

DATE: November 21, 2014

**FROM: Committee on Scholastic Standards and Petitions**

TO: Faculty Senate

**SUBJECT: Actions Required Before Consideration of Changes to the Grading Policy**

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For consideration by the Faculty Senate at the December 3, 2014 meeting.

In October 2013, a faculty department representative to the Faculty Senate from the Darla Moore School of Business brought a petition to the Committee on Scholastic Standards and Petitions requesting a reexamination of the current grading policy to a plus/minus system.

The Committee on Scholastic Standards and Petitions spent the 2013-2014 academic year comprehensively reviewing the implications of a plus/minus system, including:

- Policies and procedures impacted at the department, college and university levels;
- Grade inflation;
- Grade precision;
- Consistency with peer and peer aspirant institutions;
- Experiences with similar grading policy changes at peer institutions;
- Progression, retention, graduation, and scholarships;
- Implementation resources (such as incorporation into the Banner System);
- Definition of a 'C' grade;
- Input from the Columbia campus faculty;
- Input from the Office of the Registrar;
- Input from the Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies;
- Input from the Office of Admissions; and,
- Input from students.

To clarify faculty views with respect to arguments in support of changing to a plus/minus grading system and arguments in support of retaining the current grading system, the Committee emailed a survey to 1848 faculty on the Columbia campus in April 2014. The response rate was 29.1% (N=537). Of the 537 respondents, 444 (86%) prefer a plus-minus grading system citing greater precision and comparability with major universities across the United States as primary reasons.

The Committee on Scholastic Standards and Petitions appreciates the complexity of this decision and the need to solicit input from faculty and students at the Regional Campuses (Lancaster, Salkehatchie, Sumter, and Union) in addition to students at the Columbia campus.

The Committee understands that similar conversations at USC Aiken, USC Beaufort, and USC Upstate must occur before any change in grading policy could be implemented. Additionally, the Committee recognizes the lack of a formal infrastructure for Faculty Senates within the USC system to conference on policies that impact all campuses and, therefore, urges the Faculty Advisory Committee to establish such a formal structure recognizing the independence of each

senate particularly at USC Aiken, USC Beaufort, and USC Upstate while appreciating the efforts to create a unified USC system.

*Therefore, given the results of careful study, the Committee on Scholastic Standards and Petitions moves to empower the Faculty Advisory Committee to:*

- *Establish a formal procedure for communication between faculty senates in the USC system.*

After the establishment of such a procedure and before bringing a resolution on the grading policy, the following two issues should be addressed by a task force with representation from all campuses:

- *Develop a comprehensive list of policy and procedural changes impacted by eventual change to the grading policy;*
- *Identify reasonable barriers to implementation of such changes including all campuses of the USC system.*

In consultation with the Office of the Registrar, the Committee raises the following procedural considerations as conditions for the implementation of a plus/minus grading system:

- **Student mobility with the USC system.** A uniform grading system and policies at the undergraduate level better support Palmetto College, the change of campus process, and transient study within the USC system.
- **Early alert system.** Standard feedback from instructors early in the semester becomes paramount if minus grades negatively affect scholarship eligibility.
- **Unified policy for minimum grade requirements.** With a finer grading scale it is important to be uniform in dictating a sufficient grade in a course for different degree requirements and course prerequisites. One possible solution is to establish a system-wide policy that such requirements can only be at the classical integer grades A=4.0, B=3.0, C=2.0, or D=1.0.
- **Implications of grades at the extremes.** It is important to consider whether or not the grades of A+ or D- should be included in the grading system as meaningful indications of extremely superior or near-failing work. If A+ is included, the Committee recommends using a factor of 4.0 for both an A and an A+ with the A+ as a moral boost but not reflected in the GPA (e.g., not counted as a 4.3) as to control grade inflation. Since several policies in the Bulletin explicitly note a grade of D as the minimal passing grade, the implications of a D- to these policies should be considered.
- **Retention rates concerns.** Some have expressed concern that the proposed grading scale may cause a drop in the average GPA. If so, this could cause more students to fail to meet progression or upper-division admission requirements in some majors, and result in a drop in overall retention rates and scholarship retention rates.

Attachments: USC Grading System Survey Results