

Summary of Minutes from the 19 October Faculty Assembly “A Conversation on +/- Grading”

The meeting was brought to order at 3:35.

Andy Fort, Chair of the Faculty Senate welcomed those in attendance. After announcements and a brief introduction, he turned the floor over to Senator David Grant, chair of the Faculty Senate Academic Excellence Committee (AEC). More information on +/- can be found at <http://faculty.tcu.edu/grant/plus-minus/> . Below is a summary of the points discussed.

The assembly was adjourned at 4:48.

Where Does +/- Stand at TCU?

Some Actions thus Far

- On 29 September, 2005, the Faculty Senate passed a resolution (attached, page 5) recommending that TCU adopt +/- grading, with some suggested guidelines. Fall 2007 is the suggested adoption date.

Future Meetings Regarding +/-

- 01 November meeting with Student Government
 - meeting with Provost’s council at a date to be announced
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What Are Other Schools Doing?

Studies by the Faculty Senate Academic Excellence Committee (AEC)

- AEC examined top 120 national universities last year.
 - 83% use more a more discriminating grading system than 5 straight letters.
 - Most use +/-.
- AEC did a more detailed study of the 12 Universities used in the “comparative group” retention study (Provost criteria)
 - Small enrollment, primarily undergrad, private, top
 - 10 of 12 use +/-.
 - 2 of 12 use other forms that have about at least 8 categories.
 - None use A+.
 - Some have D-, some don’t.

The Question of A+s

- Some schools give A+'s, award 4.33 gp's for them, but cap the GPA at 4.0.
- A+'s worth 4.33 grade points might give TCU student's an unfair advantage over students in institutions that do not do so.
- A+'s worth 4.33 grade points might put TCU students at a disadvantage. The resulting 0 to 4.33 scale has to be translated to a 4.0 scale for comparison to other schools. 4.0 students at the A+ school would have their GPA's translated downward.
- Some schools do allow A+'s but do not give them any extra grade points. TCU's business school used to do this but dropped it after complaints from those students earning A+'s because the A+ didn't count more than an A.

What about a Simple % Scale?

a straight % scale has the drawbacks of:

- being non-standard in academia, and
 - not having a readily variable translation to the 4.0 scale that has been used in the past.
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Arguments for +/-

It offers a more accurate assessment of differing levels of student performance

- All "B's", etc. are not the same.
- All "A" students are not the same. Some play the "grade game" (shoot for a 92%, nothing more), some go the extra mile.
- Even if an instructor's ability to assess is not a fine as +/- allows, +/- still results in a closer match between the true performance and the grade.
- Wake Forest study which assumed a distribution of true student score with normally (truncated) distributed errors arising from instructor assessment error: +/- reduced the mean squared error
- Example of a course with several straight letter grade assignments
A, B, B, B, A "rounds" to a B with straight letter grading.
C, B, B, B, C "rounds" to a B with straight letter grading.
Are they the same?
Under plus/minus system the first example would receive a B+, the second, a B-.

Increased incentive/reward for end of semester effort

- Currently, many students often enter their final needing either a very high final grade to move up, or a very low final grade to keep their current letter grade.
- With +/- every bit of end of semester learning and effort is more likely to make a difference.

Most Peer Schools are Doing it

- See AEC study referred to above.
 - Increased prestige, increased value of a TCU degree
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Concerns About +/-

Grade Inflation

- Most studies show a slightly negative effect on GPA's but that the overall effect on a student, over their career is on average around -.04 GPA.
- ex post evidence from two TCU faculty: When converting their straight letter outcomes to +/- GPA dropped but only about the 0.04 as other studies suggest (caveat: How would effort levels have changed if +/- was in place?).

Prerequisites, Scholarships, and other grade contingent decisions

- Will a C- in a course still count as "okay" for a prerequisite? Most likely, "Yes".
- Will GPA requirements for graduation, etc. have to change? None of the schools surveyed changed their requirements.
- Over a student's academic career, the GPA difference between straight letters and +/- is likely to be trivial.
- What about academic scholarships? More information and investigation is needed.
- What about athletic scholarships? More information and investigation is needed.

Will our top students be harmed?

- Studies indicate that, as a group, very high GPA students see a greater change (downward) in GPA when switching to +/-, than low GPA students.
Caveat: Is the perceived effect likely based on the false assumption that all the straight-letter 4.0 students earned all solid A's? In reality, some are actually earning many low A's. This, however, does not show up under straight letter grading.
- Medical schools and Texas law schools translate +/- grades to a straight letter grade and recalculate GPA's.
- Will there be an increase in prestige that serves to offset the decline in GPA of students who are currently 4.0, but are actually performing at the A- level?

How to "Grandfather" it In?"

- Is the catalog under which a student enters is, in effect a contract? The registrar would have to keep track of who is still under a +/- catalog for several years
- Would students under an old straight letter catalog be given the opportunity to switch to +/-?
- Would +/- still show for students (grade reports, transcripts) under straight letter catalogs even though their GPA's are based on straight letter grades?

Will Faculty Use it?

- Trials in which schools adopt +/-, but do not adopt +/- grade points, do not lead to unanimous use. At Clemson only just over 75% of faculty used +/- in the final semester of the 2-year trial. Note: Maryland also adopted +/- for recording of grades, but not calculation of grade points.
- Grades are ultimately up to the individual faculty. A faculty could always opt out. However, how much pressure would he or she feel as a result?

Will There Be More Student Complaints?

- More close grades to contest
- Less is at stake in each close grade
- All students and faculty eventually adjust to, and expect, the grading system their school uses (straight letters at TCU, +/- at SMU, percent in high schools, 1-20 in Peru, etc)

Will There Be Faculty Complaints?

- Currently there are only 4 cutoffs. There would be 11 cut-offs under the proposed +/- system. More time is spent calculating cutoffs. The time, however, is trivial compared to other teaching and grading demands.

If/When It Is Adopted, Will There Be Review?

- Yes, there will have to be a review process.

Where Does +/- Go From Here?

Continued Meetings and Conversations

The Normal Curriculum Change Process

Addendum: Plus/Minus Resolution Passed by TCU Faculty Senate

Resolved, That beginning in fall 2007 TCU adopt an undergraduate grading system that includes plus and minus grades as follows:

Grades	Grade Points	Grade Descriptions
A	4.00	Excellent
A-	3.67	
B+	3.33	Good
B	3.00	
B-	2.67	
C+	2.33	Satisfactory
C	2.00	
C-	1.67	
D+	1.33	Poor
D	1.00	
D-	0.67	
F	0.00	Failing

Furthermore, that the Academic Excellence Committee be charged with promoting campus discussion of this proposal among faculty, students, and administrators, with the goal of presenting a fully detailed proposal for catalog changes to the Senate in spring 2006 for final approval before being sent through the University's curriculum approval process (Undergraduate Council, University Council).

Be it further resolved that the Academic Excellence Committee be charged to work with the Graduate Council to explore implementation of plus/minus grades at the graduate level.

Passed by the TCU Faculty Senate, 9/1/2003