

Report to Faculty Senate: Recommended Change in Grade Scale

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In spring 2006, the Faculty Senate voted to recommend changing USI's grading scale to include the minus grade. This change would necessitate a recalibration of the current grade scale, changing the values for plus grades, and adding values for minus grades. No rationale accompanied the recommendation, though there had been lengthy discussions in the Faculty Senate's Student Affairs Committee and the full Faculty Senate on this issue. From discussions held in the full Senate were gleaned a series of reasons for the proposed change. Those reasons included:

1. The need for "balance" in the current grading scale, which permits the plus grade, but not a minus grade.
2. Concern about grade inflation with a grading system that permits only the plus grade.
3. Anecdotal evidence that students applying to graduate schools might be negatively affected by a perception of the graduate institution that USI's grading scale is inflated.

Faculty Senate acknowledged that there were many accompanying issues that could make implementation of this change problematic, but the general mood appeared to be that it had been discussed with such frequency that some effort for closure was needed. This report is an effort to provide information related to the concerns outlined above, and render a decision about a change in the grade scale.

Grading scales across Indiana colleges and universities

Table 1 highlights USI's grading scale in comparison to other Indiana institutions. USI's current grade scale is, without question, a remnant of its affiliation with Indiana State University.

Table 1: Grade Scales at Indiana Universities

Indiana State University	Indiana University	IUPUI	Purdue University	Ball State University	USI
A (4.0)	A+ (4.0)	A+ (4.0)	A (4.0)	A (4.0)	A (4.0)
B+ (3.5)	A (4.0)	A (4.0)	B (3.0)	A- (3.667)	B+ (3.5)
B (3.0)	A- (3.7)	A- (3.7)	C (2.0)	B+ (3.333)	B (3.0)
C+ (2.5)	B+ (3.3)	B+ (3.3)	D (1.0)	B (3.0)	C+ (2.5)
C (2.0)	B (3.0)	B (3.0)	F (no points)	B- (2.667)	C (2.0)
D+ (1.5)	B- (2.7)	B- (2.7)		C+ (2.333)	D+ (1.5)
D (1.0)	C+ (2.3)	C+ (2.3)		C (2.0)	D (1.0)
F (no points)	C (2.0)	C (2.0)		C- (1.667)	F (no points)
	D+ (1.3)	C- (1.7)		D+ (1.333)	
	D (1.0)	D+ (1.3)		D (1.0)	
	F (no points)	D (1.0)		D- (.667)	
		F (no points)		F (no points)	

Data provided by USI's Office for Institutional Research and Assessment. April 2006.

The variability in point allocation to grades across other institutions indicates that there is no consensus on the meaning of various grade points. Furthermore, some systems allow an A+ with no point

allocation. This is no surprise because Faculty Senate distributed a table of possible grade scale models during the 2005-2006 year (see Appendix A) showing the same variability. Senators did not select a single model but proposed close consideration of System 5 or 6, with the difference being the presence of the D- grade and an “E+” grade, which would be the same as an F+.

Balancing the current grade scale

The assertion that a system with pluses ought to have minuses is embraced by a majority of institutions responding to a 2004 survey. The American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) conducted the survey on grade scales and Table 2 reveals the patterns among responding institutions.

Table 2: Grading Systems across AACRAO respondents (2004)

Current Grading System	Total number of institutions	Percentage
Narrative with numeric grade	2	0.50 %
Narrative only	2	0.50 %
Numeric grades only	4	1.00 %
Both letter and numeric grades	10	2.50 %
Letter grades with just plusses	13	3.20 %
Letter grades only (no + or -)	158	38.80 %
Letter grades with + and -	218	53.60 %
Total	407	100.0 %

Source: AACRAO report, “Grades and Grading Practices,” 2004.

Keep in mind that with over 4,100 higher education institutions in the United States, this is a very limited survey. That said, most institutions responding to AACRAO’s survey have either a system of plusses and minuses, or no plusses or minuses.

Concern about grade inflation

Does balancing the grade scale lead to grade deflation? The answer is unclear. Concerns about grade inflation have been voiced for several years on many campuses, including those with a plus and minus grading system. Debate in the 1970s about grade inflation on Indiana University’s campus led to the development of a grade reporting system that informed the campus about the distribution of grades by each academic school and department. Included in the report are class GPAs and GPAs by major.

A quick look at GPA distribution at USI provides some context for thinking about the issue of grade inflation on our campus. Table 3 shows the distribution of current and cumulative GPAs for the entire University. These data are from fall 2005, though the consistency of grading over time is a striking feature of grade data. A similar snapshot of fall 2006 would likely show a similar distribution.

Table 3: Current and Cumulative Average GPAs at USI, by Class Rank (Fall 2005)

Class Rank	Fall 2005 GPA	Cumulative GPA
Overall	2.591	2.720
Freshman	2.247	2.340
Sophomore	2.529	2.764
Junior	2.851	2.996
Senior	3.106	3.178

Data provided by USI's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. April 2006.

The overall cumulative GPA is between a B and a C. There is a progression in the cumulative GPA as students move up the class ranks, which is expected. Although the freshman year GPA hovers in the C range, by the senior year, the average GPA is in the B range. Some may call this grade inflation, but these GPAs are lower than those on other campuses. On one of my previous campuses, the average GPA in one college was 3.66! Furthermore, other data indicate that USI seniors perceive a higher level of academic challenge than would be predicted by individual and institutional characteristics (National Survey of Student Engagement, Institutional Benchmark Report, November 2003). By their senior year, students perceive their education to have been rigorous.

Would the addition of minus grades to USI's grading system have an impact on average GPAs? An analysis by the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment suggests that it probably would. For fall 2005 the estimate is that implementation of minus grades would have lowered the overall average GPA by .1274. A separate analysis by Dr. Bill Wilding, Associate Professor of Mathematics, confirms the OIRA analysis with an estimated reduction in the range of .10 to .15.

Finally, in the current grading system, how often are plus grades assigned? On average, 18 percent of all grades each semester are designated with a plus. In fall 2005, of those plus grades, 53 percent were B+, 34 percent were C+, and 13 percent were D+. These averages do not change much as you review the data from semester to semester. Again, grade data are relatively stable.

Discussion with the Registrar and Financial Aid

During one of the discussions in Faculty Senate someone mentioned that the Registrar had commented that implementing the change for minus grades would constitute "no problem" for her office. In a meeting convened on January 31, 2007 with Sandy Farmer, John Deem, and Jim Patton, the proposed change was discussed. Sandy Farmer expressed concern about changing grade scale values and the maintenance of accurate academic records, particular during the transition period when students would be repeating courses they had taken under the old grading scheme. Jim Patton commented that if there was a deflationary impact of the change, students could lose eligibility for some scholarships. The conversation included concerns related to University Honors, scholarships, admissions to programs (though a comment on that will follow), athletic eligibility, student organization participation, and insurance qualifications. These are issues that can generate challenges related to the fairness of a significant change in the grade scale.

With regard to admissions to academic programs, during spring 2006 I asked deans to query their department chairs and program directors about how such a change might affect program admission standards. The responses ranged from “no effect” to “why are we doing this?”

Graduate school responses to USI’s current grading scale

In May 2006, Dr. Peggy Harrel, Director of Graduate Studies and Sponsored Research, sent an electronic mail query to a listserv of her peers informing them of the change we were considering and asking for their perceptions and experiences in looking at grading scales. I’ll include only two of the responses, on opposite sides of the issue, but it shows that there is little consistency in how various graduate institutions might perceive the academic record of a USI student applying to their graduate programs.

From Rutgers University:

“We’ve had this discussion at Rutgers for years. We currently have only pluses and students and others want the minuses. The faculty think that they can be more precise in their grading with a finer scale and the students think that they will get HIGHER [in original] grades with the minuses added (e.g. A- instead of B+), so the argument for grade inflation goes both ways. After a very long wrangle our Senate decided not to adopt minuses. I’m relieved---I find the arguments utterly unconvincing.

As to admissions to graduate school, I find it hard to believe it will matter except perhaps for law schools and such where the admissions process is number crazy and blind and the inflationary effect of the minuses might help.”

From the University of Hawaii:

“I can see why other universities would consider your unbalanced system to be inflated, since there is no minus grade to offset the plus grade and the plus grade is valued at 0.16 higher than other plus grade values in a +/- system (which is similar to what we use). Our Admissions Office would calculate a GPA based on the formula given by your campus, however, so there would be a totally objective value to determine general admissibility. In direct competition with other students, faculty in the departments may or not be aware of the mathematical ‘inflation’ created by your current system. Those that did catch it might make adjustments in comparing your graduates to those from other schools.”

Others commented on some of the problems they’ve had after the inclusion of minuses in their grading system. Two individuals zeroed in on the B- grade as “problematic” because, as Radford University’s Dean of Graduate and Extended Education commented, “...the B- is the killer in a plus/minus system. A B- can’t be transferred from another institution and it is not a 3.00 so it creates perception problems for both faculty who assign the grade, and students who get the grade. They do perceive that the B- is a B and do not consider the GPA consequences.” A USI faculty member commented that the C- was a

problem because even while getting a C, a student might not qualify for good academic standing because of the lower point value given to the C-.

Still others noted that they had gone through the implementation of a grade scale change with no problems evident.

Decision

The most significant difficulty I had in considering this recommendation was that there had not been an in-depth look by the Faculty Senate into an issue larger than implementation of a change in the grade system and recalibration of the grade scale: What is it we hope to fix?

Although the argument for balance is understandable it is not in itself sufficiently compelling to trigger this change. I do not believe the data support a crisis in grade inflation on USI's campus. Finally, the response of graduate directors about the impact of USI's current grading system varies by whether one assumes minuses are inflationary or deflationary on grading patterns. There's no reason to assume that an initial deflation would not eventually shift to inflation, given what other campuses with a plus/minus system have experienced.

For these reasons, I do not find sufficient reason to implement the recommended change in USI's grade scale at this time.