Members of Drake University Faculty Senate:

Consistent with its mission to “uphold the interests of students as highest priority by bringing students’ opinions to the forefront,” the Drake University Student Senate humbly submits the following information for your consideration. It is the belief of Student Senate that the implementation of a plus/minus grading system would meet with almost universal opposition from the student population. In addition, Student Senate believes plus/minus grading to be an ineffective policy that does little to address concerns about grading at Drake University and yet whose implementation would cause significant stress and uncertainty for students.

Grade inflation has been cited as the primary justification for a plus/minus grading system. While Student Senate recognizes that grade inflation in the higher education community is an indisputable trend supported by empirical evidence, the presence of grade inflation at Drake University is not. Even through the limited discussions that Student Senators have reported with faculty contacts, it is clear that the faculty community does not comprehensively perceive grade inflation to be an issue at Drake. Student Senate implores Faculty Senate to pursue a policy-making process that invests significant research in establishing whether grade inflation is a major concern at Drake University.

If, after research, grade inflation is proven to be present at Drake University, Student Senate requests that other policies be explored. Though a 1992 study reported a 12% increase in colleges implementing plus/minus grading, more recent research has questioned the effectiveness of the policy. A more detailed 2006 study measured the effect of a plus/minus grading system when controlling for consistency of instructors. That study concluded that, “Plus minus grading seems to have no impact on grade inflation or grade deflation” (Frank & Feeney, 2006).

Effective policy-making is proactive and intentional. In contract, the implementation of a plus/minus grading system is a reactive policy that does not address the source of any grade inflation that may be present at Drake. If grade inflation is present at Drake University, it should be addressed at its source—the individual grading scales established in course syllabi—not through a blanket adjustment mechanism.

Finally, it is the firm belief of Student Senate that the implementation of a plus/minus grading system will cause undue stress for Drake University students. The Higher Education Research Institute’s American Freshman National Norms Fall 2010 reports a steady erosion in the reported mental health of college students. The survey reported that financial concerns and the current state of the economy augmented traditional academic pressures. John H. Pryor, lead author of the study, also noted that the effects of stress are often seen among a university’s most promising students. He notes that, “Often considered positive traits, high levels of drive to achieve and academic ability could also contribute to students’ feelings of stress.” Because Drake University does not have an enforceable policy on the public posting of grades throughout a course, students are often unable to monitor their level of achievement throughout the semester. This issue is only expounded by the implementation of a plus/minus grading system, which would create twelve or more categories to replace the current five. Currently, the lack of public grade postings is manageable only because students have a certain degree of flexibility before an “A” becomes a “B.” However, the creation of plus/minus grades is pursued will eliminate that
flexibility. The type of responsible, ambitious students that Drake attracts will want consistent, up-to-date information on their grades throughout the semester. When they are unable to access such information, academic stressors will increase, further contributing to the declining mental health of students.

As representatives of the student body at Drake University, the Drake University Student Senate urges you to consider the information presented above and the opinions of current students on the topic of plus/minus grading. It is our belief that the implementation of such a policy would be harmful to the wellbeing of students and ineffective in addressing concerns about grade inflation at Drake University.

Sincerely,

Greg Larson