

To: University Faculty Council
From: Educational Policies Committee
Date: February 22, 1996
Subject: Grading Policies and Grade Indexing

The Educational Policies Committee of the University Faculty Council has discussed the two resolutions presented by the Board of Trustees regarding grading policies and grade indexing. We appreciate the Trustee's interest in these and other issues that are central to the academic climate of the University.

The broad and fundamental issues raised by the Resolutions are both timely and important. While some University groups are already working effectively in these areas, it is appropriate that the issues be addressed by all campuses, schools and departments. However, the broadness of these issues and their potential solutions are not well matched to the relative narrowness in scope of the directives to faculty contained within the Resolutions. As a result, the EPC cannot endorse the specific Resolutions as written, while we applaud the efforts of the Trustees to stimulate discussions among all members of the University.

A. Grading Policies

While grade transcripts and final grade reports reveal a single system of grading symbols (B+, B, B-, etc.) that are common to all courses, there exist a multitude of different grading policies by which these symbols are correlated with student academic performance. Different grading policies naturally exist throughout the University -- in different departments and disciplines, in different levels of courses (undergraduate vs. graduate; lower level vs. upper level), and in courses taught by different instructors.

Faculty have the responsibility and the prerogative to judge student academic performance by criteria they deem appropriate. Given this fundamental right of faculty and the inevitable variability among course, program and discipline grading practices, the EPC believes that it is unlikely that the faculty members within a given department will be able to "establish a policy for the awarding of letter grades" that both has the specificity implied within the Trustees' Resolution and is also viewed as satisfactory to all members of the department.

While the EPC acknowledges that faculty have the right to adopt their own grading criteria and policies, we also acknowledge that faculty have several responsibilities. First, faculty must ensure that their grading policies are not capricious but are consonant with the goals and objectives of the course and the discipline. Second, faculty should engage in regular discussions within their department concerning grading practices and standards, as well as other equally important issues such as curriculum, methods of course design and assessment of student learning, and how faculty evaluate and learn from these assessments. Such discussions are essential for providing continuity and consistency (where desired) in the course offerings and academic policies of the department, and are extremely beneficial for informing new faculty of the academic expectations, standards and practices within the department. Mechanisms exist and are used to control irresponsible grading practices.

The EPC therefore endorses the Trustees' statement that departments should engage in discussions regarding grading policies, but we would suggest that these discussions be broadened in scope beyond the Trustees' Resolution, and that they do not abridge the faculty's fundamental freedom in how they assess student academic performance.

B. Grade Indexing

An inevitable consequence of different grading policies is that the meaning of grades is often not clear. Students may not necessarily understand whether the "B" they received in a course is a good grade or a poor grade. Students often make decisions about their aptitude for a subject, and the courses they wish to take or avoid, on the basis of erroneous assumptions concerning their grades.

In response to this situation, and in a desire to provide a context in which the meaning of grades may be better understood by students, the Bloomington Faculty Council has instituted a policy of grade indexing for:

- (1) Final grade reports mailed to students and
- (2) Internal grade transcripts requested by students.

(The BFC.EPC notes that grade indexing is not intended, in any way, to reveal or curb perceived grade inflation. Whether or not grade inflation exists is not relevant to the issue of grade indexing. Rather, the existence of variable grading policies, which occur naturally in any university setting, would suggest the usefulness of grade indexing in providing a context for understanding the meaning of the grades.)

The BFC.EPC has held numerous discussions with the Registrar during the 1995-96 academic year. Recently, decisions have been made concerning the additional information which would be provided. This includes:

- (1) The number of students who receive each of the possible grades in the course (A+, A, A-, B+, etc., as well as I, P, etc.)
- (2) The number of students who withdrew from the course during the semester (WX, WZ, W) or who otherwise did not receive a grade
- (3) The percentage of students in the course who are majors in the department
- (4) The average grade in the course of all students
- (5) The average GPA in all courses of all students in the course

In addition, an index is provided which contains 2 numbers: the total number of students in the course who received a higher grade than the student and the total number of students in the course who received a grade. From this index, and the related information listed above, the student can readily see how his or her academic performance in the course compares with that of their colleagues and can therefore more accurately interpret the meaning of their grade. For example, a grade of B+ awarded in a class in which there were no A's would indicate a far better academic performance of the student (and thus promise for upper level and other related courses) than a grade of B+ awarded in a class in which there were mainly A's.

Alternative forms of grade indexing are possible, and many have been discussed by the BFC.EPC and the Registrar. Each of these alternative models, including the specific model presented in the Trustees' Resolutions, has been problematic in that the sparseness of information provided does not fully reveal the richness of grading distributions and can therefore also be open to misinterpretation. While the BFC.EPC believes that grade indexing is an appropriate and useful tool, the decision as to the most suitable form of grade indexing is complex.

Grade indexing is not commonly used in the U.S., and the form of grade indexing which has been adopted by IUB would be unique. Consequently, it is prudent that the form of grade indexing selected by IUB be tested to ascertain its clarity and effectiveness.

While the BFC.EPC appreciates the Trustees' endorsement of the BFC's decision to implement internal grade indexing on the Bloomington campus, several other IU campuses continue to have reservations about grade indexing. The UFC.EPC therefore suggests that:

- (1) The ultimate decision regarding implementation and form of grade indexing be left to the individual campuses,
- (2) IUB be strongly supported in proceeding with grade indexing,
- (3) The other IU campuses be regularly informed about its progress and results, and
- (4) After an appropriate time, each of the other campuses consider whether they wish to adopt grade indexing.

The UFC.EPC also suggests that when a campus has decided to implement grade indexing, then the information which is to be provided on the transcripts and grade reports be left to the informed judgment of the appropriate committee of faculty, staff and students (e.g. the Educational Policies Committee in consultation with the Registrar). Once this decision is reached, then the Registrar's Office will develop the method by which this information is to be displayed.