).

**Proposal #3: Contextual information on transcripts.** Of the 10 individuals posting comments, most were generally negative though several indicated some support for the proposal. Of the 7 student responses, 5 were clearly negative and 2 could be called mixed; of the 3 faculty responses, 1 was positive, 1 was negative, and 1 expressed partial support.

**General comments.** Of the 40 responses posted, 13 could be described as positive toward our proposals, 9 were negative, and 18 raised other issues and/or expressed a mixed opinion.

Students, faculty, and GTFs all contributed to the blog. For technical reasons, we could not reliably determine the identities of enough of the blog contributors to correlate their identities with the attitudes they expressed (except in the case of proposal #3).

#### Feedback received and Council responses

Here we summarize the main arguments made to us through public feedback and provide the Council's responses to these arguments.

#### ***FEEDBACK RELATED TO PROPOSAL #1***

- **Discipline-specific standards will annoy faculty and generate more student complaints**

***Argument:*** At best, this will force departments to have useless conversations and generate unenforceable standards. At worst, this policy feels like an administrative incursion that will violate the values of academic freedom and collegiality. We also risk giving students more cause than before to complain about their grades by inviting them to hold their instructors to publicly-posted guidelines.

**Response:** A prime rationale for proposal #1 is that it helps faculty members realize economies of scale in fielding student questions and complaints about their grades. Instructors can refer students to publicly posted standards and still explain whatever departures from that standard they feel are appropriate to their own pedagogy. Its only compulsory aspect is the requirement that units comply with the policy in good faith. The Council discussed and rejected the idea of monitoring compliance itself or referring the matter to some administrative unit on campus. Instead we propose that departments in different parts of the university be paired with one another to share drafts so that each can articulate to the other—and by extension the university public—what they often take for granted or leave implicit about their grading standards. The Council will facilitate these pairings but not intrude in their discussions.

- **Discipline-specific standards ride roughshod over pedagogical diversity**

**Argument:** This proposal is inappropriate for many departments, particularly foreign language departments and interdisciplinary programs, that incorporate more than one discipline or style of instruction by their very nature. Even in departments with a homogeneous disciplinary core, different professors will often teach the same class differently.

**Response:** Departmental responses to proposal #1 should explain these differences as clearly as possible, and emphasize that students taking classes from different professors will inevitably experience different teaching styles and different grading styles. Not only is this pedagogically defensible and respectful of instructors' academic freedom, but it is a key aspect of being exposed to the diversity of teaching and learning styles that ought to be found at a research university.

- **Lax and inconsistent use of the A+ is a major problem**

**Argument:** We should get rid of the A+ or at least make it an honorary grade (counting it as a 4.0, like a straight A, instead of as a 4.3). But if we do keep it, we should ensure that its use is more uniform and consistent across the university. Many instructors and departments give out A+s very readily, others very seldom, and still others not at all as a matter of principle. Some majors award an astoundingly large percentage of A+s. Distortions at the upper end of the grading spectrum have an adverse impact on high-achieving students. The cutoff for graduating *summa cum laude*<sup>7</sup> has for six consecutive spring terms been over 4.00, meaning that even a genius student who happened to take courses only from professors

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<sup>7</sup> Awarded to the top 1% of graduating students by GPA.

who refuse to award A+s would be unable to graduate with highest honors.

**Response:** This is an important issue that every department should be required to address. Policies on the use of the A+ should be incorporated into departmental responses to proposal #1. The Council should also study the extent to which disparities in average GPAs across departments are caused by specific problems with the A+. We should avoid eliminating the A+ or making it honorary, however, as this would slash many GPAs at a stroke, violating the principle that we should not summarily penalize students competing in a difficult environment.

- **Grading “on a curve” is unfair; so are grades awarded for attendance**

**Argument:** Students should be awarded grades based on whether they meet some objective standard of achievement, not how they perform relative to their peers. Grades should not be adjusted after the fact to fit students along a predetermined distribution or curve. Grades should also not be awarded using criteria unrelated to performance or mastery, especially for attendance.

**Response:** These issues can and should be addressed in departmental responses to proposal #1. Part of the issue here is the difference between what are often called norm-referenced and criterion-referenced grading systems, which correspond roughly to grading on a curve versus grading against a fixed yardstick. Departments and instructors who use norm-referenced grading should pay particular attention to justifying their standards and practices (e.g. by explaining why in certain large classes one can assume a normal bell-curve distribution of testable technical skills among students). Those who assign grades for attendance should explain why students’ presence, participation, and verbal performance are educationally important.

## **FEEDBACK RELATED TO PROPOSAL #2**

- **Generate statistical comparisons *across* departments**

**Argument:** If discrepancies among departments are a big problem, then instructors should be given comparative statistics not only on courses in their own departments but on other courses across the university.

**Response:** The Council agrees that cross-departmental statistics should be made available to instructors. We were unable to decide on a precise

mechanism to do so, however. The issue had more to do with mode of delivery (on Duckweb, on Blackboard, or via email) and with the need to provide neither too much nor too little information (so as to maximize the chance that statistics will attract instructors' attention and prompt them to use the numbers thoughtfully) than with the merits of cross-departmental statistics themselves. The Council will work actively with the Senate and other committees to generate appropriate modes of sharing statistics, and with the Registrar and IT staff to hammer out the logistics.

- **Publicize statistical comparisons**

*Argument:* Statistical reports will have no effect if instructors are not subject to oversight at least by their department heads if not by their colleagues across the university, perhaps even the general public. *On the opposite side:* Grade distributions should not be shared with anyone but instructors themselves.

*Response:* Again, the Council decided not to endorse any particular set of statistics at this time (see response above). The two ideas that had the most support were (1) to copy department heads (but not others) on statistical reports sent to instructors and (2) to post *all* course averages on Blackboard, so that instructors, department heads, and administrators could rely on those comparisons they themselves value the most.

- **Recommend university-wide targets for Gen Ed courses**

*Argument:* The Council should recommend a certain target range for average grades (and perhaps variances as well) in Gen Ed courses. Grade inflation is a greater problem at the Gen Ed level anyway, and it is more appropriate in these introductory-level courses to expect a bell-curve distribution of student abilities than is the case in specialized upper-division courses.

*Response:* The Council is reluctant to get into the business of recommending particular numerical averages, trusting instead that a gradual, spontaneous convergence is likely to result when statistics are shared more widely. Some departments (business, economics, law) already prescribe target averages and/or ranges while others do not and presumably would not want.<sup>8</sup> Some feel that grade inflation is in fact a bigger problem at the upper division anyway, since professors are more likely to favor students they know personally and are less able to assume a

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<sup>8</sup> Economics, for example, limits the percentage of As + Bs to 55% ± 10% in lower-division classes and 65% ± 10% in upper-division classes.

normal bell-curve distribution of students in upper-division classes, which are typically smaller.

- **Statistics will push faculty to ratchet their grades down (or up) unthinkingly**

*Argument:* Faculty identified by statistical comparisons as easy graders (or tough graders) will overcompensate by changing their grades hastily. The dissemination of statistics will push the university as a whole toward “norm-referenced” grading (grading on a curve).

*Response:* Faculty should not be sent statistical reports exclusively at a moment or in a format that will encourage a hasty or ill-considered response—e.g. at the last minute before they submit final grades on Duckweb. Reports should emphasize that statistics are being provided for faculty members’ reference while stressing that the University is not imposing a campuswide grade average or distribution. The particular statistics chosen for inclusion in these reports should prompt responsible comparisons, not *ad hoc* or knee-jerk responses.

### ***FEEDBACK RELATED TO PROPOSAL #3***

- **Contextual information on transcripts will hurt students**

*Argument:* Indicating %As on transcripts will hurt students who excel in courses whose instructors happen to give a large percentage of As. Moreover, as these statistics become public, students will flock to easy courses even more than before, thereby exacerbating grade inflation. If we stand by the value of our grades, contextual information should not be necessary.

*Response:* This policy might just as well function to protect students who take difficult classes. Nonetheless, we are quite sensitive to this concern and therefore recommend phasing in proposal #3 over a period of years. This way, instructors who give an unusually high—or unusually low—percentage of A grades will have a chance to adjust their grading policies if appropriate. Inevitably, differences will remain even at the end of this phasing-in process. People who read transcripts often subconsciously adjust grades up or down already in any case. They might, for example, discount an A in a class perceived as easy and upgrade one in a class perceived as hard. We’re giving graduate schools and employers the means to make these judgments based on concrete numbers, not on unexamined prejudices. We also envision adding a simple prominent

disclaimer to transcripts such as “The University of Oregon is actively working to rein in grade inflation.”

- **Provide class rankings, not %As, as contextual information on transcripts**

*Argument:* Grades themselves are much less meaningful than class rank, which provides transcript users a more valuable indicator of student achievement.

*Response:* We decided to favor %As instead of class rank on transcripts because this figure targets the specific problem identified by the 2006 study by Mark Thoma (see p. 1): the increase in the percentage of A grades at UO.<sup>9</sup> Class rank can also be misleading in classes with skewed or atypical distribution curves—where being the 11th-best student in a 12-person seminar still represents substantial achievement, for example. Still, the Council is open to exploring the issue further since we recommend postponing the implementation of proposal #3 anyway.

- **Contextual information should not be limited to classes with more than 20 students**

*Argument:* There is no reason to limit contextual information to large classes. Small and/or upper-division classes also suffer from grade inflation, perhaps moreso than larger and/or lower-division classes.

*Response:* This decision reflects concerns about FERPA requirements, which are federal rules governing the release (even indirectly) of private information about student records. For small classes it may be possible for a student to determine a peer’s grade based on the percentage of A grades given. We will need legal advice before proceeding on this issue. There is also a sense that small classes naturally and legitimately have atypical grade distributions, so to provide statistics on these classes would give a distorted impression to readers of student transcripts.

## ***OTHER FEEDBACK***

- **Tough graders and tough-grading departments are at a disadvantage now**

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<sup>9</sup> Again, from 1992-2004, the percentage of As went up by 10% while the percentage of Bs actually went down by 3%.

**Argument:** Instructors and departments that have already taken unilateral action against grade inflation are now put at a disadvantage. Tough instructors face lowered teaching evaluations, jeopardizing their chances at promotion and tenure, and suffer unfairly in competitions for university-level teaching awards against those who grade more leniently. Adjunct faculty and GTFs who teach their own classes are under the most pressure to grade leniently.

**Response:** Our proposals are designed to protect those who assert high standards by giving them a supportive context in which to do so. By the same token, they should discourage instructors from styling themselves as outliers by being unduly harsh. In any case, we resist endorsing the idea that low (or high) grades are directly linked to teaching evaluations which are in turn directly linked to promotions and awards. Many award committees already use statistics on grade distributions to screen out instructors who owe their popularity purely to high grades. With regard to promotion, both tenured and tenure-track faculty are already afforded a great deal of protection by a rigorous and formal review process that weighs many factors, by no means all related to teaching. We considered whether to suggest changes to the promotion and tenure process to protect tough graders, but we felt it was unwise to recommend introducing more information willy-nilly into a procedure as formal and quasi-legalistic as tenure is.

It is important to stress, however, that few of these protections apply in the case of adjunct instructors and GTF instructors (GTFs who teach their own classes instead of sections in courses supervised by faculty). A recent UO study suggests that GTF instructors and adjunct instructors may indeed grade more leniently than tenure-related instructors.<sup>10</sup> (*See next comments for more on this.*)

- **GTFs are pressured, overworked, inconsistent, and untrained**

**Argument:** GTFs are pressured either by their supervising instructors or by a perceived need for positive student evaluations to grade more leniently than their consciences allow. This is especially true for GTF instructors. Since GTFs often have to grade 50 assignments a week, many give high grades in the hopes of avoiding student complaints and lengthy visits to office hours. GTFs within a given course often operate with very

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<sup>10</sup> Prof. Patricia Gwartney, Department of Sociology, personal communication, May 17, 2010. In a survey of 117 courses taught between Fall 2007 and Fall 2009 in an unnamed department, it was found that in 200-level courses, 43% of adjunct instructors' and GTF instructors' grades were in the A range, compared to 25% of tenure-related faculty members' grades. For 300-level courses, parallel figures were 32% and 27%. In 400-level courses, 49% of adjunct instructors' grades were in the A range, compared to 39% of both GTF instructors' and tenure-related faculty members' grades.

different grading standards, leading to different outcomes for the same work depending on which section a student happened to sign up for. Finally, many GTFs lack sufficient training with respect to grading standards.

**Response:** We recommend adding to our three main proposals a new measure to ensure that GTFs get better guidance and support in their grading practices. This is particularly important since GTFs do the lion's share of grading in Gen Ed classes and these classes are often identified as a prime source of the grade inflation problem generally. Professors who are otherwise conscientious about grading may find it difficult to supervise their GTFs adequately and give them clear direction in grading. Better training should be instituted both through the Teaching Effectiveness Program (TEP) and in more decentralized fashion by departments themselves. These training sessions might do double duty, providing departments an occasion to discuss their grading practices and pedagogy more generally.

- **Faculty (especially new faculty) grade in a vacuum**

**Argument:** Faculty are given virtually no guidelines about grading when they arrive at the University of Oregon besides the policy found on the Registrar's website (A=excellent, B=good, etc.).<sup>11</sup> Instructors are left completely free to interpret the meaning of terms like "excellent" and "good," and even to decide whether to rely on them at all.

**Response:** All our proposals are designed to empower faculty, new and old, with qualitative and quantitative information on how their colleagues grade. In addition, though, it might be wise to ask Academic Affairs to incorporate information on grading into the orientation program for new faculty.

- **The new budget model may exacerbate grade inflation**

**Argument:** The new budget model will encourage departments to game the system by awarding higher grades, attracting more students, and reaping more money from increased enrollments in their courses and majors.

**Response:** The budget model only affects allocations to colleges and schools, not allocations within departments and schools. So even if Economics, for example, might conceivably have an incentive to "steal" from Business, it has little incentive to "steal" from Political Science since

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<sup>11</sup> [http://registrar.uoregon.edu/grading\\_system](http://registrar.uoregon.edu/grading_system), accessed on May 17, 2010.

both are in CAS. This argument assumes that at the margins, students and departments act opportunistically (seeking high grades or seeking more money). To the extent this is true, it is all the more important to establish countervailing pressures to reinforce the integrity of our grades.

- **Grades are an obstacle to true learning and knowledge**

*Argument:* Grades are crude, impersonal, outdated metrics and they measure the wrong things. The University should abandon grades or at least take steps to diminish their importance. We should instead focus on personalized evaluations of students by instructors, greater instructor responsiveness to a range of student needs and learning styles, and the attainment of crucial skills rather than an artificially induced competition for rewards of dubious intrinsic value.<sup>12</sup>

*Response:* To eliminate grades entirely would violate our principle that UO students should not be put at a disadvantage relative to peers elsewhere. Grades are almost universally used in U.S. higher education and attempts to eliminate them have historically failed. At the same time, the Council wishes to encourage a climate where other incentives besides grades motivate the learning process. Our mission is to return grades to their rightful and meaningful place so that students and faculty alike can concentrate more on other aspects of learning which—as the critics rightly note—are arguably more important.

### Recommendations to the 2010-11 UO Senate

The UO Senate should adopt the three proposals listed on page 5—with the additions and clarifications below—and add a fourth.

#### **Proposal #1: Discipline-specific explanations of grading standards**

- Standards should be formulated in a way that does not impose a straightjacket on departments or individual instructors, but rather explains to the public what typically constitutes “excellence” in the field or fields and among the various teaching styles found in a given department.
- Departments should be required explicitly to address the issue of the A+ and attempt to align their standards with practices campuswide regarding the A+.

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<sup>12</sup> For a thoughtful editorial presenting some of these arguments, see the *Oregon Daily Emerald* (Apr. 19, 2010), p. 2.

- Compliance with the proposal should not be enforced through a centralized bureaucratic mechanism. Rather, the Council should facilitate conversations among pairs of departments in different areas of the university. Pairs can swap proposals and help clarify to each other how best to articulate their general standards and practices for the public.
- The Council should maintain a file of sample grading standards for the reference of departments. Many units (e.g. Business, Economics, German and Scandinavian Studies) already have such statements or policies.

**Proposal #2: Comparative statistics available to instructors**

- The Council heartily endorses the idea of providing comparative statistics across departments but defers a decision on how best to do this. At the very least, however, some version of the original proposal (featuring *intra-departmental* statistics shared with department heads) should be implemented.
- The specific mode of delivering statistical reports (e.g. Duckweb, Blackboard, email) should maximize the chance that instructors will devote some attention to the subject and be able to respond appropriately (e.g. neither inclining them to delete an illegible email clotted with bar charts nor encouraging them to bump grades up or down *ad hoc* just before submitting them on Duckweb).
- Publication or sharing of statistics, whether internally or externally, is a sensitive matter requiring consultation with the Senate and compliance with appropriate FERPA restrictions. We should, however, recognize that GPA statistics (often inaccurate) are already being provided by privately-run websites.
- If we do publicize statistics, we should err on the side of providing more data rather than less, enabling people to select different indicators for comparisons they deem most appropriate (e.g. within departments or across 100-level courses) rather than have the University privilege one or another metric as a matter of policy.

**Proposal #3: Contextual information on transcripts**

- The Council continues to support this idea but proposes deferring its implementation until the other two proposals have had a chance to take effect. This will minimize the chance that students will be punished for taking courses with unusually high percentages of A grades.

- Extra time will also allow us to consult more widely on whether class rankings or %As are preferable, to work with the Registrar on reformatting transcripts, and to address any FERPA-related concerns.
- We recommend that the new-style transcripts featuring contextual information be introduced for all students who enter the university in Fall 2011.

**Proposal #4 (NEW): Better support for GTFs, NTTFs, and new faculty**

- This is a new proposal added in response to campus feedback.
- Academic Affairs should incorporate a brief introduction to university-wide grading policies (including the measures the Council is proposing) in its orientation for new faculty.
- GTFs should be given more specific training both at the departmental and university-wide levels. Within departments, GTF training could be folded into general discussions of grading practices required by proposal #1. At the university-wide level, the Teaching Effectiveness Program (TEP) has already developed programs to educate GTFs about grading. TEP could also be asked to gather concerns about grading from GTFs, whose experiences matter disproportionately since they serve as front-line educators and primary graders in many large survey courses.
- Departments should also discuss ways to guide protect GTF instructors—as well as adjunct faculty—whose employment prospects are far more dependent on positive teaching evaluations than is the case for tenure-related faculty. The Council also recommends that those in charge of policies regarding non-tenure-related faculty members be made aware of this issue.

Conclusion

The Undergraduate Council's interest in grade culture is motivated by the desire to increase the quality of education at the University of Oregon. The last thing the Council wants to do is increase anxiety about grades by signaling that grade deflation is an end in itself. Rather, we want simultaneously to reassert and to limit the role of grades precisely so that other, more valuable forms of student-teacher interaction can flourish. But to realize that goal, our campus may have to endure an uncomfortable period when grades are indeed the topic of close scrutiny and collegial discussion. Facilitating that discussion is consonant with the mandate of the Undergraduate Council.