

M E M O R A N D U M

To: Faculty Senators

From: Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, Chairman, Undergraduate Policy Council

Re: Plus/Minus Grading System

Date: April 9, 1984

On March 23, 1984, at the direction of the Faculty Senate, the Undergraduate Policy Council revisited the issue of a modification of our current grading system to incorporate pluses and minuses in each grade range. It is the firm conviction of the UPC that its recommendation of a plus/minus system as presented, moved and seconded in the Faculty Senate was thoughtfully made after extended discussion and debate covering all aspects of the proposal. Therefore, the UPC reaffirms its recommendation without modification.

Questions from the floor of the Senate, however, suggest that the following points may help to clarify that recommendation.

1. The UPC's recommendation of intervals of +/- .25 rather than some other value such as +/- .33 was based on several factors.

a. +/- .25 was the preferred interval of the Executive Branch of the Student Government, and was approved overwhelmingly by the Student Senate. Although the Faculty Senate may amend to intervals of, for example, .33 (C-: 1.67; C: 2.0; C+: 2.33), such amending should only be done if the amended system is decidedly superior to the system as proposed.

b. The total differential (.5) within a given grade range (e.g.: 1.75 to 2.25 from C- to C+) is equal to the total differential (.5) between two grade ranges (e.g.: 2.25 to 2.75 from C+ to B-). These point values serve to focus on the integrity of each grade range because the difference between two different grade ranges (.5) is twice that between any two grades within the same grade range (.25, e.g.: 2.0 to 2.25 from C to C+ or 1.75 to 2.0 from C- to C). In a system which assigns values +/- .33, the difference between a C+ and a B- would be .33, no greater than that between C and C+, and the difference between C- and C+ (or the entire 'C' range) would be .66. The UPC feels it is somewhat more desirable to have plus and minus grades cluster close to the straight grade, emphasizing the grade range, than to have equal differentials between each individual grade.

c. The question of what point values are assigned to plus and minus grades is not directly related to how an individual faculty member decides to break down the grade range he or she currently uses. Regardless of what point values are assigned to minus and plus grades, the individual faculty member will always have the prerogative to assign grades as he or she deems appropriate. A faculty member who, for example, currently assigns a C to all students who achieve a semester average between 70 and 79.9 would, under the proposed system, decide where within the grade range a student would earn a C+ or a C-. One professor might divide the range in thirds, assigning the bottom third a C-, the middle third a C, and so on. Another professor might

assign a C- only to those students whose averages fall at the very bottom of the range (those earning averages, say, of 70 and 71) and a C+ only to those students at the very top of the range. A third professor might decline to use minus grades altogether. The UPC feels that the +/- .25 differential encourages individual faculty members to decide how they may most appropriately use the plus/minus system. Intervals of +/- .33 would seem to say that faculty are expected to divide each grade range into three equal parts. The UPC assumes the Faculty Senate would prefer to offer faculty the widest possible range of options as each instructor works to adapt his or her own grading system to the plus/minus modification.

2. The problem of "borderline" students remains precisely the same under the proposed system as under our current system. The above professor, whose student achieves a 79.9 average, now must decide whether to round off the grade or not, whether to give the student a B (a "low" B) or a C (a "high" C). Under the proposed system, the professor would have to make the same decision, but could debate between a B- and a C+. Under the proposed system, therefore, the professor's decision about a borderline student will at least have less stark results. Under the current system, the decision will make a one point difference (2.0 or 3.0); under the proposed system, the same decision will make only half that difference or .5 (2.25 or 2.75).

3. Certainly the most problematical matter in the proposed system is the C- which is figured into the grade point average at less than 2.0. It should be reiterated that under the UPC proposal, no student will be penalized for earning a C- in a particular course. Penalties are associated, under both the current and the proposed systems, with grade point averages for all courses taken. Certainly, a student who earns a C- in one course will have to offset that grade with a C+ in another course. On the other hand, currently a student who earns a D must offset that with a B (no number of C's in courses can offset the D). Under the proposed system, a D+ could be offset by a B-, or by three C pluses a straight D may be offset by four C pluses and so on. Thus, the proposed plan can work to a student's advantage in ways that the current system cannot.

4. There exists no unanimity among grading systems in schools which use plus/minus systems. Most schools (University of California at Berkeley, for example, Vanderbilt or the University of Michigan) use a system valuing pluses at .3 (B+: 3.3) and minuses at .7 (B-: 2.7). (The University of Michigan has an A+ which it values, like the A, at 4.0). Other schools (Mills College, for example) value the plus at .33 and the minus at .67. Cornell and Columbia include an A+ valued at 4.3. Harvard has a system which does not include an A+, and assigns point values from 1 to 11 (A: 11; A-: 10; B+: 9 and so on). Of all these institutions, the one which most recently changed to a plus/minus system is Vanderbilt, which shifted in 1982. Administrators at Vanderbilt have perceived no significant difference in grade point averages as a result of the change and expect none in future. In 1968, the University of Georgia dropped a plus-only system (A+: 4.5; B+: 3.5 and so on), at the height of the student protests about the irrelevance of grades. Recently, the University of Florida instituted the same system (plus only); faculty debate at the University of Florida suggests a reluctance to assign 'minus' grades and a compromise decision to try, as a first step, pluses with the option to institute minuses at some future date. The UPC (and, we suspect, the GPC) feels that a plus-only

system would simply insure grade inflation and would therefore be unacceptable to the faculty.

Finally, and for your information, we note that the Law School Data Assembly Service converts pluses and minuses to .33 in either direction, and includes A pluses at 4.33. The Association of American Medical Colleges converts to .3 in either direction; however, the AAMC values an A+ at 4.00.

Recommendations of the Undergraduate Policy Council

- I. The Undergraduate Policy Council of the Florida State University recommends that the Faculty Senate endorse the plan presented by the Student Senate, with the following modification: we recommend that the plan include an A+ to be awarded the value of 4.25:

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A+ : 4.25	B+ : 3.25	C+ : 2.25	D+ : 1.25	F : 0.00
A : 4.00	B : 3.00	C : 2.00	D : 1.00	
A- : 3.75	B- : 2.75	C- : 1.75	D- : .75	

- II. This recommendation and the recommendations that follow are based on the premise that the grade range from plus to minus is considered to be equivalent to the current letter grade range. In other words, a student currently awarded a "C" in a course has, in fact, been awarded a grade in the "C range" which, under the proposed plus/minus plan would include "C-," "C," and "C+." See accompanying illustration.

- III. Our recommendation pertains only to the grading scale. The Faculty Senate should understand that passing the new plus/minus scale will not affect any university requirements. All university regulations currently announced in the BULLETIN will be considered binding, to be interpreted as follows:

- A. All regulations currently tied to a specific GPA will remain exactly as they are (e.g., GPA of 2.0 required for undergraduate students to remain in good academic standing; 3.0 for graduate students to remain in good academic standing; 3.50 for cum laude, etc.).
- B. All regulations currently applicable on a course-by-course basis and currently tied to a specific letter grade would be interpreted to mean a specific letter grade range. Hence, if a student currently must achieve a "C" in one course in order to proceed to another course, under the proposed plus/minus system, that student would have to achieve a grade in the "C range," to include "C-."

NOTE: It follows from recommendation III.B. that in the case of "Gordon Rule" courses (and in the absence of any ruling by the Board of Regents), which currently do not fulfil the Gordon Rule word-count requirement unless the student achieves a C or better, the university will consider that a C- earned in a Gordon Rule course will constitute successful completion of the Gordon Rule word-count requirement for that particular course.

- C. All regulations currently tied to a specific grade average would be interpreted to mean the numerical average currently associated with that specific grade. Hence, the required "C average or better" on all Liberal Studies courses would be interpreted as "2.0 average or better."

- IV. Each college and department will review its current regulations as stated in the BULLETIN and make any changes it deems necessary to clarify its program requirements in light of the plus/minus system.

* The A+ proposal was NOT APPROVED by the Senate. The remainder of the proposal was approved.

Mr. Roeder moved to revise the proposal to the following scale: A=4.0; A-=4.0; B+=3.5; B=3.25; B-=3.0; C+=2.5; C=2.25; C-=2.0; D+=1.5; D=1.25; D-=1.0. This motion was seconded by Ms. Hendrickson. After discussion Ms. Hendrickson stated she would support Mr. Roeder's original motion if he would change the C-=1.75. Mr. Roeder agreed. After discussion voting resulted in the motion failing.

The Senate then voted on the amended motion of Ms. Muhlenfeld (the proposal without the A+). The motion passed with a vote of 29-24.

Ms. Muhlenfeld then presented the UPC proposal for implementation of the plus/minus grading system (attachment B) and moved its adoption. Her motion was seconded. Mr. Standley moved to amend the motion to state that the UPC report back to the Senate after two complete years of this system on its impact. Mr. Edwards ruled this motion was not germane and asked Mr. Standley to present his motion later.

Following a request from the floor, the Chair ruled that each question be considered separately and each one passed (page 19 of these minutes).

Mr. Standley restated his earlier motion that the UPC monitor the operation of the system and report back to the Senate on the impact of the plus/minus grading system in its third year of use. This motion was seconded and passed.

VII. University Welfare

There were no items of university welfare at today's meeting.