

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

Faculty Senate

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Date: May 5, 2011

TO: UW Board of Trustees, Academics and Research Subcommittee

FROM: Warrie Means incoming Faculty Senate Chair 2011-2012, Jay Puckett, Former Faculty Senate Chair 2009-2010, and Cindy Price, outgoing Faculty Senate Chair 2010-2011

RE: Summary -- Proposed plus-minus grading system (Senate Bill 320)

Dear Trustees:

In the academic year 2008, the Faculty Senate embarked on a study to change our existing grading system to one that provides additional opportunities for refinement and better resolution. Over the course of the next three years, studies and conversations have been conducted with trustees, faculty, students, staff, and administration.

Below we highlight the primary elements for supporting the change, define and compare the present and proposed systems, indicate which grading system our comparator institutions use, address issues raised by the UW Board of Trustees, Academics and Research Subcommittee, and provide the chronology of events pertinent to Senate Bill 320.

What is a plus-minus grading System?

Table 1. Current and Proposed Systems

Current GPA System		Proposed GPA System	
A	4.0	A	4.000
		A-	3.666
B	3.0	B+	3.333
		B	3.000
		B-	2.666
C	2.0	C+	2.333
		C	2.000
		C-	1.666
D	1.0	D+	1.333
		D	1.000
F	0.0	F	0.000

Table 2. Comparative Institutions

Mountain West	+/-?	Regional/Comparator	+/-?
Texas Christian	Yes	University of Montana	Yes
University of Utah	Yes	University of South Dakota	No
University of Nevada, Las Vegas	Yes	University of Colorado—Boulder*	Yes
Colorado State*	Yes	University of Nebraska—Lincoln	Yes
Brigham Young	Yes	University of Phoenix	No
University of New Mexico*	Yes	Indiana University/Purdue Indianapolis	Yes
San Diego State University	No	Iowa State*	Yes
Air Force Academy	Yes	North Carolina State*	Yes
Boise State University	Yes	North Dakota State*	No
Fresno State University	No	University of North Dakota*	No
University of Nevada—Reno	Yes	University of Oregon*	No
University of Hawaii	Yes	University of Washington*	Yes

“*” refers to nine comparator institutions for the National Survey of Student Engagement. These schools are chosen because they carry the most relevant similarities with UW in student population, size, degree programs, etc.

Primary Elements

General

- No system of assessment is perfect; however, assessment is part of our academic culture. This bill is not about the philosophy of grading or whether grades are necessary.
- Three quarters of the faculty senate supported the bill (Senators polled their constituents).
- Supported by faculty within the arts, sciences, and professional programs.

Assessment and Evaluation

- A tool to help professors/instructors to better appraise student achievement.
- An optional system because the current grading system is a subset of the proposed (also S/U is available).
- Provides a better resolution for evaluation.
- Does not address assessment methods, philosophical or pedagogical issues traditionally associated with academic freedom or course management; this remains within purview of the professor/instructor.
- In aggregate, studies show that a move to the plus/minus system does not lead to grade inflation or deflation.
- Faculty will continue to develop and use refined rubrics with appropriate resolution for their disciplines.

Students

- Keeps students engaged throughout the entire term.
- Students will not “just miss” their grade
- No matter the assessment or grading methods, it is communication that is integral to the development of a common understanding and positive learning environments, providing strong motivation.

Administrative

- Costs are minimal as Banner has +/- features (used by UW College of Law).
- Timeline is flexible

Summary

- UW Faculty members, Academic Professionals, and Instructors are charged with development of curricula, course development, course content, and assessment. They wish to have a different tool that provides more resolution.

Issues raised by UW Board of Trustees, Academics and Research Subcommittee meeting (May 2010 and May 2011):

At our last discussion of the +/- system with the UW Board of Trustees, Academics and Research Subcommittee, the Trustees raised several important issues. These issues are outlined/addressed below.

Surveys were sent to 25 registrars/admissions offices: WWAMI—Wyoming and Washington offices; University of Washington; Washington State University; University of Nebraska--Lincoln; Simmons College; University of Idaho; University of Michigan; University of Pennsylvania [Penn State]; University of Texas—Austin; University of California—Irvine; University of California—San Diego; University of Colorado; Colorado State University; University of Wisconsin—Madison; University of Montana; University of Utah; Utah State University; Florida State University; Denver University; University of Arizona; Arizona State University; Vanderbilt University; University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill; Teacher's College--Columbia University.

Question #1: Does your program receive applications from students who come from institutions that use straight grading as well as plus-minus grading? If so, approximately how many/what percentages come from each?

All said yes. None knew how many from each.

Question #2: If so, is there a difference in how students from those institutions are handled in terms of entrance/application? If so, what are those differences? If not, how do you handle the grade discrepancy?

All said no difference—take grades as they come in OR just use overall GPA.

Question #3: Do you think there is a difference in admission rates between students from straight-graded institutions and those from plus-minus graded institutions? If so, what might account for this?

All said no; one mentioned unless case is border line when course by course grades are examined. Medical school admissions: different conversion tables for different grade systems, never adds up to GPA regardless (several other factors are important)

Question #4: Do you think there would be a perceived difference in admissions (i.e. a "red flag", etc) if a student's transcript showed an institutional change from straight grading to plus-minus? If so, what might that/those difference(s) be?

All said no. One said would impact conversion, but just informational, neither beneficial nor harmful.

Question #5: Other University Regulations and policies reference performance levels; how will this be addressed?

Regulations and policies that reference a grade point average can remain the same and/or be revisited by the unit involved. Those regulations and policies that reference a letter grade will be addressed by the cognizant unit prior to implementation. Example include: prerequisites, admissible grades into professional program (likely already addressed with non WY applicants), standards for progress, etc. This can be systematically addressed and published.

Additional Comments:

When one institution switched over, students rose to the new system in spite of their resistance—no noticeable change in overall GPA's

"I have always been in favor of the +/- system."—Dr. Matthew McEchron, Assistant Dean (First-year regional campuses), WWAMI

"any [+/-]change will have absolutely no effect. I think that you should do whatever is best for the university." ... "there is no effect on the admissions process, they readily translate among various grading systems." – Dr. Richard Hillman, Assistant Dean (Assistant Dean for Clinical Programs).

ASUW Discussion (2010-2011)

ASUW looking to compromise:

- In agreement that straight grading "is not an accurate representation of student's academic performance and progress"
- Met with subcommittee who presented a grade/plus option in order to provide "an extra level of evaluation to be placed on top of current straight system of grading" (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D, F)

Sent back to SIC for more research; discussion left off at that point.

Registration and Records

The associated costs are minimal as the plus-minus system is widely used in Banner. Note that the UW College of Law has used the plus-minus system for years. All modifications can be accommodated by UW personnel within their duties.

Faculty Senate Recommendation from Vote

The Faculty Senate recommends changing the grading system as outlined in Senate Bill 320 and the associated University Regulations (6-722, 6-404, 6-710, 6-716, and 6-719). The Senate vote was conducted April 25, 2011; 75 percent voted affirmative. The modified regulations are provided in the UW Board of Trustees' Agenda.

Chronological Events:

AY 2008-09	Initial study was done by Dr. Ed Janak and reported to the Faculty Senate (FS) Executive Committee.
November 2, 2009	FS Executive Committee discussed how to proceed with the consideration of a new grading system. It was decided to discuss in the Nov. 2009 FS meeting and gain a “straw vote” regarding support for further study, development of University Regulation language modifications, and outline details.
November 16, 2009	The FS voted in favor of moving forward for further study: 32 in favor, 8 opposed, 4 abstentions. University Regulation changes were to be documented.
November 23, 2009	The FS Student Interaction Committee (SIC) was charged to study and make recommendations.
March 1, 2010	The FS SIC reported back to the FS Executive Committee.
March 29, 2010	The FS discussed (first reading) Senate Bill (SB) 320. Senators took the bill to their respective faculty for discussion.
April 13, 2010	ASUW voted 2-23 to not support a resolution for changing to the plus-minus grading system.
April 26, 2010	The FS voted to adopt SB 320 as amended (26-18-2).
April 30, 2010	Dr. Puckett (FS Chair AY 09-10), Dr. Barrans SIC Chair, Dr. Janak College of Ed, member SIC, Registrar Tammy Aagard, Matt Haigler (ASUW President AY 09-10), ASUW President Cameron Nazminia (AY 10-11) meet to discuss the work associated with SB 320, implementation issues and philosophical concerns. The appendices from this document were provided.
May 4, 2010	Presentation to Dean and Directors – discussion ranged from changing the grading tool, philosophy of education, implementation details, grading metrics, and a host of very broad-based topics.
May 6, 2010	Presentation to UW Board of Trustees Academics and Research Committee.
May 7, 2010	Tentatively presented in FS Chair’s Report (very short version)
September, 2011	FS Executive Committee charge to FS SIC. SIC was tasked with gathering further information about student and faculty perception and impact on entrance into graduate schools and professional programs before considering taking the bill before the trustees.
F2010-S2011	FS SIC discussions with ASUW subcommittee. ASUW looking to compromise on the issue--In agreement that straight grading “is not an accurate representation of student’s academic performance and progress”. Met with subcommittee who presented a grade/plus option in order to provide “an extra level of evaluation to be placed on top of current straight system of grading” (A+, A, B+, B, C+, C, D, F). Sent back to SIC for more research, discussion; left off at that point.
F2010-S2011	FS SIC surveyed professional Programs/Graduate Schools. Sent to 25 registrars/admissions offices.
F2010-S2011	FS SIC discussions with Deans/Directors. SIC members met with their respective deans and sampling of directors to survey their opinions. Opinions were mixed.
F2010-S2011	FS SIC surveyed comparator institutions, data presented in Table 2. Including UW, 4/10 used straight grading.
March 7, 2011	FS SIC reported their findings to the FS Executive Committee.
March 28, 2011	FS SIC reported their findings to the Faculty Senate.
April 25, 2011	After considerable discussion, Faculty Senate voted by the required three-fourths majority to repass Senate Bill 320.
April 29, 2011	W. Means and J. Puckett meet with ASUW leadership; Megan Degenfelder (ASUW 2011-2012 President) and Robert West (Chair, ASUW Academics, Technology, and Sustainability Committee). They are informed on FS activities related SB 320. They do not necessarily support the bill.
May 5, 2011	SB 320 presentation to UW Board of Trustees, Academics and Research Subcommittee.

Appendix – UW Medicine

Below are excerpts regarding grades for UW Medicine’s WAMI web site. (all test is take directly)

REF: <http://uwmedicine.washington.edu/Education/MD-Program/Admissions/Pages/FrequentlyAskedQuestions.aspx>

http://uwmedicine.washington.edu/Education/MD-Program/Admissions/Applicants/Documents/ApplyingtoMedicalSchool2010_0525.pdf

- **What is a weighted GPA?**

The undergraduate GPA is weighted to give credit to applicants whose records show improvement as they progress through their undergraduate studies. Only the first three years are included in this calculation as most applicants have just begun their senior year. The weighted GPA is calculated on a standard 4-point scale with 4.00 representing an “A” average.

- CUM. Freshman GPA x 1 = A
CUM. Sophomore GPA x 2 = B
CUM. Junior GPA x 3 = C

$$(A+B+C)/6 = \text{Weighted GPA}$$

- An initial automated screening is done of all applications. The WGPA is added to the mean MCAT score converted to a 4.0 scale so that the maximal “Combined score” =8. If this combined score is less than 5, the application is automatically screened out. If your application falls into this category, but you have subsequently taken additional coursework and have a stronger subsequent GPA, please contact our office.

- **Are an applicant’s credentials (science GPA, MCAT, prerequisites GPA) considered individually or in aggregate? Would a strength or deficiency in one measure (MCAT, for example) be considered in relation to another (prerequisites GPA)?**

All applications are considered holistically. When considering your competitiveness, please refer to the GPA/MCAT chart above.

- **Do other medical schools look at weighted GPA?**

All medical schools will have different application procedures and processes. The best thing to do is to refer to the Medical School Admission Requirements (MSAR) or directly contact the admissions office for the medical schools you are applying to.

I am a mechanical engineering student but have a GPA slightly less than 3.5. Do you take the difficulty of this course load into consideration?

Yes - We always consider difficulty of course load, no matter what the major.

- **In the WGPA, is the Freshman GPA for all 100 level classes you take or for the classes you took freshman year?**

The Freshman GPA is calculated based on the classes you took freshman year. The same thing applies for all other years.

- **Is the weighted GPA measured differently for students who spent their first two years at a community college?**

No.

GPA/MCAT (admission statistics, UW Medicine's web site)

The table below illustrates the combination of undergraduate GPA and MCAT scores of UW Medical School applicants that were accepted (green) and not accepted (red) in the last academic year. Most applicants who were accepted with lower than average college GPAs had taken additional post graduate course work and performed well. [Dotted lines were added for BOT discussion]

Acc = all those accepted. Tot = total applied.

MCAT	2-3		4-5		6-7		8-9		10-11		12-13		14-15	
UNDERGRADUATE GPA RANGE	acc	tot	acc	tot	acc	tot	acc	tot	acc	tot	acc	tot	acc	tot
>3.75	0	0	0	0	1	6	19	71	60	172	22	76	1	3
3.5-3.74	0	0	0	2	1	18	17	113	58	203	7	38	1	1
3.25-3.49	0	0	0	5	1	11	6	73	22	90	2	19	0	1
3.00-3.24	0	1	0	3	0	11	3	29	3	33	1	4	0	1
2.75-2.99	0	1	0	2	0	3	1	13	1	9	0	3	0	0
2.50-2.74	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	2	0	3	0	0	0	1
0.10-2.48	0	1	0	0	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTALS	0	3	0	12	3	54	46	302	144	510	32	140	2	7