

5-23-2013

## Plus/Minus Grading System at Georgia Southern

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### Recommended Citation

Yarbrough, Robert, "Plus/Minus Grading System at Georgia Southern" (2013). *Faculty Senate Index*. 76.  
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/faculty-senate-index/76>

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# Plus/Minus Grading System at Georgia Southern

Submitted by Robert Yarbrough

5/23/2013

## **Discussion:**

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The Academic Standards Committee requests that the Faculty Senate discuss the potential for implementing a Plus/Minus Grading System at Georgia Southern.

## **Rationale:**

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At the behest of the Senate Executive Committee, the Academic Standards Committee (ASC) began discussing this possibility in February of 2013, after which an ad hoc subcommittee was formed to research existing plus/minus frameworks and report back to the full committee. A second meeting occurred on March 13 (see meeting minutes attached) at which the subcommittee-generated materials were discussed and a general consensus was reached in favor of Georgia Southern implementing a Plus/Minus Grading System. The Academic Standards Committee ultimately decided the most prudent next step would be to bring the issue before the Faculty Senate as a discussion item. Please see attached materials generated by the ASC sub committee in addition to the ASC meeting minutes from March 13, 2013.

## **SEC Response:**

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5/28/2013: this discussion item has been approved for inclusion on the agenda of the June 4th senate meeting.

## Senate Response:

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Academic Standards Committee Discussion: Plus/Minus Grading System at Georgia Southern

Robert Pirro (CLASS) wondered what started this discussion at the faculty level; had there been complaints by students?

Mynard said there was a discussion of this by the ASC and SEC because some faculty asked about a pilot program at the University of Georgia that was now fully implemented and whether this was something we should consider. The Senate Executive Committee asked the Academic Standards Committee to look at it.

Robert Costomiris (CLASS) asked if there was any way to compare the grades a student would receive in one system versus another, and compare GPA's to see if there really is an impact.

Jim LoBue (COSM) called attention to a study that was done by Eastern Kentucky University in 2003. They implemented a plus/minus system for one year and then looked not only at what they did, but asked for input from other institutions that did it too. The GPA changed by one one-hundredth of a point, that is, just .01.

Marc Cyr (CLASS) could not fathom a system where what is called a "C" grade is below 2.0 and what is classed as a "B" grade is below 3.0. He said there are three elements in the mix: percentages, grade points, and letter grades. The real problem is a 4.0 grade scale because it doesn't work with percentages. He thought our current system was working well enough, and as Lobue had pointed out a change to plus/minus would have infinitesimal impact. He did not see much point in messing with what we have now unless we can get rid of the 4 point scale.

Rob Yarbrough (COSM and outgoing chair of the Academic Standards Committee) noted that according to most plus/minus systems, what Cyr said is exactly right: a C-minus would not be a "C" grade; a "C" grade would be at the 2.0 level. He understood Cyr's discomfort with the letter situation, but that's the point of a plus/minus system, that it would be a C-minus. How that would translate into a GPA would really depend on the exact numerical translation for each one of those plus/minus grades and there are a few different systems for that. There would be many discussions that would have to occur about how to translate the grades to a GPA.

Mark Hanna (COBA) said an institution where he worked formerly had gone through a change like the one being considered, and there was really little change in terms of student outcomes, but there was a period of substantial upheaval. Many of our academic standards are built around these issues of a “C” or better in class for a prerequisite, for example, or 2.0. They had to change that and in the process professors had the choice of staying with the old flat letter grade or giving pluses/minuses. There were many attempts to game the system. He thought there was limited upside associated with such a change. He thought the primary interest of the student is best served by consistency over time.

Pirro asked Yarbrough for the top two or three reasons that the committee felt that we needed this change.

Yarbrough said the biggest issue was fairness: Is it fair to give a student a “B” for an 89.3, and another student gets a “B” with an 80.0? Dovetailing with this issue is the ability to more accurately reflect a student’s performance in a course.

Janice Steirn (CLASS) understood the accuracy issue, but said fairness is treating people the same way, and if all of the students know that between an 80 and an 89 is going to be called a “B,” and all students are treated the same, that is fair. She had bad experiences with plus/minus at another school because the system increased the amount of grade-begging by students

Yasar Bodur (COE) said Steirn had defined “consistency,” not “fairness.” He thought two students getting B’s, one with 89.3 and the other 80.5, was unfair. He had been on the ASC sub-committee and favored plus/minus grading. He has worked under both systems, and plus/minus did not generate extra grade-begging in his experience. One problem he had with our current system is his end-of-term “moral dilemma” of giving the same grade to two students who are at the extremes of the grade scale. He wanted to be able to more accurately represent a student’s performance via the grade.

Costomiris said a student who gets a B with an 89 in one class might get a B for an 80 in another, so the fairness issue balances out in overall grade point average.

Bodur said he was working from the individual course level, where the different grading systems have an impact he sees all the time.

LoBue thought we should defer this discussion until we have completed our SACS evaluation because at this time such a change won’t “improve our standing” regarding RPG and would be “effort that is not well spent at this point.”

Sabrina Ross (COE) came from an institution with a plus/minus system and felt incredibly limited here by not having that, particularly in graduate school, with someone who makes a 90 versus someone who exceeds expectations and makes a 99%. She

thought it to be a fairer system. She cited an article about a high school where 34 of the students were valedictorians. You can't strive for excellence when you can't differentiate the excellence of the students in your class.

Pirro said one way he deals with the "moral dilemma" is to consider that there might be a deficiency in his assessment, so he tends to round up grades that are on the verge of the next letter grade level. He also noted that rewarding outstanding effort can be done via letters of recommendation and recommendations for department scholarships, both means more beneficial to the students' future careers than giving them an A+. And like Lobue, he didn't think we needed to be doing this at this time.

Azell Francis (SGA) said any system that is implemented should be to benefit the students. She noted that students take many core classes in which they may not necessarily be as strong or as adept as they are in their major classes, so a C- in a core class would put students at risk of not being able to progress towards graduation. She also seconded Pirro's point about other ways to reward outstanding performance. Bodur thought Francis was deviating from the central focus. He thought Pirro's methods were good, but not all faculty use them. A plus/minus system would regularize and make consistent the ability to make finer distinctions. He also asked for clarification about why some people thought this was not the time to make a change.

Steirn said, regarding SACS, "you don't want to upset the apple cart when somebody is judging your apples." On the issue of consistency, as she understood it, using whole letters or plus/minus would be an individual faculty option, so there would be less consistency.

Rebecca Ziegler (LIB) said one of the things that we have to do for SACS is to improve our assessment, and grading is a form of assessment, and so wondered why we couldn't work on those things together.

Goran Lesaja (COSM) suggested that we entertain a numerical system that would avoid any letter grades. This could avoid some of the concerns about a plus/minus system, and would be the most accurate. He thought the discussion should actually be expanded to include more options. He also wanted more student input.

Yarbrough noted that Academic Standards sent all their materials to the SGA, and there was an article in the George-Anne, and he arranged an interview with a George-Anne reporter in order to get out information. All of his feedback from SGA had been positive, and he had heard few negative reactions from students.

When Mynard asked if Yarbrough was satisfied with the Senate discussion, he said “very” and noted that the ASC members overwhelmingly supported a change to this system. He hoped the discussion would continue in the future.

Attachments:

[Academic Standards Committee Minutes 3 13 2013](#)

[Plus Minus Peer Aspirational](#)

[Plus Minus Subcommittee prelim report](#)