

# Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

Responses to "Plus/Minus Grading," by Hale, Jones, McLachlan, & Mainwaring  
2/1/96

I heartily concur that we should move to a plus/minus grading system. Other schools in the UNC system use it; it might make students more diligent in preparing for tests; it certainly moves in the direction of deflating grade inflation.

*Nancy Joyner, English*

People attached to the limited A,B,C,D,F scale tend to act like do-it-yourselfers who use chain saws for delicate carpentry cuts requiring a band saw. The attitude is that the lumber gets cut, don't worry that the blueprint requires a finished cut. For the diverse population we serve, I believe we can find finishing tools that more accurately reflect student achievement. Having used a similar 12 point scale for evaluation, I have watched students respond to the finer gradations, moving through levels of "C" and "B" as their improving work and skills are reflected in the end of the course evaluation. I support moving Western Carolina to an evaluation tool of greater refinement.

*Lawrence J. Hill, Communication & Theatre Arts*

I think the +/- or 12-point grading system makes much better sense than the present 5-point one. At times I have entertained the idea that the whole percentage point scores would be even more accurate, such as some I have seen in Chinese transcripts.

*J. Dan Pittillo, Biology*

While I think there is much merit to the suggestion that we adopt a plus/minus grading system, I do have one concern, and that is the system's contribution to grade inflation. Although the authors have suggested the plus/minus system would curb grade inflation, I don't agree. For instance, I think most faculty believe a student who has earned an A deserves 4 grade points under the current system. They may be reluctant to give an A- if they realized the student would receive fewer than 4 grade points. Faculty who give a B+ to students who would normally have received a B will see their grades inflated as the student would now receive 3.4 grade points. The only way to know the new system's effect on grade inflation is to do a careful study of the number of +'s and -'s and compare grades after the implementation of the new system to the grades before its implementation.

*David Claxton, Health, PE, & Recreation*

The February Faculty Forum presents the best argument for plus-minus grading that I've seen. This proposal was defeated in the late '80s because--I believe--a majority of those in the Senate at that time felt that (1) the old system worked well enough ("if it ain't broke...") and that (2) the change would necessitate undue effort for the minimal benefits it might offer. Drs. Hale, Jones, McLachlan, and Mainwaring have shown clearly that the old system is

not fair and that the change is easily done from the professor's point of view and well worth the effort from the students'. I was especially impressed by the arguments concerning the inherent unfairness of the old system and the way the traditional system encourages students to believe that finals "aren't worth the time" unless the student is "on the line."

*Steve Eberly, English*

Surely the best way to assess student performance is to provide a written evaluation of each student's strengths and weaknesses in the course. Since there are compelling reasons that militate against written evaluations, I think we should therefore adopt a grading system that summarizes and retains as much information as possible about the student's performance. The plus/minus system is prefer-able to the current whole-letter system, just as the whole-letter system is preferable to one that simply records pass-fail.

*John Slater, Communication & Theatre Arts*

I don't think it ranks with identifying types of pneumonia, but I have no objection to a grading system that allows plus and minus grades. In fact my undergraduate education at Davidson College was under a similar system.

*Ralph Triplette, Geosciences & Anthropology*

I support the 12-point grading system. The 12-point system would provide more validity and accuracy to the assessment processes. This system would also help to eliminate the bias and subjectivity that can enter into the assignment of grades when the situation is borderline. With the current system, the student who earns an 89 average on a numerical scale (00!-100) has received a "B". More accurately the student's performance resides at a point between "A" and "B". I want to be able to make the finer distinctions in assessment for the purposes of informing and inspiring students.

*Darlene Thurston, Administration, Curriculum, & Instruction*

I would like to respond to the question in the Faculty Forum concerning the 12 point grading scale. I whole-heartedly agree that it is a much needed change. The gradation would more accurately reflect student achievement. There is a wide variation of competence between a student receiving a 90% A and one earning a 99% A. The new system would involve a bit more "bookkeeping" on the part of the faculty and registrar, but computers would be able to accommodate the new "spread sheets." Other state universities in North Carolina have adopted this new concept. After the initial "start-up trial period," the system is working very productively.

*Judy King, Human Environmental Sciences*

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2/1/96, continued

I agree with Professors Hale, Jones, McLachlan, and Mainwaring on the issue of Plus/Minus Grading because of what is done with the grades after we turn them in at the end of the term. THEY ARE AVERAGED. Letter grades coming from many different professors and many different courses make up data which is at the ordinal level of measurement and therefore should not be averaged. It is statistically invalid to do so. It is unscientific and downright unfair to compare students through the use of grade point averages. How can we treat our students this way? Not only do we compare students through grade point averages, we use these averages to kick some out of school and to graduate others with honors. If we really want to be a national leader in teaching and learning, then we should get rid of grade point averages. Student performance within a class should be judged superior, acceptable, or not acceptable. Such things as failing out of school, graduating, and graduating with honors should be determined by percentages of the total course hours taken that result in these three categories. There are clearly more details to be worked out with this system, but I will not begin to try to discuss them here. Before you make up your mind about the proposed Plus/Minus Grading system, you should read Making Sense Of College Grades: Why the Grading System Does Not Work and What Can Be Done About It, by Milton, Pollio, and Eison. The Faculty Center has a copy of this book. Before you say, "nobody else uses the system that Stephens is proposing," think about this. Once upon a time, nobody used grade point averages. Some one must be the first. In conclusion, if we are not going to scrap grade point averages, the Plus/Minus System at least moves our grade reporting a little closer to the level of measurement required for data to be averaged (interval or ratio level). *Richard Stephens, Mathematics & Computer Science*

Of the arguments I've heard regarding the grading systems, I find those favoring the 12-pt system to be more compelling, at least in an ideal world. However, I must share with you the gut feeling I have when I sit down to calculate final grades: that the letter grade system is crude and that the final grade which a student "earns" may or may not reflect his/her grasp of a subject. Is there a danger that a 12-pt system would simply lend a false impression of accuracy in what is at best an imprecise business? I hope we do not delude ourselves here.

*Gary White, Geosciences and Anthropology*

Before coming to Western, I was at a university which used the 12 point system. Assigning grades was a lot less stressful under this system. At one time or another, all of us have agonized over whether or not a student should get the higher letter grade if the student lacks one half a point or less. It does make more of a difference when the ultimate discriminating spread is between a 3.0 and a 4.0. In one of my classes, due to the number of assignments, the difference between an 89 and a 90 final percentage is two ten-point summaries. Do I say, "Oh, it's OK, they didn't turn in two summaries, but I'll give them the "A" anyway because they came to all of the classes? I think not. Along the same line of reasoning, why should someone who barely squeaked by with an 80 overall course average and probably received at least two letter grades lower on one exam receive the same 3.0? The 12 point scale rewards those who chose to study diligently for a test over one who opted to spend the evening watching a favorite movie. If we are to increase our standards at the university and decrease grade inflation, this is a great place to start.

*Susan C. Brown,  
Sport Management*

I am aware of Richard Stephens' response to the latest Faculty Forum article and agree with most of his points. I would even like to think I influenced his thinking by calling Making Sense of College Grades to his attention. The first two chapters of this book should be required reading for anyone interested in this issue.

*Lee Minor, Mathematics &  
Computer Science*

The "12-point" grading system is not the solution to the problem of grades. Consider Paul Dressel's description of a grade: "An inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material." The claims that a 12-point grading system would be more precise and more accurate than a less differentiated system assume that grades are more precise and accurate than the techniques used to measure them. Who among us can attest to the accuracy and precision of the techniques we use to measure student performance in our courses? If we adopt the 12-point system, I fear that grades will become all the more important as devices for ranking students for personnel selection for graduate and professional school and for business and industry. Any value that grades have as motivators for learning may well be eclipsed by this ranking function. We should use a less, rather than a more, differentiated grading system and we should abolish the GPA.

*John Habel, Psychology*