

Working Group on Grade Inflation

Final Report

March 2014

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Charge

The charge of the Working Group on Grade Inflation was to enumerate possible changes in policies and procedures that would work against grade inflation, and to evaluate the potential costs and benefits of such changes.

Motion #1

Every academic program that offers 100 to 300 level courses will have a faculty-wide discussion about grading practices before the end of the fall 2014 semester and thereafter at least once every 5 years.

Motivation

- The analysis of grading patterns revealed that what was originally termed “grade inflation” is more an issue of “grade fairness.” As shown in Appendix 1, there are broad differences in the distributions and means of grades across departments and programs. Even among different sections of the same course, there are clear examples of grading inconsistency. These examples are not limited to a single school. This variability means that a student’s choice of majors or even course scheduling issues may influence his or her GPA (and prospects of graduating with honors).

Implementation

- Each department and program should decide how to frame the discussions of grading in the courses their faculty teach. These discussions will be supported by data summaries provided to department/program chairs at the end of every semester. The complete grade data are already available in Edgar to department chairs, Deans, and advisors. As shown in Appendix 2, the working group has prepared a list of suggested discussion points including questions about course size, type, or level; elective or distribution status; pedagogy; and

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ability to revise assignments.

- Students asked to be involved in these discussions. The working group recommends that the department or program identify 1-5 students to be included in the discussions.
- Each academic program will provide a brief summary of their 2014 discussions to their faculty senate representative.

Impact

- Promoting an open discussion of what grading means is expected to have a positive impact on the majority of faculty and to increase grading fairness and consistency. This discussion should be especially helpful for faculty who are new to the university.
- Some faculty expressed concerns that these discussions could be an administrative burden and could infringe upon the academic freedom of those who are already employing what they consider to be a sound and reasonable pedagogical plan. These concerns motivated the recommendations that this be a faculty wide-discussion within each individual academic program, and conducted within a five year time frame. These discussions could take place during a regular faculty meeting or on another occasion when the faculty are all together, such as a department review or retreat. Pedagogy and grading standards are not minor responsibilities of academic programs and deserve faculty discussion.
- Discussion of this motion frequently led to inquiry about whether we (the faculty at Rice) are ensuring that the students are being taught the material they need to know about a subject, and how we assess their learning of this material (i.e., objectives). Although this is a topic related to grading, it is a much bigger issue and outside the scope of this working group. We believe that at the department / program level, this recommendation to discuss plans for grading guidelines should naturally lead into such discussions of assessment of educational objectives.

Motion #2

Effective the Fall 2018 semester, the grade A+ will be worth 4.0, not 4.33, in calculating the GPA.

Motivation

- At the present time, in order to graduate with top Latin Honors (*summa cum laude*), a student must have a GPA of greater than 4.0 (with the exception of Architecture), which means that they must have received a number of A+ grades.
- The A+ grade is awarded in a very heterogeneous manner. Some professors do not award A+ grades at all, whereas there are courses where every student in the class earned an A+ grade.
- As a result of this mixed likelihood of getting an A+ grade, the likelihood of students graduating *summa cum laude* varies tremendously between majors within the same school.
- Some students complain when they are awarded an A instead of an A+ grade because it “ruins” their GPA and their ability to graduate *summa cum laude*.

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- Of the 30 institutions we generally consider to be our peers (Appendix 3), only six, including Rice, assign A+ a numerical value higher than A. The remaining schools either had an A+ numerically equivalent to an A (9 schools), or did not have A+ (14 schools).
- The grade of A+ does aid in rewarding top performing students, and the faculty are reluctant to abolish this grade altogether. Therefore, we recommend keeping the A+ but with a 4.0 equivalent.

Implementation

- In Fall 2018, the registrar will change the value of the A+ grade to 4.0. This change would be explained on the back of the transcript, as is common practice.
- Faculty will still be able to award A+ grades to top performing students. This grade will show on their transcript.
- This change does not affect the value of A+ grades awarded prior to the Fall 2018 semester.
- The values of all other grades (A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, etc.) will not change.

Impact

- Students who enroll at Rice before Fall 2018 but graduate after Fall 2018 will have a GPA that has different values for A+ in different years. This issue will be present until all students who matriculate prior to Fall 2018 have graduated. However, this approach of making the A+ value change at one time, as opposed to applying this change gradually, is far more straightforward for Administrative Systems to implement.
- It will no longer be necessary to have greater than a 4.0 GPA to graduate with top Latin honors though we recognize that it may compress the GPA ranges for assigning Latin honors.
- Making this effective in Fall 2018 will allow time for there to be impact on GPAs – meaning less variation in average course grade between departments – resulting from the departmental grading discussion (Motion 1). This time frame also allows time for the General Announcements to be modified so that no current students will be affected.
- Although there will be a reduction in GPA for the top performing students, we do not expect GPAs to drop dramatically across the university. Using the data from the last several years, we calculated the difference in average course grades with A+ = 4.3 and with A+ = 4.0 and found a difference of 0.03 in the average course grade.

Motion #3

In promotion and tenure abstracts, student ratings of instructor effectiveness should be supplemented by additional evidence of effective, quality teaching. Options for these materials include, but are not limited to, peer and/or chair observations of teaching and the inclusion of teaching artifacts (such as syllabi, assignments, exams, etc.) in promotion and tenure dossiers. This motion recommends that the Committee on Teaching consider our proposals for changing the promotion and tenure policies to this effect.

Motivation

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- Students who receive higher grades rate their instructors as being more effective than do students receiving lower grades.
- The course evaluation score for instructor effectiveness is currently the only metric of teaching quality included in the abstract for promotion and tenure. This seems an inadequate way to assess the quality of teaching.

Implementation

- The Committee on Teaching will be asked to develop additional metrics for teaching assessment. The Director for the Center for Teaching Excellence will be involved in this process.

Impact

- Providing additional measures of quality teaching will ensure that the Promotion and Tenure Committee evaluates teaching assessments of a particular candidate from both students and faculty.
- The development of additional metrics to evaluate teaching is expected to have a positive impact on teaching quality across the university.