Executive Committee Report
February 4, 2002

The Executive Committee met at 3:30 on January 14, 2002. Besides developing an agenda for today's meeting, the focus of the meeting was continuing to discuss the concerns presented by SGA about the plus-minus grading scheme.

The discussion was predicated on awareness that though this policy was not approved by an overwhelming majority of the Senate, it was based on the very significant work done by the Ad Hoc Committee on Grade Inflation and extensive debate by this body at various times over the last decade. The Committee therefore was hesitant to reverse/revise a policy without good cause. Nevertheless, the Committee also felt an incumbent need to respond to the SGA's concerns. Discussion therefore considered two issues: 1) concerns raised by SGA and 2) how policies are made and modified.

Attempts made to validate or refute concerns which have been raised were to a large extent unsuccessful other than by providing more anecdotal or very limited data. For example, concerns have been raised about the impact on scholarships. What is known is that if we had recertified scholarships this spring, based on the fall GPA's, almost three times the typical number of students would have lost their scholarships. However, while there is no other obvious reason, at this time we do not know if that was in response to a change in the grading scale.

We also know that meeting enrollment/retention goals is critical to the University. This is heightened by the current budget situation. We cannot afford to lose ANY students without good cause. We only have anecdotal reports that the plus-minus system may negatively impact our endeavors to meet these goals. These unsubstantiated reports suggest that some students may leave or never come to the University because GPA's were actually lower secondary to the change in grading or because of fear that this might happen. Both mathematical models and the experience of other universities suggest that plus-minus grading has no effect on aggregate GPA's. Nevertheless, individual students, especially those at the upper end of each grade step, will experience decreases in GPA. Concern has been raised about how responses to this might affect recruitment and retention efforts, especially since no other undergraduate program in Kentucky uses the system. Nevertheless, the possibility also exists that some students, believing the plus-minus scale will make them more competitive, would be attracted to EKU.

The addition of an A-, equal to higher than 4 points, was suggested as a compromise which might soften both the potential reality or perception that the plus-minus system could negatively affect the best students. However, concerns were raised that students might be harmed by this as some graduate programs might normalize GPA's that were based on a higher than 4.0 system. Again, attempts to verify or refute the degree to which this might be true were inconclusive, but did suggest that some programs would do it. Therefore, the Committee did not believe it was in the students' best interest to make such a recommendation.
A related issue, not included in the SGA report is ambiguity about the meaning of some minus grades, especially C- for undergraduates and B- for graduate students. Since a C minus corresponds to less than 2 on the GPA scale some programs do not consider it passing while others do. Problems arise when a “passing” grade is required in a support course and the support course department has a different interpretation than the major department. Similarly, at the graduate level, students with B minus are in jeopardy of being placed on probation. While this issue was mentioned in our discussions, the Executive Committee did not directly address it.

The Executive Committee struggled with balancing 1) how to appropriately respond to concerns about the grading scale and 2) ensuring there is adequate time to evaluate policies before changing them. As many conversations about plus-minus appear to end, we did not reach consensus in this discussion. Virginia Falkenberg, as a member of the Senate, proposed a motion to bring to the Senate floor in order to facilitate broader debate on this topic. With consensus, the Committee placed it on the agenda, under new business, for today. As it is substantive, action will be delayed until the next meeting.

Strategic Planning Report
Today we are also distributing the most current draft of the work of the Strategic Planning Council, which is co-chaired by Libby Wachtel and Ken Johnstone. This draft is also being distributed to the departments via the Provost and Deans and is available on the Web. I hope you will take a leadership role in encouraging your colleagues to study and discuss it. This is a critical document as it will not only provide direction for the University, but also will be the basis for budget decisions.
A variety of avenues to give the Council feedback have been established and are explained in the cover letter. Please avail yourself of those opportunities and encourage your colleagues to do likewise.

Sincerely,

Pam Schloemann
Chair, Executive Committee