

Grade Expectations

(Draft, April 8, 2009 for first reading in the Faculty Senate April 10)

The Academic Planning Committee of the DU Faculty Senate has studied the issue of grades and what is sometimes deceptively called grade inflation for the last year. There is no denying college and university undergraduate grade point averages (GPAs) have risen steadily over the last four decades (and, for that matter, over the last century). GPAs have increased more at private colleges and universities than they have at public institutions. Different departments have seen greater increases (the humanities) and smaller increases (the sciences). Janette Benson spoke to our committee in the spring of 2008 on this subject:

The reasons for grade inflation are social and generational, as well as structural. This last has to do with the increasing numbers of adjunct faculty in universities, and government intrusions, in a sense—students with Hope Scholarships have to maintain a B- average, for example. The correlation between student evaluations of faculty and grade inflation is difficult to pin down. Empirically, there is no relationship between faculty who give a wider spread of grades and lower evaluations from students. Going back to the Vietnam War, male students were often given better grades in order for them to maintain their student deferments.

In *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (November 8, 2002), Alfie Kohn offers an alternate view of the very word “inflation” and the general topic (in “The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation”):

The debate over grade inflation brings up knotty epistemological problems. To say that grades are not merely rising but inflated—and that they are consequently “less accurate” now, as the American Academy’s report puts it—is to postulate the existence of an objectively correct evaluation of what a student (or an essay) deserves, the true grade that ought to be uncovered and honestly reported. It would be an understatement to say that this reflects a simplistic and outdated view of knowledge and of learning.

Whatever the problem is, we propose several methods for dealing with it:

- To educate the faculty about their own overall class GPAs, and show them their own general education class group GPAs (FYS, CORE, etc.), departmental GPAs, and division GPAs as reference points (Dennis Becker has said this is relatively easy to do, privately, when a professor hands in his or her grades each quarter).

- To educate the faculty about university grading policies (some faculty, for example, do not use the +/- system, preferring to give only whole letter grades for papers, exams, and final grades).
- To educate the faculty about better methods for describing grading rules in course syllabi.

We oppose any efforts to mandate grades (a certain number of A's, B's, C's, etc.). We also oppose any efforts by the administration to impose a system on faculty. We think the linking of faculty GPAs in any way to tenure and promotion rubrics could be damaging to faculty morale and academic freedom.

The committee is proposing an awareness program for faculty, allowing each instructor to see how she or he fits into the overall pattern of DU's grades. We hope that this information allows individual instructors to weigh the purpose of a course with the grades given. For those who have gone through the writing workshops as part of an intensive writing CORE class or a First Year Seminar proposal, the perspective in those workshops has been to promote the process of writing and revision. As a result, students in those classes with extensive writing do tend to have somewhat higher grades, if they take faculty comments seriously and rework their writing. The senate (or CTL) might survey instructors to find out what kind of materials they base grades on. Is it mostly objective tests, essay exams, a mixture of the two, or something else completely?

DU's Undergraduate Bulletin 2007-2009 offers the following simple relationship between grade symbols and grade points (as well as an interpretation of grades):

A 4.0 excellent; A- 3.7; B+ 3.3; B 3.0 good; B- 2.7; C+ 2.3; C 2.0 satisfactory; C- 1.7; D+ 1.3; D 1.0; D- 0.7 minimum passing; F 0.0 failure

Notice that in the Undergraduate Bulletin there is no similar relationship between common numbers on the 100-point scale. Is a 94 an A or an A-, for example? B's are relatively easy (80-82=B-; 83-87=B; 88-89=B+), but because there is no A+ is an A 93-100?

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Appendix

Here are two examples of other colleges' GPA averages since 1978:

Carleton College

1978	3.05
1979	3.04
1980	3.09
1981	3.13
1982	3.12
1983	3.09
1984	3.10
1985	3.14
1986	3.14
1987	3.15
1988	3.19
1989	3.21
1990	3.22
1991	3.24
1992	3.23
1993	3.25
1994	3.25
1995	3.28
1996	3.28
1997	3.29
1998	3.28
1999	3.26
2000	3.33
2001	3.35
2002	3.37
2003	3.38
2004	3.42

Auburn University

1978	2.71
1979	2.68
1980	2.65
1981	2.62
1982	2.63
1983	2.59
1984	2.62
1985	2.67
1986	2.64
1987	2.70
1988	2.69
1989	2.70
1990	2.79
1991	2.81
1992	2.78
1993	2.77
1994	2.77
1995	2.82
1996	2.81
1997	2.86
1998	2.84
1999	2.86
2000	2.69
2001	2.74
2002	2.74
2003	2.82
2004	2.80