

Faculty Senate Resolution 03-04:

On Grades and Standards

Including (Only by Reference) Two Appendices

Presented by Carruth McGehee at the Meeting of November 7, 2002

As Amended and Adopted at the Meeting of December 11, 2002

Whereas, the evaluation of students' work and achievement is an important responsibility of the faculty; and

Whereas, University policy on undergraduate grades (p. 65 of the current catalog) states that A indicates distinguished mastery of the course material; B, good mastery; C, acceptable mastery; D, minimally acceptable achievement for credit; and F, failure; and

Whereas, grades serve to acquaint students with the standards of the discipline; to inform them about their mastery of skills and subject matter; and to advise them of their preparedness for further study or for a line of work--and ought to do so accurately; and

Whereas, grades serve to certify students' credentials to providers of scholarships and awards, to employers, and to graduate schools--and ought to do so in a meaningful and reasonably uniform manner; and

Whereas, students' educational interests are better served when they are challenged by academic programs of good quality, with grading standards which are rigorous, consistent, and sound; and

Whereas, grades at LSU (see Appendix 2) have been rising for many years; 63% of undergraduate grades in the fall of 2001 were As or Bs; furthermore, grade distributions differ considerably among academic units; and

Whereas, grading standards in U.S. universities have become the subject of widespread discussion and concern (see, for example, the Rosovsky-Hartley report, the material from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and other references listed in Appendix 1);

Therefore Be it Resolved, that all teaching faculty should thoughtfully examine their grading standards and practices.

Be it further Resolved, that in every department (or other appropriate academic unit), administrative leaders should promote analysis and discussion of grading standards and practices--in the light of the disciplines, teaching methods, and characteristics of student populations taught by that department. After due preparation, but no later than Spring 2004, the faculty of every department should review the issues and problems in a formal meeting--to exchange views, move toward consensus, and adopt new policies and guidelines if they see fit.

Be it further Resolved, that the Faculty Senate recommends the adoption of the following practices as a matter of policy:

1. Each semester, every faculty member will be informed of the recent grade distributions in the courses he or she teaches, and in other courses at the same level, courses in the same discipline, and so forth, so that he or she will have a clear picture of grading practices in the campus context. Each department or school will, in timely fashion, obtain the needed reports and studies from the Office of Budget and Planning.
2. Whenever an administrator or a committee makes or reports an evaluation of teaching--or of a course, or of a program, or of an experimental mode or method of teaching--grade distributions will be on view and will be part of the record along with other appropriate factors such as course requirements, grading criteria, and evidence of student achievement.
3. The appropriate officer of each academic unit will take special care to see that all teaching personnel are informed about pertinent policies and expectations with respect to grades, and supported as they undertake to uphold appropriate standards.
4. Each year, beginning in Spring 2004, each Dean, in consultation with the policy committee or other appropriate faculty body, will prepare a report for the Provost on grading patterns and practices in the units reporting to him or her, addressing any need that may exist for reform.

Be it further Resolved, that the Committee on Admissions, Standards, and Honors should, in consultation with the Provost, monitor developments in the distribution of grades. Each year, beginning in 2004, the Committee will report thereon to the Faculty Senate, offering recommendations as it sees fit.

Be it further Resolved, that the Committee on the Improvement of Instruction should, in the spirit of Faculty Senate Resolution 96-08 (passed unanimously by the Faculty Senate at its meeting of February 17, 1998) monitor patterns in campus procedures for the evaluation of teaching, consider issues related thereto, and offer recommendations as it sees fit.

Be it further Resolved, that colleges and schools whose degree programs have admission requirements including a minimum GPA should, if they find that the use of this criterion may be inducing a decline in standards, consider replacing it by a competitive consideration of the GPA;

Be it further Resolved, that the Faculty Senate favors appropriately rigorous and more nearly uniform grading standards based on sound course design and valid distinctions among levels of mastery. We do not favor arbitrary changes in grade distributions. We affirm the provision in PS-44 that at the beginning of every course, the teacher must give the students a clear statement of requirements and grading criteria. The primacy of teaching faculty's judgment in determining grades in their classes is affirmed.

Appendix 1: References

LSU References

LSU policy on grades is stated in PS-44. It refers to the catalog, p. 65, for the definitions of the letter grades. Other formulations of grading policy may be found on page 17 of the Faculty Handbook of 1997, which is also available online.

The minutes of the Faculty Senate meeting of February 17, 1998 describe the deliberation on Resolution 96-08 may be found through a link at the Faculty Senate website; click on "Minutes." Likewise for the text of the Resolution; click on "Resolution."

Other References

A number of pertinent articles have appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and are available on the web to subscribers. With a search engine one can find many studies and commentaries on grade inflation, from various points of view. Here is a selection.

1. *Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?* Grade Inflation and Letters of Recommendation, by Henry Rosovsky (Harvard University) and Matthew Hartley (University of Pennsylvania), published by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

2. Items from Chapel Hill: In February, 2000, the Educational Policy Committee prepared a 24-page paper, *Grade Inflation at UNC-Chapel Hill, A Report to the Faculty Council*. This report recommended that each large unit should strive to reach and maintain an overall GPA in undergraduate courses between 2.6 and 2.7. At its meeting of September 7, 2001, The Faculty Council unanimously passed a Resolution endorsing the recommendations of the report. Also available on the web are the version of the Resolution that was originally presented and the minutes of the meeting, which give an account of the debate and of the amendments which were offered (one passed, one failed).

3. *Grade Inflation: Myth or Reality*, by Gary R. Hanson, Student Affairs Research, University of Texas at Austin.

4. *The 1999 report Grade Inflation at the University of Arizona*, by Jonathan Penner.

5. The report and policy statement adopted at the University of Minnesota in 1999.

For those who cannot use the hypertext links in the list above, here are the URLs:

1. http://www.amacad.org/publications/monographs/Evaluation_and_the_Academy.pdf
2. <http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/reports/R2000EPCGrdInfl.PDF>,
<http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/resolutions/Res2001FC5a.htm>,
<http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/resolutions/Res2001FC5.htm>,
<http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/minutes/M01FC09.htm>.
3. <http://www.utexas.edu/student/research/reports/Inflation/Inflation.html>
4. <http://www.u.arizona.edu/~ctb/cogdoc01.html>
5. <http://www.umn.edu/usenate/policies/syllabi.html>

Appendix 2: A Discussion of the Resolution

1. Grades at LSU, 1965-2001

Overall, undergraduate grades at LSU have been steadily rising.

- * In the fall of 2001, grades were 33% As, 30% Bs, 17% Cs, 5% Ds, 3% Fs, and 11% Ws.
- * In the fall of 1991, grades were 27% As, 30% Bs, 20% Cs, 6% Ds, 3% Fs, and 10% Ws.
- * In the fall of 1984, grades were 21% As, 28% Bs, 22% Cs, 7% Ds, 4% Fs, and 13% Ws.
- * In the fall of 1965, grades were 17% As, 30% Bs, 30% Cs, 10% Ds, 7% Fs, 1% WFs, 3% Ws, and 2% Is. (Note that the W policy was different in 1965.)

Thus it appears that overall grading practices have slipped away from suitably rigorous standards. Moreover, grade distributions vary so much by college that the usage and meaning of grades lack campus-wide coherence. Here are a few numbers, considering only the colleges and schools that enrolled at least 1000 students:

- * In the fall of 2001, the percentage of As and Bs combined varied from a low of 53% to a high of 78%.
- * In the fall of 1984, the percentage of As and Bs combined varied from a low of 34% to a high of 73%.
- * In the fall of 1965, the percentage of As and Bs combined varied from a low of 42% to a high of 69%.

To some extent, in some time periods, and in some courses, a rise in grades may be justified by reference to improvement in the academic performance of students. However, the overall rise in grades has outrun such a justification.

To be sure, there has been a substantial and gratifying improvement in the academic credentials of LSU's entering students. Let's grant that the improved credentials are indeed associated with improved academic performance at LSU. But if our students are now more serious and better prepared, as indicated by an ACT Composite average of 24, then surely our duty to them is not to hold steady, or to relax, but rather to raise expectations, standards, and the quality of degree programs.

As Reference 1 points out, a rise in grades is quite unlike a rise in prices, since grades can go only so high. The effect of even a slow rise becomes important over time, since it entails the de facto use of a smaller grading range, a less meaningful set of gradations. This effect is called grade compression. In the words of the Chapel Hill report (Reference 2, page 7), the effect is that "our whole quality evaluation system becomes less meaningful."

2. The Texas Defense

Reference 3, a study of a ten-year period at the University of Texas at Austin, undertakes to explain and defend the rise in grades by reference to an improvement in students' academic performance. It assumes that standardized test scores of entering students are a satisfactory index of their academic performance, at least in the freshman year. It concludes that the rise in grades was in fact a modest response to the improved academic credentials of the student population. In the absence of more information about the UT situation, it is reasonable to say that the argument

is plausible.

The UT study lets us make a comparison between UT and LSU. In the following summary, the LSU numbers come from a report dated June 26, 2002 by Sandra J. Walker (Director, Budget and Planning). The SAT scores from UT are converted to equivalent ACT scores using a table available from the College Board.

From 1986-1987 to 1995-1996,

- * the average first-year GPA of freshmen at UT changed by .25 points, from 2.46 to 2.71, while
- * their average ACT Composite Score increased by about 2 points, from 25 to 27;
- * the average first-year GPA of freshmen at LSU changed by .30 points, from 2.46 to 2.76, while
- * their average ACT Composite Score increased by 1.6 points, from 21.8 to 23.4.

No criticism of UT is intended. Suffice it to say that the Texas Defense does not work terribly well for us at LSU.

There is no data at hand from UT for the period since 1995. As for LSU:

From 1986-1987 to 2000-2001,

- * the average first-year GPA of freshmen at LSU changed by .49 points, from 2.46 to 2.95 while
- * their average ACT Composite Score increased by 2.2 points, from 21.8 to 24.0.

3. The Case of Calculus

There are courses at LSU in which the rise in grades has been relatively modest, and where some research and discussion might, at least partially, explain and/or justify the change. Consider the service course Mathematics 1550, Calculus I. The percentage of grades which were As or Bs was below 30% in the late 1980s, and it is now above 40%. The academic profile of calculus students improved somewhat over the period. On the other hand, in view of the position of this course in the engineering and science curricula, the expectations in the course should have risen. It seems quite reasonable to ask whether grades in Math 1550 are a bit higher than they should be.

Also, grade distributions in 1550 vary from section to section. Many of the variations are small and probably justifiable, but the grades in a very few sections run to extremes which may indeed not be defensible. So it seems quite reasonable to ask also whether grading standards are less consistent in 1550 than they would be if the department developed and promulgated appropriate guidelines, or maybe just made new faculty more aware of the norm.

4. The North Carolina Offense

The Chapel Hill report is readable, clear, and thorough, beginning with its description of an eerily familiar situation. It deserves to be used as a reference and guide at LSU, both for its examination of the issues and for its analysis of measures that might be taken.

The Resolution being proposed to the LSU Faculty Senate takes essentially the same stance as

the Resolution adopted by the UNC Faculty Council at its meeting of September 7, 2001. That is, it calls forth local review and reform. It is reasonable and proper that grading practices should be conceived and understood in ways that vary by course, by discipline, and by pedagogical approach. Grading standards are necessarily a commingling of the relative and the absolute, the competitive and the fixed. As teachers, our grading policies reflect our professional convictions, our experience of classes past, and our understanding of the world for which we want our students to have sound preparation and valid credentials. Because the assignment of grades is a responsibility of individual teachers, a call for higher standards must be mediated primarily through the several and diverse judgments and actions of all LSU faculty. But it is also true that grading practices, and the policies that have a bearing thereupon, are the collective responsibility of the faculty in each academic unit, and of the University faculty as a whole. We must assure that our students are graded in a currency with a steady value.

Remarks on the Grades and Standards Resolution at the Faculty Senate Meeting of November 7, 2002

Grades are not everything. I myself did not make all As in college. I thought that those who did were showing a lack of discrimination. I had good reasons and excuses for just doing B work in Mathematical Physics, and Russian, and German Philosophy, but I recognized the higher attainments of those who got As, and I knew that my Bs were accurate marks. I'm happy for a B to be considered a good grade. I'm content that C students often attain riches and fame. D students may become university benefactors and Trustees, and that's OK too. Grades are not everything, but they have a certain job which they ought to do.

The Resolution, first drafted in mid-summer, has evolved through discussions with 20 or so other faculty, including members of the two Faculty Senate Committees which I asked for input, ASH and Improvement of Instruction. In at least 4 colleges, some units have begun talking about grades, perhaps as a response to the Resolution. I surmise that there is something of a faculty consensus that standards at LSU, as reflected in the overall use of the grading scale, are not quite what they should be. The percentage of As is increasing each year. It's not just the overall distribution of grades that is troubling. There are large variations by academic unit. There are too-frequent cases of individual courses in which grade distributions shift by leaps and bounds in a short time.

The challenge is campus-wide and requires campus-wide recognition and leadership - in this case from the Faculty Senate. But also, the challenge has local, discipline-specific particulars, and needs to be faced, understood, and resolved locally. Accordingly, this Resolution mandates study, deliberation, and reform-as-required in each of the departments and schools. Also, it calls upon ASH to monitor and report as time goes by. The approach is the one that is already under way at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, as mandated last year by their Faculty Council.

I invite you to consider some questions. Are there pressures, albeit unspoken and unintended, to grade more and more generously? Do we give the impression to newer and less secure faculty that we do not care about grading standards? Do we forget to consider grading standards in our

decisions about good teaching and programs? Shouldn't we see grading standards as a good-teaching issue? I don't ask you to endorse any answers that I might offer. Instead, let's launch a process in which there is regular systematic questioning along those lines.

We cannot safely allow the university policy on grades to erode away, nor the faculty function of evaluation and credentialing to atrophy. Continuing as they are, matters will reach a point at which the University will be deeply embarrassed, in front of all those we serve, and recovery will then be difficult and painful.

Grading standards are necessarily a commingling of the relative and the absolute, the competitive and the fixed. It is reasonable and proper that grading practices should be conceived and designed in ways that vary by course, by discipline, and by pedagogical approach. There may be those who have sincere reservations, who believe that the Resolution expresses a misguided, unnecessary, or distracting worry. To them I say, if it passes, join the discussions in the departments, use persuasion, and contribute to a thoughtful consensus. But don't expect this trend to run on, unexamined.

Because the assignment of grades is a prerogative of individual teachers, a call for higher standards must be mediated through the several and diverse judgments of individual LSU faculty. But it is also true that grading practices, and the policies that have a bearing thereupon, are the collective responsibility of the faculty in each academic unit, and of the University faculty as a whole. If we get a grip on this responsibility, it will bring credit upon LSU, and benefit all those we serve. I leave the matter in your hands.

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Question: *What has happened at UNC since their Faculty Council passed the Resolution last fall?*

Response: The Provost has so far passed on reports from about 60 academic units to the Educational Policy Committee, which as of mid-October has just begun to study them. The Committee will report to the Faculty Council sometime this academic year. I'm in touch with the Committee Chair and a few other faculty in Chapel Hill, and will be glad to share what I hear from them. As of this date it's clearly too soon to say just how the process will work out.

2. Question: *Grades of W--which indicate student-initiated drops from courses--are 11% of undergraduate grades at LSU. This high incidence of Ws complicates the grade-distribution picture, and the evaluation of teaching in particular. Why doesn't the Resolution address it?*

Response: I think it's probably better to address W policy separately. Grades and standards are faculty business, as purely so as anything can be. The faculty can make it a priority to improve academic standards. The complications entailed in doing so, pretty much, all reside within our classrooms.

On the other hand, a departure from LSU's lax drop policy would require a high degree of administrative attention, decisiveness, and resolve. It might well be a good thing if faculty took a stand and urged a change. But we must realize that the high incidence of Ws is reflected substantially in the habits and assumptions not only of students, but also those of teachers,

counselors, and administrators who manage resources. That makes it a different kind of problem.

3. Question: *Someone said, "grade inflation will continue until we outlaw student evaluation of teaching." Do you agree?*

Response: No. This is a free country; students will talk about their teachers, and what they say will get published; we just need to deal with it. Let the students' views be gathered and disseminated as accurately and as efficiently as possible. Manage it so that the result is as fair and valid and useful as you can make it. But then, don't worry about it. We all have to take our lumps.

If student evaluations are a cause of grade inflation, then it's because they get used improperly in the evaluation of teaching by the University--and/or because faculty, particularly young teachers and those in insecure positions, have the impression, correct or not, that student evaluations are used largely to the exclusion of other measures of their teaching.

4. Question: *What do you think about the online publication of teachers' grade distributions, by semester and course?*

Response: The publication and general knowledge among faculty of the grading practices all around us is probably a necessary condition for combating grade inflation. The Resolution takes that position, and the Faculty Council at Chapel Hill agreed.

As for general publication, it seems that secrecy in this area doesn't have much of a future. We've arrived at a point where it's impossible to keep tables of our grading histories from being published, at least on paper, perhaps even online. Students are always going to trade information about hard and easy graders, there's no stopping it, so why not make accurate and complete information easily available?

Let me give you an example of how things are going. The University of Georgia's server carries a table of faculty grading histories. You can look at it through this link. If that doesn't shock you, then have a look at a student website, which allows a U.Ga. student to search for a section of a desired course in which the teacher's grading history implies that the expected GPA is at least, say, 3.5. We may be right to resist making possible a computerized search for easy graders, but I don't think these developments necessarily imply the collapse of academic standards.

5. Question: *Wouldn't a change to a plus/minus grading scale do a lot to reverse grade inflation?*

Response: The term refers to the use of the grades A- = 3.7, B+ = 3.3, B- = 2.7, C+ = 2.3, C- = 1.7, and perhaps D+ and D- in addition to A, B, C, D, and F. There are many variants on such proposals, including purely numerical scales. I've heard faculty say they think it would help against grade inflation, but I've seen no report on the experience of other institutions to support that idea. Some have changed grading scales to or from plus/minus grading, for various reasons, without appreciable effect on GPAs.

The Faculty Senate defeated such a proposal (Resolution 87-08) in March of 1988. I have a

file of statements, articles, and studies from that period. A quote from that time: "The arguments that seem worth attending to are subtle and delicate. It is a question of how finely calibrated the grading scale should be, to be optimal both as a reporting system and as an incentive system." Technically and administratively, a change would be time-consuming. In any event, the issue should be dealt with separately.

6. Question: *Do you agree with the Rosovsky-Hartley report that the blame lies largely with events in the sixties?*

Response: No. The sixties have little bearing on what has happened at LSU in the last 15 years. It seems to me that certain policies and pronouncements have created unintended pressures to lower standards. Our leaders were not often heard reminding us to keep standards up, or stating their presumption that we were doing so. That dog didn't bark.

That remark seems a fair comment, but, finally, it doesn't work as an excuse for us. We the faculty had best accept the blame, and the responsibility now to do something.