Plus/Minus Grading – Pros, Cons, and Comments

Klaus Bartschat (Feb. 3, 2013)

Below is a summary of what I believe I heard during various meetings, what I read studying some (not all) of the material provided, my own experience, and – ultimately, of course – my subjective thoughts. I firmly believe that introducing the option of plus/minus grades will increase the overall learning experience at Drake University. It will increase Drake's overall academic reputation and, consequently, the value of a Drake degree. These goals are in line with our strategic plan and should be beneficial for our students – even though the majority of them may not see it this way right now.

I will first list two common arguments for plus/minus grading and address objections to those, and then try to provide answers to other objections that I have heard.

Pro: Many of Drake's peer institutions, and those that we look up to as the next step in academic reputation, have some form of differential grading finer than A, B, C, D, F; this includes all other ANAC schools.
Objection: Drake is unique; we don't care what others do.
Response: Drake is a very strong institution, but not strong enough to completely ignore the rest of the world, especially the places that we aim at as the next step in academic reputation.

Pro: Plus/Minus grading allows for an accurate assessment of a student's learning achievements.
Objection: In some courses, such a fine grid makes no sense.
Response: True, but no faculty member can/will be forced to use Plus/Minus distinctions. I also believe that many of us already award +/- or percentages for individual items in our courses. It seems inconsistent not to be able to do this when it comes to the final grade for a course.

Other common objections and my responses to those

What "problem" are we trying to solve?
Response: It would be most unfortunate if Senate only acts if there is problem. We should be pro-active rather than re-active! We were pro-active in initiatives such as J-term and Experiential Learning.

The survey of the faculty doesn't count. The question offered "choice".
Response: Choice is the idea; the question was phrased correctly. It is already well known that the majority of faculty nationwide favor +/- grading while many students are against it (when new implementation is discussed – nobody cares if the school already has it). This is not a characteristic of Drake.

Don't we have more important things to worry about?
Response: The response rate by faculty and the actions of the students, including the many comments submitted, suggest that this is an important topic. Hence, my answer to the question is: "No, not many – except for fixing the X on transcripts (see below)".
The average GPA will go down; consequently, students will have problems to maintain the GPA necessary to remain in a particular professional program (Pharmacy, Business) or comply with the 2.0 rule.

Response: Students who struggle with academic eligibility are unlikely to be in the A– category. It is well established that there is virtually no effect on the average GPA in the B to D range; in fact, if a D– counts as 1.0 (rather than 0.7), it is an advantage for a weak student since the combination of D+ (1.3) and D– (1.0) is better (average 1.15) than two straight D grades (1.0). Consequently, there is no need to modify these requirements. Make up a C– with a C+, etc.

With an A+ only counting as 4.0 rather than 4.3, it is indeed not possible to maintain a "4.0" mathematical GPA once an A– has been awarded. However, since admission operations and presumably employment offices (Human Resource Departments) will know when a school uses +/- grading, a "3.9" GPA from such a school may compete just fine (if not better) with a GPA of "4.0" from a school that doesn't. In fact, I have heard of anecdotal evidence that an "A" from a school like Drake may only count as an "A–" in such compilations. After all, a "straight A–" is the worst-case scenario, and there is currently no way to rule out that scenario from a Drake transcript. Similar things are apparently happening when a student retakes a class; instead of just using the better grade, we learned last year (to my horror!) that some schools assume an "XB" to mean "F" the first time and "B" the second time. The result may be a "1.5" average. In reality the grades might have been "C" and "B", which should have counted as a "2.5" in this method.

**Conclusion: There may be major danger looming if details are missing!**

This will cause nightmares in the implementation. What do we do with students who came to Drake under the assumption of "integer grading"? Do we need to have different rules for different students?

Response: Implementation is not the primary concern of the Faculty Senate as the principal legislative body for academic affairs. We should certainly be interested in it (that's why we listen, for example, to the progress on J-term implementation), but ultimately it's the administration (i.e., the executive branch of the university) that needs to figure this out. If it can't be done, or if it has legal consequences that cannot be overcome, then it's their responsibility to tell us. It should not prevent Senate from recommending something if we feel that it is in the overall best interest of the institution and particularly of our students, even though they may not see things this way (yet). Since we are not the first school in the country to introduce +/- grading, there should be information available about "best practices" that the administration can draw on. We could use some delay (e.g., start in the fall of 2016 as suggested in the draft motion — too late in my opinion, but better in 2016 than never), but then it's the rule for everybody. It gives those students who think they won't finish by then a lot of time to transfer if they think that the new rule is an unbearable hardship. The problem may be to find a school like Drake that doesn't have the differential grading already! Realistically, there seems to be very little to worry about, especially since the effect can be offset (probably more than just offset) by proper advertising of our likely increased academic reputation and the value of a Drake degree.
The students will be stressed out even more, there will be lots of haggling over every point, students will avoid classes with +/- grading, they will drop out of extra- and co-curricular activities, etc.

Response: Where is the evidence for that? Are extra/co-curricular activities suppressed at schools that have +/- grading? If professors are afraid of or unwilling to deal with grade haggling, it's their choice to establish a policy to deal with it. That might include not to use +/- grading.

Clearly, the biggest stress will be on those students who are frequently in the A– category. There seems to be the impression around (expressed at least indirectly at the students' open forum) that "If it's between A and B, I'll [always, almost certainly, most probably, ...] get the A and hence keep my 4.0 GPA." Realistically, however, there will be occasions when it just wasn't enough for an A–. The result in integer grading will then be a "B" (rather than a B+). That will hurt the GPA more than a B+, it might prompt the student to try again, possibly make an "A", end up with an "XA" on the transcript, and – in the worst-case scenario – that "XA" will be counted as a "C", namely the average between an assumed F and the final A. A disastrous outcome, which seems to have been completely overlooked!

Educational reforms in K-12 suggest to only assess whether or not a student masters a concept (effectively Pass/Fail); we could introduce a third category and use "accept", "reject" and "revise, then resubmit" – something journals do.

Response: That looks too simple for a university; (hopefully!) we do not just assess small individual pieces, but we want to see what our students can do with the pieces that they have learned when it comes to the "big picture". Also, "Accept" in Journal A is very unlikely to be the same as "Accept" in Journal B, due to the different selectivity, e.g., impact factor, of the two journals. This selectivity is a potentially serious problem that Drake’s 4.0 students will ultimate face when it comes to competing for graduate school or in the work force. A Drake 4.0 GPA is unlikely to be competitive with a 4.0 (or maybe even a 3.8) from an institution of similar academic standing if the other school has +/- grading. And chances are that the school does.

We should just forget about grades altogether, since they interfere with learning.

Response: There may be a few cases where this ideal concept is working already. In my opinion, Drake isn't one of them (yet).