

TAKING ANOTHER LOOK AT PLUS/MINUS

PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY SENATE
NOVEMBER 5, 2001



**EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
STUDENT GOVERNMENT ASSOCIATION**

Committee on Academic Affairs
Erin Michalik, Chair

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Executive Summary

The Student Government Association was approached with the issue of a Plus/Minus grading scale in April of this year. From that time until the present, there has been more direct interaction initiated by the student body to its elected leadership on Plus/Minus than on any other issue in the past three years. Based on that level of concern, the Academic Affairs committee has worked solely on Plus/Minus since the new administration took office.

During the 2001 fall semester, a survey was conducted with a sample of students and faculty members. As an ordinal level survey, this one question telephone interview was used to determine whether or not further review was needed. Both faculty and student groups had around a sixty-percent disapproval rate. Based on the initial surveys, additional research and sampling took place.

In the research, we found that the majority of the faculty and the student body strongly disagreed with the implementation of a plus/minus grading scale. Many students indicated that they noticed their professors' lack of support for the system, and some faculty indicated that they didn't think plus/minus would benefit their students. Our research also uncovered a significant potential recruitment problem, and a potential competitive advantage for the rest of the public institutions as a direct result of implementing plus/minus. Indeed, the KEES scholarship is now renewable to Kentucky students, assuming they maintain the grade point average requirement.

Dr. Tom Guskey, Professor of Education at UK, believes that the implementation of a plus/minus grading scale does not solve the problem of grade inflation, and in fact is a detriment to the top students. His opinion is supported by the individual opinions on campus from EKU students in the Honors Program.

Change is often difficult for people and groups of people to deal with, especially when something has been done the same way for so long. However, the very nature of SHARED GOVERNANCE is to base the decisions by the few on the opinions of many. With that in mind, we developed our most recent survey.

Overall, the student body has brought to its leadership several grievances and questions regarding the implementation of a 12-point grading scale. Moreover, the majority of the faculty members surveyed and interviewed also brought out valid questions and concerns. Because of the concern generated by the University Community, it is the request of Student Government that the Faculty Senate take another look at the plus/minus grading system.

Opinion Surveys & Research

Eastern Kentucky University is part of a public school system that contains seven other universities, as well as KCTCS. Eastern is now the only public institution in the state with the plus/minus grading scale.

<u>Institution</u>	<u>Grading Scale</u>	<u>Exceptions</u>
Eastern Kentucky University	12-point	None
Kentucky Community & Technical College System	5-point	None
Kentucky State University	5-point	None
Northern Kentucky University	5-point	None
Morehead State University	5-point	None
Murray State University	5-point	None
Northern Kentucky University	5-point	None
University of Kentucky	5-point	College of Law, Denistry and Agriculture have 12-point scale
University of Louisville	5-point	None

Information from Phone Interviews with Provost Offices & Other Student Governments

We chose the Likert scale for this survey, noting the ability to evaluate multiple variables at interval level. This will allow us to display central tendencies of each of the five statements for both of the different designs (one for faculty and one for students). It is important to note that all of the surveys had not been returned at the time that these means were derived from the data. However, projections of opinions can be made, as the deviations aren't expected to be high.

A series of five statements were made, with the opportunity to evaluate them by ranking them 1 to 5, with 1 being "strongly disagree" and 5 being "strongly agree."

1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neither Agree nor Disagree 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

FACULTY OPINION SURVEY

(1) Over all, I support the plus/minus grading scale.

MEAN SCORE = 1.791

(2) Plus/Minus will benefit my students.

MEAN SCORE = 1.836

(3) Plus/Minus will solve grade inflation.

MEAN SCORE = 2.127

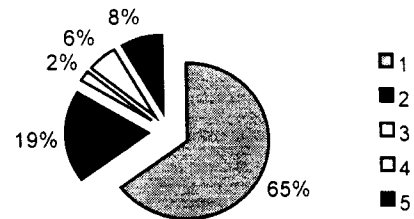
(4) Plus/Minus is confusing to my students.

MEAN SCORE = 3.236

(5) Plus/Minus is simple to administer in my classes.

MEAN SCORE = 2.582

Question 1 for Faculty



STUDENT OPINION SURVEY

(1) Overall, I like the plus/minus grading scale.

MEAN SCORE = 1.492

(2) I would choose a university with a 5-point grading scale over one with a 12-point scale.

MEAN SCORE = 3.644

(3) Plus/Minus will affect my financial aid.

MEAN SCORE = 3.441

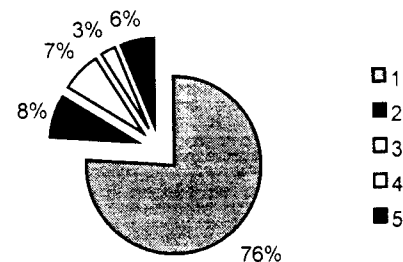
(4) I find plus/minus confusing.

MEAN SCORE = 3.136

(5) My professors support plus/minus.

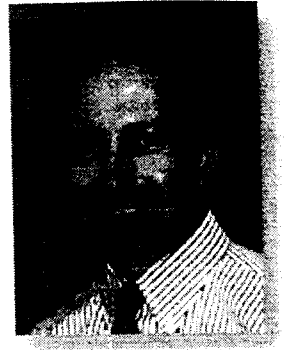
MEAN SCORE = 1.915

Question 1 for Students



The View From Outside

In an effort to learn more about grade inflation and plus/minus grading scales, Student Government sought the advice of an external consultant. Dr. Thomas Guskey, Professor in the College of Education at the University of Kentucky, came highly recommended as an expert on grading and reporting. His book, Communicating Student Learning, has been nominated for several prestigious awards.



Professor Thomas R. Guskey,
COE/UK

Below are excerpts from his opinion on the Executive Summary of the Ad Hoc Committee on Grade Inflation.

"While I am certain the report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Grade Inflation is a sincere and honest attempt to bring clarity to this important issue, the report is exceptionally biased, includes numerous flawed assumptions, and shows little knowledge of the vast research literature on grading and reporting. This is reflected throughout the document and illustrated most clearly in the Committee's concluding statement prior to offer its recommendations.

"Because we feel we have an obligation to the larger society to make meaningful discriminations among our students, and because we feel it is our responsibility to our students to distinguish those who have truly earned their good ranking, we submit below a number of recommendations and motions designed with various goals in mind:" (Ad Hoc Report, p. 10).

Although committee members might find it odd, at other institutions of higher education, the faculty feel their obligation to the larger society is to teach well all students who gain admission to their institution. Discrimination, they believe, is duty of the admissions department, not the faculty. Therefore, the most efficient and cost-effective recommendation the committee could propose to accomplish their discrimination purpose is to lower the quality of teaching in all ECU courses.

...There are some among the faculty at ECU who believe the purpose of grading is to reflect how well students have learned. They, in turn, follow different procedures. First they clarify what they want students to learn and be able to do. Second they identify clear criteria or standards by which students' learning will be judged. Teaching for these faculty members is an organized and purposeful effort designed to help their students meet those standards. Their goal is to develop talent, not simply to select it.

Grades in these professors' classes reflect well-defined learning standards and have direct meaning. Students' grades in some professors' classes may be higher because the standards are less rigorous. A comparison of related learning criteria would address this issue. It also may be, however, that some professors are simply better than others at helping their students attain rigorous and challenging learning standards. Such evidence would be invaluable in efforts to improve instructional quality. But this problem was essentially ignored by the committee. Defining clear learning standards and deciding what evidence best reflects those standards is, after all, hard work. It takes lots of time, clear thinking, and dedicated effort.

ADDING MORE CATEGORIES TO THE GRADING SYSTEM PROVIDES ONLY THE ILLUSION OF ACCURACY IN THE ABSENCE OF CLEARLY SPECIFIED LEARNING CRITERIA. IT ALSO DOES LITTLE TO SOLVE THE REAL PROBLEMS THAT UNDERLIE GRADE INFLATION. Until we precisely identify what students are expected to learn, articulate the criteria by which their learning will be judged, and clearly communicate these criteria to students, grading will remain an arbitrary and highly subjective process that victimizes more students than it helps."

Summary of Issues

It is the opinion of Student Government that several issues must be adequately addressed before the university can continue with the Plus/Minus grading scale.

- 1. Does Plus/Minus solve grade inflation?**
- 2. Will Plus/Minus hinder Eastern's recruitment of in-state students because of the KEES?**
- 3. Will Eastern's top students suffer because of Plus/Minus?**
- 4. Will Plus/Minus damper Eastern's renewed interest in the Graduate School?**
- 5. Has Plus/Minus resulted in extra costs in programming and support to the Banner system, and will this continue?**
- 6. Is it fair to implement a grading change mid-degree for students who were enrolled prior to Fall 2001?**
- 7. Is Plus/Minus a system that is accepted by the faculty as a constituency?**
- 8. Should the view of students be considered when making changes to grading policies, or is it only at the discretion of faculty?**
- 9. Why did schools like UK and Towson abandon Plus/Minus after a very short term?**
- 10. What's best for Eastern Kentucky University?**

*Respectfully submitted,
Eastern Kentucky University
Student Government*

November 1, 2001


To Whom It May Concern:

As a recipient of the Kentucky Educational Excellence Scholarship (KEES), it has occurred to me that the current plus/minus system would lessen student grade point averages, lessen students' likelihood to retain said scholarship and potentially damage enrollment.

Created to encourage Kentucky students to go to in state schools, the KEES award is based upon high school grade point average and ACT score. The scholarship went into effect for the 1998-1999 high school academic year. 2002 graduating high school seniors are eligible for as much as two thousand five hundred dollars annually for four years. However, in order to retain the KEES award, students must maintain a 2.5 cumulative grade point average for their freshman college year and a 3.0 cumulative grade point average for the remainder of their eligibility.

With a large amount of money available to these students, many of them will enroll in state schools. They will examine the state institutions carefully to see where they fit. However, because Eastern is the only state school with the plus/minus system, many of them will look elsewhere. They will look to institutions where their chances of retaining the KEES scholarship is greater. Eastern Kentucky University should make efforts to recruit competitively with the other state institutions. The plus/minus system will hinder such efforts.

Sincerely yours,



Lance Melching
Freshman Senator
EKU Student Senate

To Whom It May Concern:

I am opposed to the plus-minus system at Eastern. The beginning of my concerns is that the students had no say in this decision. We pay tuition here and our grades are very important to us, a decision that will affect us, should include us. This new system was also not mentioned when I applied to Eastern and may have weighed my decision and others that were not aware. This system could drastically change my GPA, something that I have taken great pride in and continue to take pride in. I am an Occupational Therapy major and my classes are difficult, with this new system it is going to be even harder to do well. I am not opposed to working harder, but there is no way to get an A+, which would be an incentive to work harder, now I have to work harder just to maintain the grades that I have. This will also affect my resume and job search. It is going to be virtually impossible to achieve a 4.0, something that I had hoped to do. Now my resume won't be as impressive and the others who are applying from different schools without this system will have higher GPA with as much work and effort as I put in. That is putting Eastern graduates at a disadvantage.

I believe that the student should vote on this issue, and it should be re-considered. Other alternatives should be investigated also. The current system itself could be improved with an A+ and a GPA higher than 4.0. This is the only fair thing to do. Please consider my request and complaint.

Sincerely,



Tracy Nageleisen

A Concerned Student

Faculty Senate

October 29, 2001

To Whom It May Concern:

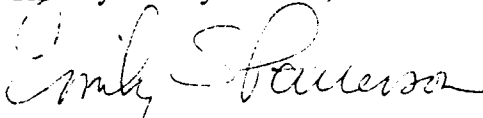
I am writing this letter in regard to the new Plus/Minus Grading Scale that has been implemented here at Eastern Kentucky University in the Fall of 2001. I am a junior and an Economics major who is in the Honors Program with a cumulative Grade Point Average of 4.0, and I feel that the new grading scale will damage my GPA.

First, I believe that the new grading system is unfair to students who consistently make good grades. As a student who has made all A's for four consecutive semesters, I am concerned that the new grading scale does not give me the four points that an A deserves. Since an A- is now worth less, I feel that I am not rewarded for putting forth the extra effort that is required for an A in most classes.

Second, I believe that a new grading system is being implemented unfairly to students who entered the university under the old grading system. A GPA made up of a combination of grades given under the old and new grading systems seems to be very unrepresentative of any student's grades over the course of their college career, considering that the value given to an A in previous semesters is now very different from the values given to an A starting in this semester.

Finally, I believe that if the University feels that a Plus/Minus grading system is truly in the best interest of the students, than it is only fair for there to be an "A+" added to the scale. If getting a grade in the high 80's is worth more than the traditional 3.0, then it is only reasonable for to A students like myself to expect that getting a grade in the high 90's is worth more than the traditional 4.0 as well. I strongly feel that this is one of the most damaging flaws in the new grading scale for students who consistently work for the highest grades possible.

Thank you for your time,



Emily S. Patterson

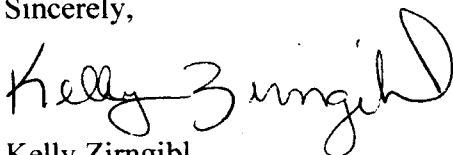
Dear Faculty Senate,

I am writing this letter to voice my concerns about the change in the grading system. I believe that it is a cosmetic change at best. I can say this objectively because I am an out-of-state transfer and non-traditional student. The problem lies not in grade inflation, but in the pervasive lack of constructive challenges built into course work. I believe that this was done intentionally in order to accommodate the students who were cheated out of an adequate education at lower levels.

Changing the grading standards only provides a patina of quality; serious students such as myself continue to be well aware of the shortcomings of the present system. The most obvious shortcoming is that course objectives provide too few challenges to promote serious scholarship. The difficulty level of course material should be increased to solve grade inflation. I have been enrolled in college courses at ECU that were easier than similar courses at my Pittsburgh, PA public high school. This is how I have managed to maintain a 4.0 grade point average for 3 years.

The grade inflation lies in the inability of the state of Kentucky to provide an education that is competitive with students from other states. ECU's grade inflation problem is a direct consequence of poor high school education and the university's insistence in accommodating these students who would otherwise be unable to study at a university. So please, fix the problem instead of instituting new policies that simply provide a new coat of paint to crumbling walls. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kelly Zirngibl". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "Z" and "I".

Kelly Zirngibl



EASTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
Serving Kentuckians Since 1906

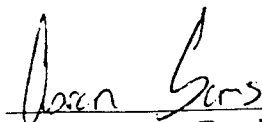
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An Act Concerning Grade Inflation

- WHEREAS, The Academic Affairs committee is charged with identifying and proposing change to any and all obstacles of academic success; and,
- WHEREAS, The University has adopted a 12-point grading scale to be implemented this Fall, replacing the 5-point grading scale; and,
- WHEREAS, A large volume of complaints, concerns and suggestions have been brought to the attention of the committee by members of the student body; and,
- WHEREAS, Initial research has indicated that the implementation of the plus/minus grading system may not be a universally accepted solution to the alleged problem of grade inflation; be it therefore,
- ENACTED, That the Student Government Association support and forward the recommendation of Academic Affairs that the Faculty Senate reconsider the 12-point scale as a solution to grade inflation; and be it further,
- ENACTED, That an official survey of opinions be conducted and delivered to the Faculty Senate at its next regular meeting.

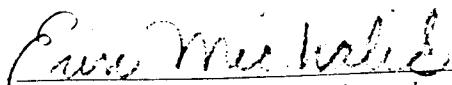
Sponsored by,



Aaron Sams, Freshman Senator

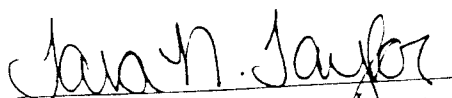
Presented on: October 30, 2001

Approved on: October 30, 2001

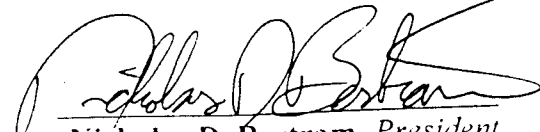


Erin Michalik, Chair of Academic Affairs

Approved by,



Tara Taylor, Senator at Large



Nicholas D. Bertram, President

