

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Annual Report of the Educational Policy Committee to Faculty Council
April 22, 2005

Membership: Debashis Aikat (2007), Lucia Binotti (2005), Karen M. Booth (2006), Pamela A. Cooper (2007), Peter C. Gordon (2005; Chair), Clayton Koelb (2006), David C. Lanier (ex officio), Leah G. McGinnis (2007), Bobbi Owen (ex officio), Adam Versenyi (2006), Barbara M. Wildemuth (2005).

Meetings. In 2004-2005, the Educational Policy Committee met on the following dates: 9/9, 9/24, 10/8, 10/29, 11/12, 12/3, 2/11, 2/25, 3/11, 4/8.

Annual Report prepared by Peter C. Gordon (Chair), with review by the committee.

Committee charge: "The committee is concerned with those matters of educational policy and its implementation which have significant impact upon graduate and undergraduate instruction within the Division of Academic Affairs, and as to which the Faculty Council possesses legislative powers by delegation from the General Faculty under Article II of the Faculty Code. The committee's function is advisory to the Faculty Council in respect of such matters."

Activities, AY 2004-2005 (through April 8, 2005).

Class Attendance Policy/Excused Absence Policy

As discussed in its Annual Report last year, EPC has reviewed two sets of policy issues with respect to class attendance. We recommended action by Faculty Council on the issue of appeal of faculty decisions on absences. We further reviewed the second of these issues, absence from class because of regularly organized and authorized University activities, and decided not to recommend any action at this point.

Appeal of faculty decisions on absences.

Background. Current policy gives instructors the sole authority to determine whether an absence from class should be considered excused except in cases where "regularly organized and authorized University activities" cause student members to be out of town. On November 4, 2003, Student Congress passed a resolution (SCR-85-042), which requested that students be given a way of appealing an absence whose notice was not approved by the instructor of a course. While the resolution outlined a variety of legitimate reasons why a student might need to miss class, it was EPC's understanding that a primary impetus for the resolution was concern about absences due to important religious holidays. The resolution stated that students should notify an instructor in writing two weeks in advance (if possible) about the reason for a planned absence. It then asked that students be given an avenue of appeal in cases where instructors deemed the planned absence to be unexcused. After discussion of this request, EPC recommended two changes to the attendance policy as follows.

1. EPC proposed that the sentence "The University calendar does not recognize religious holidays." should be deleted from the statement of class attendance.

Rationale. This sentence was added to the statement of class attendance policy following a request from Provost Samuel R. Williamson, Jr. on March 24, 1986. It was part of a change that read in its entirety.

The University calendar does not recognize religious holidays. The faculty are encouraged to make reasonable accommodations for students requesting to miss class due to the observance of religious holidays.

While EPC believes that this change was well intentioned, we also believe that the first sentence can be legitimately seen as conflicting with the reality that the calendar does recognize two religious holidays, Christmas and Good Friday. While both of these days are state holidays in North Carolina, the University no longer cancels class on all state holidays (*viz.* Labor Day) and also cancels class for on occasions unrelated to state holidays (e.g., University Day, Fall Break, etc).

2. EPC believed that an appeal mechanism should be provided for cases where the planned absence could be anticipated well in advance (as is the case with important religious holidays). We concluded that it would be reasonable to provide an appeal process in such cases, but that the process would have to be streamlined so that a decision could be made in advance of the planned absence. Therefore, we proposed that Faculty Council amend class attendance policy so that under specified circumstances a student could appeal an instructor's decision not to consider a planned absence excused as long as the appeal is made in advance of the date in question. EPC believed that the appeal should be made to the head (chair or director) of the unit in which the course is being taught. (In cases where the instructor is the head of the unit, then the appeal would be made to the Dean to whom the unit head reports.)

Based on these considerations, EPC proposed the following changes to the class attendance policy. Faculty Council approved those changes on February 11, 2005.

Draft Policy

The following legislation by the Faculty Council gives each instructor the authority to prescribe attendance regulations for his or her classes: "Regular class attendance is a student obligation, and a student is responsible for all the work, including tests and written work, of all class meetings. No right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any given number of class meetings." If a student misses three consecutive class meetings, or misses more classes than the instructor deems advisable, the instructor may report the facts to the student's academic dean. However, only instructors excuse absences from class for valid reasons (illness, family emergency, etc.). A student should present his or her explanation for any absences to the instructor in advance if the reason for the absence can be foreseen or at the next meeting if the reason for the absence cannot be foreseen. The faculty are encouraged to make reasonable accommodations for students requesting to miss class due to the observance of religious holidays.

A student may appeal an instructor's denial of a request that an absence be excused if the request to be excused from class and the reasons for the request are presented to the instructor in writing at least two weeks ~~???~~ in advance of the date of the absence. The appeal is to be made to the head (chair or director) of the unit in which the course is being taught.

Students who are members of regularly organized and authorized University activities and who may be out of town taking part in some scheduled event are to be excused during the approved period of absence. Notification of such an absence must be sent by the responsible University official to the instructor before the date(s) of the scheduled absence.

The University calendar does not recognize religious holidays. ~~The faculty are encouraged to make reasonable accommodations for students requesting to miss class due to the observance of religious holidays.~~

Absence from Class because of Regularly Organized and Authorized University Activities

In its last annual report, EPC noted that there was some concern that the policy excusing students from class for participation in extra-curricular activities that require them to be out of town was creating increased problems because of trends in teaching approaches that increase the importance of attending class. This year EPC sent a letter to departmental Directors of Undergraduate Studies inquiring about the extent to which this was in fact a problem and also whether the problem had increased in recent years. While the responses indicated that this policy caused occasional problems, they did not convey a sense that problems were frequent or increasing. EPC also consulted with the chair of the Athletics Committee on this issue. The Athletics Department has in the past successfully reduced scheduling conflicts through careful attention to how class schedules and attendance policies relate to athletic activities. All involved agree that avoidance of severe scheduling conflicts is the best way of tackling the issue. Ultimately, it may be necessary to change current policy on excused absences for extracurricular activities as well as to formulate a policy for absences that occur because a class requires activities outside of its normal hours, but it does not appear that there is reason to change policy at this time.

Allowable Number of Majors and Minors

Revision of the General Education Curriculum raised the issue of the allowable number of specializations that an undergraduate should be allowed to pursue. Last year, EPC made a tentative recommendation that students be allowed a maximum of three specializations (majors, minors and certificates) with a limit of two majors. This means that undergraduates now would be able to declare, for example, two majors and one minor or one major and two minors; this relaxes current rules that allow students to declare only two majors or one major and one minor. After further consideration EPC recommends that this change be adopted as policy.

Tenth Semester Petitions

While students are expected to complete their graduation requirements in four years (including summer school), many require an additional semester for a total of nine. In order to stay for a tenth semester – a full five years – students are required to submit a petition to the appeals committee of the Administrative Board of the College of Arts and Sciences.

A number of petitions for tenth semesters are caused by students who decide late in their careers to obtain a second major. Current policy states that tenth semesters are not approved in order to acquire a second major, but students get around this restriction by leaving some basic requirements unfulfilled, so that they cannot graduate at all in nine semesters, and then finish the two majors during the tenth.

Currently the number of students doing this is small, but the new general education curriculum will allow an additional major or minor (students will be required only one major, but allowed one major and one minor, two majors and one minor, or one major and two minors). Therefore it seems likely that the number of undergraduates deciding on multiple majors late in their careers will increase.

The Educational Policy Committee proposes to block petitions for a tenth semester that arise solely from the goal of obtaining a minor or a second major by disallowing second majors and any minors for students who need a tenth semester in order to graduate. In other words, students who require a tenth semester to complete graduation requirements, beginning with the Fall 2006 semester, will only be allowed one major (and no minors). When they submit the petition for permission to register for a tenth semester, students must have changed their declaration to one major.

Eligibility and Retention

EPC was asked to begin a discussion of rules for student eligibility and of the related issue of student retention. This discussion was prompted by a sense that current eligibility standards are too low (they are lower than those specified by the NCAA for students to be eligible to participate in inter-collegiate sports) and also by research done by a committee chaired by vice-provost Jerry Lucido that examined factors that influence student retention and graduation rates. To some extent the goals of raising eligibility standards and increasing retention are at cross purposes because stricter eligibility standards may force some students to withdraw from college. Members of the retention committee (Carolyn Cannon, Jerry Lucido and Lynn Williford) presented information to EPC drawn from their experience advising students and from statistical analyses of student records. Members of both EPC and the retention committee believe that the appropriate goal is to couple higher eligibility standards with new administrative procedures (e.g., an official probationary status and/or a later drop date) so that students use their time at Carolina fruitfully and move successfully to earning a degree. Substantial groundwork has been done toward this goal (primarily by the retention committee) and we believe that EPC should address this issue next year with the expectation of that it will propose revised eligibility standards.

Grading

EPC is charged with reporting on grading each year. Last year's report presented an update to the extensive EPC report of February 2000 (the Turchi report), which had shown that there is a consistent upward progression in average grades, a pattern that was shown to have continued. Among other things, last year's report recommended consideration of alternatives to traditional grade-point average (GPA) that take into account discrepant grading practices across courses.

Discrepancies in Grading Practices.

Average grades vary widely across departments as well as across instructors and courses within departments. Some of this variation is systematic: (1) Average grades are lowest in the natural sciences, highest in the humanities, with the social sciences in between. Evidence for this pattern at Carolina is presented in the Turchi Report. Analyses of grading at other institutions give similar results^{1[1]}. (2) Average grades are higher in upper-level classes with a small number of students than they are in lower-level classes with a large number of students. Evidence of this pattern is seen in ongoing analyses of grading at Carolina and also from those at other institutions^{2[2]}.

Uses for Grades.

^{1[1]} Johnson, V.E. **Grade inflation: A crisis in college education.** New York, NY: Springer.

^{2[2]} University of Washington, Office of Educational Assessment: <http://www.washington.edu/oea/uwrepts.htm>

We believe that it valuable to consider three different types of uses for grades. Our analysis draws on past studies of grading at UNC, on published research on grading, as well as our discussions as a committee. The types of uses are:

1. **Comparing performance.** One common use of grades is to compare performance by different students and by the same student in different courses. This use has been endorsed by Faculty Council: “High grades should be used for the one purpose of signaling outstanding academic achievement (Faculty Council, 1976).” Further examples of the comparative use of grades can be seen in the use of GPA in awarding distinction upon graduation, in the use of GPA in admissions, in use of GPA as a screening device by business recruiters visiting campus, and in the routine request by prospective employers that GPA be accompanied by a class rank based on GPA. The comparative use of grading is also important to students trying to understand the significance of their own level of performance.
2. **Mastery.** A second use of grades is to indicate mastery of content at defined levels.
3. **Motivation.** A final use of grades is a motivational tool for specific student behavior (e.g., class attendance or class participation) or to reward students for improvement so that they continue to apply themselves to their studies.

EPC believes that grades are employed to varying degrees for all three of the uses described above; it also believes that different uses of grades may be appropriate in different courses. As a committee, EPC has not attempted to evaluate which of the above uses is most appropriate or under what circumstances different approaches to grading should be taken. This categorization is useful because it provides a framework for assessing the consequences of discrepancies in grading. We address the importance of grading discrepancies on each of the above described uses starting with the least consequential case.

Discrepancies in grading practices across courses do not seem particularly consequential for the use of grades as a motivational tool. When grades are used for this purpose, their meaning seems inherently bound to the communicative context between the instructor and the student. While instructors may be more or less deft in using grades as a motivational tool, grading differences across courses are unlikely to undermine the motivational use of grades as long as the instructor assigning the grade makes the meaning clear to the student receiving the grade.

How discrepancies in grading practices affect the use of grades to convey levels of mastery is less clear. When this use is dominant, discrepancies simply indicate that across courses different proportions of students achieved different predefined levels of mastery. Grading discrepancies potentially create problems concerning how information about the setting of predefined levels of mastery is communicated. Some curricula have very well defined goals associated with particular courses that may allow a standard set of expectations about the goals associated with courses. This situation seems most likely to exist in professional programs and in introductory courses in curricula that have a cumulative progression of courses where mastery of material in one course is essential for understanding material in the next. For more varied, non-progressive curricula the predefined levels of mastery are difficult to assess for those outside of the course. In

that case, grading discrepancies across courses are problematic because they may reflect differences in the ambitiousness of goals across courses rather than differences in levels of student achievement.

Discrepancies in grading practices are manifestly problematic for the comparative use of grades. In the worst case, a student's GPA can be seen as conveying more information about what courses the student took than about how much he or she learned. Most faculty find little joy in the comparative use of grading but it is without doubt viewed as an important part of grading by students and by those outside the University who use grades for evaluative purposes. Furthermore, the University facilitates and encourages this use by providing information on class rank and by awarding distinction based on GPA.

The notion that GPA should be adjusted based on the courses that a student has taken is common in high schools where regular courses are graded on a four point scale, honors courses are graded on a five point scale, and advanced placement courses are graded on a six point scale. While this scaling procedure reflects a serious effort to grapple with problems created by averaging non-comparable grades, EPC believes that it is not appropriate at the college level because it requires a prior valuation of the merit of courses. Such a valuation may be possible for highly standardized curricula, such as those in many high schools, but would not apply easily to the diverse plans of study and unique course offerings that are the distinctive intellectual reasons for seeking a university education.

An alternative for dealing with grading discrepancies that does not require a prior valuation of courses is to compute an adjusted GPA that takes into account all the grades assigned in a course. The idea is to find an aggregate statistic that treats a high grade as more significant in a class in which few high grades are given than in a class where many high grades are given. This idea is appealing because it preserves the policy of leaving grading practices up to the instructor in a course, but then takes those practices into account before aggregating grades from different courses taught by different instructors. The most straightforward way of doing this is to convert each individual grade into a deviation from the average in the class in which the grade was assigned before computing a student's GPA. This approach incorporates a linear model that is common to a large number of applied statistical procedures. While this model has merit, it also has deficiencies. It assumes that differences between grades have a constant meaning both within and between classes. Thus, the difference between A- (3.7) and B (3.0) is assumed to be the same as the difference between B (3.0) and C+ (2.3) for a given instructor and across instructors. This assumption is probably false and is better replaced by the ordinal assumption that for any instructor A- is higher than B and B is higher than C, etc. A more serious deficiency is that a student's adjusted GPA can be reduced by taking a course in which high grades are given even if the student earned an A in the class. Thus, this grade adjustment mechanism creates an incentive for high-achieving students to avoid taking classes in which high grades are given because doing so can lower adjusted GPA regardless of how well the student does in the class. EPC believes that selection of courses should be governed by how the content of courses relates to students' goals and interests. Grade-based incentives for course selection – whether the current incentive to avoid classes with relatively low grades or a newly created incentive to avoid courses with relatively high grades – should be minimized.

An alternative to the linear adjustment method for GPAs, that preserves its positive features but avoids its negative features, has been developed and evaluated by a statistician, Valen Johnson, while he was on the faculty at Duke University. The method aggregates grade information into an adjusted GPA while treating grades as providing ordinal (relative) information and while taking into account the grade distribution in the course in which the grade was assigned as well as how the students in that class did in their other classes. Unlike the linear model discussed above, this method does not penalize a student who gets an A in a class where a great many As are assigned (though the student also derives little benefit from such a grade).

EPC has undertaken preliminary research on the use of Johnson's method for computing adjusted GPAs, particularly as it applies to awarding distinction and highest distinction at Carolina. That research has provided provocative evidence that adjusted GPA provides a more valid aggregation of information about the relative performance of students than does traditional GPA. Based on these findings, EPC has the following recommendations:

1. Comprehensive analyses of the use of different methods for computing adjusted GPAs should be completed and disseminated to the University community. To the extent practicable, students should be allowed to access information about how their own performance is assessed by adjusted GPA as well as by traditional GPA.
2. Consideration should be given to determining criteria for the awarding of distinction and highest distinction within each of the larger units that award Bachelor's degrees (e.g., the College of Arts and Sciences, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, School of Nursing, etc). Patterns of grading between those units are sufficiently different that the use of a common set of GPA cutoffs for the awarding of distinction may not be appropriate.