

Dr. Michael O'Loughlin
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Dear Colleagues,

I urge the Senate to vote against the recommendation of the Academic Policies Committee regarding a major change in the grading system at Salisbury University.

Although the Committee clearly did much work with research and surveys, in my view, it fails to provide a convincing argument as to why the proposed change would truly advance the intellectual development of our students. Instead, the recommendation would take us in the wrong direction, encouraging the manic pursuit of "points" and thus further trivialize the intellectual experiences we are trying to provide in our classes.

Fundamentally, perhaps we can all agree that the reason for grades is to communicate to students an assessment of intellectual achievement. If so, I would argue that grading for the course is different from grading a particular exam or an essay. The course evaluation is a judgment of the overall performance of academic achievement that a faculty member must make of a student for the course. It shouldn't be simply an accumulation of points.

In this reasoning, the A through F grading scale is simply short hand for communicating to a student that judgment: A = excellent performance; B = good performance; C = satisfactory performance; D = barely passing; and F = failure. In each case, a faculty member could explain more fully the meaning of each of these descriptors pertaining to the particular student and indeed that would be preferable. The common sense message that these grades carry to the student gives them a clear judgment of their complete performance from the professor - If the student gets an A rather than a B, then the student knows that overall the faculty member believed that the student was an excellent student for the course as a whole, taking into consideration all of the scores and adding judgment rather than simply addition.

In contrast, if we were to change the system to pluses and minuses, the meaning to the student becomes quite confusing if not incomprehensible. What is the meaning of an A- versus an A? If I get an A, it was "excellent" but an A- means "almost but not quite excellent"? And if I get an A+ it is a "super-excellent" performance as opposed to merely "excellent". A "B" grade was "good" but a B- is "only barely good"? And the difference now between a C- and a D+ is what? C- is "barely satisfactory" and a D+ is "passing but almost barely satisfactory"? And finally, the difference between an F and a D-? An F means "failure" but a D- means "really bad but by the skin of your teeth, you don't fail the course."?

Precision in points may make good sense for an exam: True or false or multiple choice questions, each worth one point, necessarily lead to a point based structure of evaluation that naturally leads to a score, say, of 80 for one student and 87 for another student. Similarly, grading an essay can involve minuses and pluses if a rubric is used and it includes points for

content and points for grammar and spelling. So, a student could do well in providing content but make several mistakes in grammar and punctuation and therefore end up with an 81 rather than an 85, indicating the particulars of achievement for the assignment.

However, once all of the particular assignments have been finished and graded, along with the messages delivered to the student regarding those assignments, it now becomes a decision regarding not only an accumulation of points but critically, in my view, a final assessment of the intellectual performance and growth in the course. This really means an integration of the various experiences rather than simply an additive function.

Instead, the Committee's recommendation takes us entirely in the wrong direction. In essence, it recommends that we transform our grading system as much as possible into a quantitative assessment of intellectual development leaving no room for a final judgment by the professor. Indeed, a computer program is all that is necessary for calculation of a grade.

The end result is reductionist: Instead of using points to arrive at a conceptual grade, we are supposed to use grades to match points in as precise a fashion as possible. The end result is that students are given the incentive to pursue points, indeed, to maximize their "gpa," rather than pursue intellectual development, plain and simple.

The recommendation embraces a philosophy that says that intellectual achievement is quantifiable and that the more quantitative precision we can attach to the intellectual achievement, the more accurately we capture its value and can report it to the world. So, what quantitative number shall we attach to Tolstoy's War and Peace? How about Conrad's Heart of Darkness? Darwin's, Origin of Species, Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations, John Stuart Mill's On Liberty? I presume most of us would say that these are "great works" all deserving A's, perhaps? But surely we can be more precise than that! Darwin – 98? Conrad, 96? Or maybe just a 93 because it is somewhat dated?

In truth, anything intellectually valuable is incalculable, isn't it? It is ironic that while most of us teach texts that we consider "invaluable" and would scoff at the idea of attaching a numerical figure to it, we are now considering an additional step towards doing just that regarding the intellectual achievements of our students. What lesson do they learn from this new trivialization of their supposedly intellectual experience?

While our present system may have its flaws, it remains superior or perhaps less offensive to the work that we do than the proposed plus and minus system before us.