

AS OTHERS SEE US

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursel's as ithers see us!
It wad frae monie blunder free us,
An foolish notion...*

— Robert Burns, "To a Louse"
[English translation available](#)

News coverage and reputation

Whether we like it or not, UCSC is news. Journalists look at us and judge us and write about us. And what they say does matter. As a university, we are critically dependent on the esteem in which we are held by the public. As a university we need many things if we are to succeed: talented high school and community college students applying to our undergraduate programs; high-achieving undergraduates from elsewhere applying to our graduate programs; top-quality PhD's from elsewhere as applicants for our teaching positions; grants, contracts, and gifts from government agencies and private donors (never forget that what the State provides comes nowhere near being enough to run the university). Any university that does not look after its good reputation will have major trouble continuing in its mission. We therefore need to take a careful look at how we look from elsewhere — to see ourselves as others see us.

Alumni and present students should keep in mind that UCSC's success as an institution is critical to their own success: if the reputation of your alma mater goes down the drain, your degree loses its value. No one will recall that years ago your university was highly ranked if today it is a national laughing-stock. To ensure that the degrees of all our students from yesterday will count for as much as possible in the world of tomorrow, we have to build a reputation in the educational and cultural climate of today. No amount of excellence from the early 1970s will suffice: if the class of 2000 is going to win respect in the world outside, UCSC must take steps now to see that it has a solid reputation throughout the coming decades.

It has often been suggested that damage is done to UCSC's reputation by its student assessment system — the system under which narratives are written for every course but A-C letter grades are merely a student option, which we will refer to for brevity as the Narrative Evaluation System (NES). Perhaps this is so. But at the very least it is clear that the NES has given useful material to our critics that they can use to make us look silly. It is essential that we confront this unwelcome fact, and ask what we might be able to do about it.

Those who think that the NES is one of our most crucial virtues have been, quite understandably, reluctant to look squarely at the evidence that it has been doing us harm. What matters is how we really are, they say, not how ill-informed journalists think we are. But that is dangerously naive. The fact is that the way we are perceived will in due course change the institution itself, by changing the kinds of students and faculty who are prepared to come here.

The Moon Unit problem

One extremely troubling aspect of the NES is the possibility for narrative evaluations of a highly

embarrassing nature to find their way into students' files and eventually come to the notice of colleagues in other institutions. *Santa Cruz Sentinel* cartoonist Weiss clearly sees this, and depicts (in a cartoon published on March 5) a wincingly recognizable UCSC graduate (named Moon Unit after Frank Zappa's daughter) proudly reading his transcript to a graduate school admissions officer:

"And in conclusion, Moon Unit's free spirit, capricious nature and joy for life raised our consciousness in Vegan Pottery . . ."

"Moon Unit's performance in Advanced Frisbee Applications evoked an existential quality . . ."

An exaggerated cultural stereotype? Certainly. These snatches of nonsense are (we very much hope) fantasy from a cartoonist's imagination. But as every faculty member who has seen a significant number of other people's narrative evaluations knows, the genre is not entirely a matter of myth. Evaluationese at its flowery, ridiculous worst gets passed around quite a bit. A 1982 evaluation reports that the student "came to this class with special intentions of a thoroughly significant kind," and goes on:

"The class helped him in his chosen direction; on the way it opened his innocent and searching and charming eyes. He works with extreme sensitivity and a desperate and reverential care. So his path is slow. But he's incapable of any kind of ugliness or insignificance. A wanderer in faery lands -- sometimes forlorn, but often happy."

That one is real, we are sorry to report, and it contains nothing more precise about the academic achievement it is supposed to be describing than is shown above. There are hundreds more, perhaps thousands more, where it came from. A colleague tells us he has seen a UCSC evaluation pinned to a bulletin board at the campus of the National Institutes of Health, with the more ludicrous passages underlined. Make no mistake about it, there are evaluations out there that would make any self-respecting faculty member squirm with embarrassment at being thought to be associated with them.

Luckily, the press has not made a large-scale practice of tracking down such pieces of florid rambling and specifically holding them up to ridicule (thank heaven for confidentiality of student records). But they have merrily made hay with the hallmark of our system: the availability of the P/NP option for every course, together with a long-standing tradition among students of taking that option. This combination of features has led to a widespread perception that we have not been identifying levels of performance clearly enough to guarantee that anyone is doing work above the level of a traditional C grade.

Rigor and retention

The outside world really does perceive UCSC's assessment system as having been less rigorous and more "laid back" than a conventional letter grading system. Such a perception of us as having lax standards hurts us in two important ways: first, it hinders our ability to compete with other UC campuses for the best students in the state; and second, it appears to contribute to our exceptionally low retention rate compared to those of other UC campuses.

NES loyalists (who may yet call for the matter of obligatory grades to be revoted in a mail ballot) have denied that the NES causes any serious reputational damage to UCSC. They are convinced that

the public still regards the NES as "innovative," "experimental," and "different", not at all inferior to a conventional grading system. The loyalists advise us to be proud of our maverick grading system, and to "flaunt our difference." Should we listen to them?

Stark and often quite emotional disagreements have emerged between the two camps — those who think the NES has caused reputational damage to UCSC and those who don't. It is not going to be easy to find a resolution of the cultural divide that has opened up. But perhaps some additional information about the actual record of our press image might help in this. In the sections that follow we will briefly examine some of what the press has been writing about UCSC over the last two decades. We are not offering a scientific study, of course, just a casual browse. But even a casual browse through the past twenty years of newspapers and magazines brings up some material that may help to set the current debate in a wider context.

Some early history

It is quite clear that during its very early years, until the early 1970s, UC Santa Cruz was regarded as the premier undergraduate institution in the UC system. Many of our older faculty and emeriti recall this period with pride, and they are quite right to do so. But the articles we obtained from the Public Affairs office are more recent. They were published between 1981 and 1999. Well before this period, UCSC's pre-eminence had begun to fade.

Los Angeles Times education writer David G. Savage describes a lot of the history in a 1986 article entitled:

'60S SCHOOL STRIVES FOR '80S IMAGE

He describes UCSC's fall from grace in these terms:

By the late 1960's, UC Santa Cruz was the most sought-after spot in California's growing system of higher education. But as the Viet Nam War sentiment withered and the job market shrank in the mid-1970s, anything that sounded like alternative education suddenly went out of fashion.

(Savage notes that students at UCSC were able to request grades for some classes as early as 1966, but few availed themselves of the opportunity.)

Things began to get worse. And in the late 1970s, an enrollment crisis triggered a move to give letter grades to all students:

In the late 1970s, the university was hit hard by a systemwide drop in enrollments. In turn, the campus's academic senate voted in 1979 to give all students letter grades — but reversed itself in a few months, after hundreds of students protested. (Savage, *Los Angeles Times*, 1986)

Thus soon after the beginning of the Sinsheimer chancellorship, a faculty attempt to implement a conventional grading system had been blocked by student political pressure. The erosion of UCSC's academic reputation continued unabated. In a *Sentinel* article headed "IS TOWN-GOWN RIFT A MISUNDERSTANDING?" two years after that early reverse for conventional grading, Sylvia

Townsend wrote:

The campus has gained a reputation as a playground for students who take drugs seriously and their studies lightly. (May 27, 1981. *Santa Cruz Sentinel*)

The enrollment trouble deepens

But the numbers of such students were in fact declining. Instead of becoming a worldwide mecca for alternative student culture, this campus acquired a flaky, non-serious image that put students off. Fewer and fewer applied to UCSC.

As then Dean of Natural Sciences Bill Doyle admitted to journalist Sylvia Townsend in 1981, it was beginning to look like it was just a minority of risk-takers who would select Santa Cruz:

Students took a gamble to come to Santa Cruz. Those who were concerned about jobs went to Berkeley or Davis. ('**Academic nonconformists in a resort town**', *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 24, 1981.)

It is hard for more recent arrivals to appreciate how serious the situation became in those days. At the start of the 1980s, UCSC's enrollment problem was so perilous that there was talk of actually closing the campus. Persistent rumors suggest that Brigham Young University was prepared to consider buying it as an adjunct campus, a "BYU West". Systemwide instituted a "Redirect Program" in which many students who applied to Berkeley but could not be physically accommodated there were forced to spend their first two years at UCSC, a humiliating situation for a campus that could not recruit enough students of its own to stay in business, and one that was calculated to pass through the campus hundreds of students who felt they had been shunted to a second-rate institution.

Serving as a two-year transit camp for unwilling Berkeley aspirants who would move there as soon as they got to their junior year was clearly not a viable long term solution to our enrollment woes. The Chancellor at that time, Robert Sinsheimer, was determined to find a better solution. By 1980 he had hired a highly regarded expert on college enrollment to serve as the new Dean of Admissions: Richard Moll, who had solved a similar enrollment crisis at Vassar. After studying the situation, Moll concluded that UCSC had a very serious image problem, one on which he was to work until he left the campus in 1986 with the job still not done. What he told the *Sentinel* in 1981 was:

UCSC is considered too laid back, not rigorous, and a haven for wealthy white kids who like drugs. (*Santa Cruz Sentinel*, May 27, 1981)

A place where second-rank students trying to make it to Berkeley could be parked for two years among wealthy white kids who liked drugs. Not quite the great educational dream of the founders of this campus.

The impact of NES

What is the connection between these early-1980's enrollment troubles to the NES? The fact is that it is not the exam results of our students once here that are cited by the newspapers (because those are private), and it is not the rate of drug use (because that is mostly kept hidden). The fact about this campus that is most consistently cited in newspaper and magazine articles in support of claims about our laid-back character is that we have the NES.

Sylvia Townsend, for example, cites the NES as one of several causes of the campus's flaky image in the 1981 article cited above:

UCSC gained a 'flaky' image because of its use of short written evaluations of course work instead of letter grades, the absence of a recorded 'failure' grade, some experimental courses, no professional schools and a politically liberal faculty and student body.

Dean of Admissions Moll likewise blamed the NES (or to be more precise, the part of it that involved the absence of obligatory letter grades) for our flaky image. David Savage, in the *Los Angeles Times* in 1986, reported Moll as stating that the absence of grades was the "single biggest contributor to our reputation as being a not very serious place."

Moll was backed up by then Dean of Natural Sciences Frank Drake, who is quoted thus:

The no-grades policy "was based on the fantasy that without carrots and sticks students would study hard and produce good work," said Frank Drake, Dean of Natural Sciences. "We're slowly drifting back to a more realistic approach."

The drift to realism Drake was referring to was the adoption in 1981 of optional grades for upper division classes. However, only a small percentage of students opted for letter grades, and thus the impact of this change on our reputation was negligible. Few people outside even knew about it, and our reputation as the Pass/Fail campus lived on.

The last ten years

UCSC's enrollment difficulties and low status within the UC system continued into the 1990s. Even today, at a time of burgeoning demand for UC places, we are making offers of admission to *all* the students who apply, in an effort to get the entering class size we need.

We are in a position now that exposes us to negative comments in the press no matter which way we go. If we continue as we are, we get called flaky and nonserious; we are a good source for amusing stories about student protest and liberal wackiness, but not for stories that will attract the best students here. But if we make a move toward greater rigor, we get criticized for that too. In 1996 the academic senate voted to extend the grade option to all classes, not just upper division classes, and an optional GPA was established. The *San Jose Mercury* reported this in an article under a headline that says it all about the damning press this campus has so often received:

OUT OF THE WOODS

WINDS OF CHANGE BLOW THROUGH THE QUIRKY, LAIDBACK UC SANTA CRUZ CAMPUS

Under this banner (and a worse one for the second page: "UCSC trying to shed its flaky image"), reporter Sarah Lubman described the situation as follows:

Alarmed by falling enrollments and students' anxieties about their futures, UCSC is

consciously trying to shed its flaky image. This fall, for the first time ever, all students will be able to get conventional grades and grade point averages." (*San Jose Mercury News*, May 18, 1997)

Lubman also picks up on the sad facts of our lack of attractiveness to those students whose SAT scores (particularly in math) are the highest:

The real pressure to change...came from those who were shunning Santa Cruz. From 1993 to 1995, a time when enrollments grew in the UC system, they fell at the Santa Cruz campus. Even more ominously, the quality of its students has dropped precipitously over the years. In 1970, the UCSC freshmen had the highest SAT math scores of all UC freshmen. By 1995, the average math scores had declined to the second lowest among UC's eight undergraduate campuses.

High school students and their parents were turned off by Santa Cruz's laid back image... "We found that students didn't want to hear how UCSC was different from other campuses," said Randy Nelson, director of institutional research. "They wanted to hear how similar it is." (*San Jose Mercury News*, May 18, 1997)

Image and engineering

Under the leadership of current Chancellor M.R.C. Greenwood, the administration has been making strong attempts to change UCSC's image, especially in the area of engineering. Some have written as if the new School of Engineering was some kind of hastily conceived gimmick that Chancellor Greenwood foisted upon the campus after her arrival. This is nonsense, of course: it takes a decade to get a major new unit to the launch point. It is not as widely known as it should be that UCSC had always intended to cover engineering since its very earliest academic plans. Only the long funding drought between the early 1970s and 1985 prevented progress from being made in this direction. Energetic efforts to revive the original concept of a School of Engineering and bring it to fruition have been going on continuously since 1985.

Chancellor Greenwood arrived toward the end of the process of forming the new school. It was formed by separating off the departments of Computer Science and Computer Engineering, adding Electrical Engineering, selecting the founding faculty for a new Department of Applied Mathematics and Statistics, and appointing a founding Dean. In such a way the first professional school at the campus was at last established, and Chancellor Greenwood set about doing what she could to ensure that its existence became known to journalists who write about higher education.

The initial results were very disappointing. The coming of Engineering did not change our image overnight. We continue to be written up as a temporal anomaly, a little pocket of 1960s culture that has mysteriously survived to the present day. The stereotypes were carefully repeated in every story. Thus the *Sentinel* (May 10, 1999) chose the headline

FROM HIPPIE HAVEN TO HIGH TECH

Nearly 35 years after its founding, UCSC is changing its image from 'Uncle Charlie's Summer Camp' to a more serious academic institution

If only. In actual fact our image is not changing nearly enough. The *Mercury's* story about UCSC orienting itself more clearly toward Silicon Valley (*San Jose Mercury News*, October 22, 1999) was something of a P.R. disaster:

- The opening sentence began: "More often linked to the Age of Aquarius than to the Information Age..." (groan).
- The inserted front-page picture was of Stanford's President Casper with Microsoft's Bill Gates (though the article was meant to be about UCSC).
- The campus's new MS program in Network Engineering was credited wrongly to UC Extension.
- The existence of the School of Engineering was never mentioned at all.

And just in case you thought that for once they might at least have left out the no-grades myth: no, they included this remark:

Though considered a leader in such fields as marine science and astrophysics, the campus has been more popularly known for its banana slug mascot, frisbee team and aversion to traditional letter grades.

The Chancellor was interviewed, but the interviewer appears to have trapped her in defensive mode, for she was quoted as saying things like "Sure, we play frisbee... But I don't find the students here, and I certainly don't find the faculty here, frivolous."

This had little good effect, of course. On November 7, 1999, the *San Jose Mercury News* revisited the topic of UCSC, Chancellor Greenwood, the Santa Clara Center plan, and the Silicon Valley mission, in a Sunday magazine cover feature, and the following (if you can bear to see any more of this sort of thing) is the headline they chose:

FROM TIE DYE TO HIGH TECH

**UC Santa Cruz was born in the hippie era.
Now under the leadership of M.R.C.
(‘Marci’) Greenwood, it's poised for
move into the Internet age.**

From tie dye and the Age of Aquarius to the Information/Internet age... We are still being spoken of like a newly discovered stone-age tribe, awestruck at its confrontation with the modern world. (This of a campus that has never had a library card index — we went straight from microfiche to computers — and was the UC system pioneer in Unix computing.) It is unjust, of course; indeed, ignorant and flat wrong. But that is our image out there. The world outside the 95064 zipcode thinks we can write poetry but not Perl scripts, run frisbee tournaments but not file servers.

And the charges of being soft in our student assessment policies are never far away. In the article under the above headline, reporter Michael J. Ybarra took the opportunity to remind his readers of our lack of grading one more time:

What Greenwood has actually gotten herself into is trying to turn one of the smallest and quirkiest campuses of the University of California system — a place known for its redwoods, its banana slug mascot and the fact that recently it didn't even have grades — into a major player in the information revolution taking place over the hills in the Santa Clara Valley.

The retention bug

As it happened, one of the reasons the engineering story could not really do us much good was that it was interrupted by the discovery of another newsworthy chronic problem of our campus. In June 1999 the press discovered it and began trumpeting it throughout the state. It concerned our bad retention figures. On June 1, 1999, the *San Jose Mercury News* ran an article with the following headline:

LOST STUDENTS

LAIID-BACK, WOODSY SANTA CRUZ CAMPUS LEADS UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SYSTEM IN DROPOUTS

(The allusion in the phrase "lost students" is surely to the vampire movie "The Lost Boys", set in a very recognizable Santa Cruz where college-age vampires — the ultimate retention problem — hang out and have fun, nocturnally feasting on the blood of local residents; not a pretty subliminal picture.) According to the *Mercury's* article, by John Woolfolk:

For a decade, UC-Santa Cruz has ranked last among UC schools in student retention, the percentage of students who continue after their first year, according to a recent report by the university's Office of Planning and Budget. One in five freshmen at the Santa Cruz campus drops out after a year, compared with one in 20 at UC-Berkeley, the report says. One in three UC-Santa Cruz freshmen left before their senior year, it said." (*San Jose Mercury News* June 1, 1999)

Noting that UC Santa Cruz is the least selective campus in the UC system, the article suggests that one of the factors contributing to the low retention rate might be academic prestige:

Academic prestige...may be a factor. Recent surveys found that 77 percent of freshmen who left were in good academic standing, suggesting that 'UCSC may not be providing the atmosphere sought out by high-achieving students,' the report said.

A comparison of UC schools shows that those that are harder to get into have fewer dropouts. UC-Santa Cruz admits more applicants — 84% — than just about any other UC campus. Only about one in three who apply to UC-Berkeley are accepted. (*San Jose Mercury News*, June 1, 1999)

UCSC's retention woes were further dissected by the *Los Angeles Times* in an article headed:

SPECTACULAR SETTING, PUZZLING PROBLEM

Once again, the campus's grading system, mistakenly described as a pass/fail system by reporter Veronique de Turenne, is implicated as a causal factor:

Students are divided about the pass / fail system of grading, one of the hallmarks of UC Santa Cruz's liberal education style. They can choose to get traditional letter grades, but some students accustomed to grade-point averages complain that the university's lack of emphasis on such gauges of success is unsettling. "I know that the drop out rate here is high among people with better GPAs and test scores. In certain ways, there's an intellectual climate here that is so laid-back, it puts people off, especially at the lower levels," said Jordan Benjamin, 21, a sophomore majoring in biochemistry and molecular biology.' (*Los Angeles Times*, June 6, 1999)

Our Pass/Fail image

The fact that the *Los Angeles Times* reporter, as recently as last June, was apparently unaware that UCSC provides detailed narrative evaluations in place of grades, after a 35 year history of the NES, should really make us stop and think. Whatever the point was of the experiment with narratives, the outside world didn't grasp it and isn't listening.

The message is clear: until we institute a conventional letter grading system with mandatory GPAs, the public will continue to believe that the only grade our students receive is a Pass or Fail annotation. (They do not appear to know that at most half of this is true: the NP grades never appears on a UCSC undergraduate's transcript, so for students who do not opt for letter grades the only grade ever recorded is a Pass for each course mentioned: not a Pass/Fail system, but a Pass system!)

We all need to think hard about why we continue to have such a disastrous image in the press despite everything that has happened. And we need to consider seriously the possibility that to some extent the press may be right: there *are* some signs of unacceptable laxity in our academic standards. Although our very best students shine so brightly that they blind us to it, some of our middling students may indeed be creeping about under to cover of NES-induced vagueness, sliding through at a level that would make their GPA 2.0 or even lower, getting passes from faculty who have kind hearts or faculty who didn't understand that D+ work is supposed to get an NP at Santa Cruz.

There may, in other words, be a grain of truth in the repeated press assertions that our grading is lax. We should face that possibility, because the media are apparently not going to drop it. Despite the best efforts of the administration to make UCSC a serious player in the world of high tech, the press continues to harp on our flaky image, and, in particular, the absence of conventional grades that has (to be fair) characterized the transcripts of the majority of our students through the majority of our history.

The future of the world's greatest university

We must face our past as it is, and in part, because public perception is a real and tangible thing for a public university, that means facing up to the way we have been portrayed in myth and legend. Our traditional system — P/NP grading with narratives providing the bulk of the work of evaluation — is

firmly associated with flakiness in people's minds. Even today reporters describe our grading policy as a Pass / Fail system. The absence of conventional grades is considered to be the major cause of our enrollment problems, our retention problems, and the declining quality of our incoming students. It seems clear that UCSC will continue to provide fodder for journalistic sarcasm and ridicule until something is radically changed, stays changed for quite a few years, and is hammered home in press interviews by UCSC officials many times over.

We believe that until UCSC begins to use a conventional grading system, its position — almost at the bottom of the UC system by many different measures, such as the SAT scores of entering students — is unlikely to change. Students today do want a competitive institution and a record of taking seriously the struggle for excellence. Whatever the changes we make, and whatever the exact resolution of the problems with the actual business of writing and managing narrative evaluations — about which there is much more to be debated and discussed during the spring quarter — one thing is clear to us: voting in mandatory plus-and-minus letter grades for all undergraduates in all courses, as the Academic Senate finally did on February 23, is the best thing we could have done for our campus. It must not be reversed.

We hope that any call for a mail ballot to verify the support for that vote will result in an overwhelming majority in its favor. What the press has said about us over the past two decades is not fair, but we must face it as it is. They say we are flaky and nonserious and we do not grade our students' work. We cannot make the press do what is proper and just, but by adopting a full letter-grade system that is fully comparable and intertranslatable with those at the other UC campuses, we can at least ensure that no responsible journalist will have grounds for continuing to print this sort of nonsense, and that will be a lastingly positive contribution.

We certainly do believe there is hope for the future. Already things have slightly improved since February 23: although there have been whiny pieces like those in the *Mercury* by Sharon Noguchi and Lee Quarnstrom about changing the character of UCSC and the Santa Cruz community, in general the news coverage has started to say that we are moving in the direction of becoming more like other UC campuses. We should never forget that *being called similar to our sister campuses is not an insult*. The entire 9-campus University of California is the greatest university the world has ever seen, by almost any measure one might want to use, dwarfing most others in sheer size, and outshining all others in its combination of size and quality. UCSC and the seven other general campuses provide world-class undergraduate and graduate programs.

But at the moment all the other seven rank above UCSC in the most recent survey by *US News and World Report*. Being a bit more like those other campuses would not be bad at all. It is being so different from them that has been hurting us, more seriously than most people here realize, for quite a long time.

—Lincoln Taiz (Biology) and Geoffrey K. Pullum (Linguistics)

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