Motions US 10/11-11abc – Improve Grade Culture at UO

Sponsored by: Undergraduate Council

For Senate action: April 13, 2011

Motion 11a: Discipline-specific rationales of grading standards. The University Senate moves to make discipline-specific rationales for grading standards publicly available. By the end of Fall 2011, each department and undergraduate program shall have formulated a rationale for its grading practices and posted this on its official website. Such rationales should articulate the general standards of academic achievement in a given discipline and not be formulated in a way that binds individual instructors. Departments should devote specific attention to A+ grades in their posted rationales. They should also discuss the degree to which grade inflation threatens to compromise their evaluation practices and, if appropriate, develop discipline-specific ways to address this problem. The Undergraduate Council will make these rationales easily accessible online and encourage conversations among different departments and programs as they formulate their rationales.

Motion 11b: Comparative statistics available to instructors. The University Senate moves to make comparative statistics available to instructors. Starting in Fall 2011, for each undergraduate course, the instructor of record shall be shown the mean grade and grade distribution for that particular course just before final grades are submitted on DuckWeb. Then, on the day after all grades are due, instructors will be given access to a standard set of statistics comparing their grade distributions with those in other relevant courses—for example, those with the same name and number, with the same subject code, in the same department, or in the same college. These statistics will become part of each CRN’s official course record (roughly equivalent to the “Class list” shown on DuckWeb) and will only be viewable by those with access to that course record. The Undergraduate Council will work with the Registrar to implement this policy.

Motion 11c: Contextual information on transcripts. The University Senate moves to provide contextual information on transcripts. Starting in Fall 2013, official University transcripts issued by the Registrar will include, alongside the grade for each undergraduate course, the percentage of A-range grades given in that course. Exceptions will be made for courses with enrollments under 20, which may justifiably have skewed grade distributions, and for any other course for which the release of such information would violate FERPA requirements. This policy targets the problem of grade compression. Its deferral until Fall 2013 gives the other two policies a chance to take effect, leaving instructors ample time to adjust their grading practices where appropriate and to communicate any changes to students. The Undergraduate Council will work with the Registrar to implement this policy.
Financial Impact of the Motions

There is no direct financial impact. Motion 11a merely requires a set of discussions whose outcomes will be posted online. The implement motions 11b and 11c, the Registrar’s Office will complete service requests with Information Services programmers to reprogram DuckWeb pages and official transcripts, respectively. These types of service requests, together with any subsequent website maintenance, are a part of these offices’ regular work routines and will not cost the University extra money. In addition, the implementation work on 11c will need to be synchronized with the annual reorder of the official transcript paper (since the key on the back will need to be updated to inform the reader of the data displayed on the record).

Background for the Motions

These motions are the product of five years of study as well as exhaustive consultation with a wide variety of campus stakeholders—indeed the entire faculty, student body, and GTF staff—on a set of draft recommendations. See the report posted at http://gradeculture.uoregon.edu for the Council’s study of grade culture and response to campus feedback.

After this long and careful study, the Undergraduate Council has determined that there are significant deficiencies in the culture connected with undergraduate grades on our campus. These are by no means unique to the UO, and are caused, in part, by the assumptions about grades that students bring with them from their K-12 experience. It is the responsibility of our faculty to employ grading practices that are appropriate for university-level education in a range of disciplines. That is, our grading practices should be capable of distinguishing variation in the quality of student work and should reward the types of achievement that are prized by each discipline. Moreover, the rationale for our practices should be readily available to students and understandable by them. At present students are not often told the standards of grading in the various disciplines. Faculty do not know how their grading practices compare with those of their colleagues. Transcript end-users have no way to gauge how easy or difficult it is to earn a high grade in a given course. In this informational vacuum, grades have a natural tendency to drift upward, and those who rely on grades as a means of assessment no longer know whether they represent genuine achievement or not. Together, the three new policies aim to improve the UO’s grade culture, and—where appropriate—put a check on grade compression (the clustering of grades at the top end of the spectrum).

Addendum to the Motions

Implementation. The Undergraduate Council will publicize these policies, study their impact, and report back to the Senate on its findings. The Council will work with Undergraduate Studies to ensure incoming students receive a proper orientation to UO grading practices; with Academic Affairs to ensure that new faculty receive a brief introduction to these policies as part of their regular orientation to teaching at UO; and with the Teaching Effectiveness Program, to fold discussions of the new policies into its workshops on best practices in grading. Finally, the Council, in its communications with departments, will remind them of UO’s existing policies and procedures on grading already on the books.