

Minutes of the University Council on Teaching

Monday, November 24, 2008

Waul House

Committee members attending meeting: Chris Hepburn (chair), Jackie Lerner, Rita Olivieri, Virginia Reinburg, Pete Wilson, Fred Yen.

Also attending: Pat De Leeuw (Vice Provost) and Don Hafner (Vice Provost).

Peter Wilson recorder.

After the minutes of the October 27 meeting were approved, the remainder of the meeting was devoted to considering ways to mitigate grade inflation and compression.

Don Hafner distributed recommendations on grade inflation and compression created by the Arts and Sciences Educational Policy Committee in 2006. There was general agreement on the UCT that the recommendations resonate with, and elaborate on, discussions at our October 27 meeting. Accordingly, we plan to incorporate some of them into our report to the Provost.

Several areas of agreement emerged from the meeting.

- The Committee agrees on what is broken: The primary consequence of grade inflation and compression is that far too many students claim they are not sufficiently challenged by BC courses. Considering the emphasis students place on grades and the fact that grade-point averages have risen dramatically across the university over the past decade, it is reasonable to conclude students are not adequately challenged because the incentive benefits of grades have been significantly diluted. A secondary consequence of grade inflation and compression centers on fairness. For example, students in departments with inflated grades have a greater likelihood of graduating with honors or receiving other benefits associated with high grades than students in departments with lower grades.
- The Committee agrees that this is a challenging problem: Ideally, faculty members, department chairs, deans, and the Provost need to work together to develop and maintain processes that will discipline grade inflation and compression without negatively affecting perceptions about students' academic achievements and without sacrificing teaching effectiveness or academic freedom.
- The Committee is considering recommending that departments should establish grading norms that discipline grading inflation and compression, such as setting upper limits on course grade-point averages or on the percentages of students who can receive As, A's, B⁺s, etc. Schools and the university might also consider norms.
- The Committee recognizes that there will likely be situations where such norms could do more harm than good and thus where faculty should be allowed to deviate from them. However, there is also a sentiment on the Committee that faculty who deviate from

norms need to explain the reasons they did so to their department chairs, perhaps in writing. Likewise, the chairs of departments with grades that are above the norms set by their schools need to explain these deviations to their deans, and deans with grades above the norms set by the university need to explain deviations to the Provost.

- The committee agrees that the following information should be compiled and given to faculty for the courses they teach, departmental chairs and deans as appropriate to facilitate the above processes. (1) Average and median grades in each course, department, and school on a 4.0 basis, (2) Number of students in each course, department, and school, and (3) Distributions of letter grades expressed in terms of number of students and percentage of total students for each course, department, and school.
- The committee agrees that steps need to be taken to ensure that grade inflation and compression is mitigated without negatively affecting perceptions about students' academic achievements. For example, we need to ensure that if students apply to graduate schools, admissions officers will recognize that their grades may be lower for the same level of academic achievement than those awarded by universities where grade inflation is problematic. The 2006 recommendations by the Arts and Sciences Educational Policy Committee suggest several ways this might be accomplished.