

SUMMARY OF SOME ARGUMENTS FOR CONTINUING UCSC'S NARRATIVE EVALUATION SYSTEM

To the Academic Senate, Santa Cruz Division:

When in October the faculty voted to adopt a grading system that requires instructors to assign conventional grades at the end of a course, the context of the discussion of whether or not to continue to require narrative performance evaluations at UCSC changed in important ways. Most of the original objections to narrative evaluations (assertions that narratives detract from UCSC's reputation, that they encourage less excellent students to apply here and matriculated students to work less hard, and that they compromise students' success in getting into graduate and professional schools or securing jobs, etc.) were relevant only in the context of the lack of a conventional grading system and therefore became moot once UCSC adopted such a system.

In addition, many faculty members recently have come to realize that the existing regulations pertaining to narrative evaluations already allow individual instructors the latitude they need to determine what constitutes appropriate, useful, and feasible narrative evaluation in any given class, depending on its size and nature.

The current Senate regulation 9.2.1 on narrative evaluations reads as follows:

9.2.1 At the end of the term, each instructor in a credit granting course shall prepare a written evaluation of each student who receives a grade of P, A, B, C, or D in his or her class. The narrative evaluation must evaluate the quality and characteristics of the student's performance in the class. (Refer to CEP Advisory Guidelines on Writing Narrative Evaluations.)

Contrary to what many UCSC faculty members believe, for several years CEP's Advisory Guidelines have contained only information about how narrative evaluations may be submitted to the Registrar and suggestions for menus and formats. (See web site: <http://reg.ucsc.edu/nes/handbook/>) They do not prescribe or proscribe content. This means that right now faculty members have the flexibility to submit whatever kind of evaluation is feasible, useful, and appropriate given the size, content, and methods of assessment of any given course. Faculty members who believe that the best they can do is submit a minimal summary statement are free to do so. Those who wish to reproduce electronically some form of their grade book may do that so as to show how a student's final grade has been determined. And faculty members who wish to contextualize a summary grade with a multi-dimensional performance evaluation may do so. In the last several months, several proposals for streamlining and reforming the NES have been circulating among faculty members, garnering considerable support. After considering these proposals and consulting widely with the faculty, CEP would submit for Senate review new Advisory Guidelines to make explicit the flexibility and options for preparing narrative evaluations that in fact now exist.

Having recognized the flexibility in content permitted by current regulations, CEP does not advocate going a step further to make the submission of narrative evaluations optional. CEP believes that to make narrative evaluations optional will have the effect, sooner or later, of diminishing their worth and significance. In the short run, doing so will prevent us from confronting the issues of whether some form of narrative performance evaluation can enhance a conventional grading system in important and valuable ways.

As Senators consider the matter of narrative evaluations in the new context described above, CEP offers the following observations:

1. A summary letter grade given at a course's end communicates general information about the quality of a student's achievement in relation to that course's expectations and in comparison with the performance of others in the class. It also places a quantitative value on that achievement so that grades can be converted into grade point averages, thereby permitting efficient ranking and sorting. A summary letter grade, however, gives no precise information about the nature of assigned work, the quality of effort, the extent of progress, the state of a student's initial preparation for course work, patterns of strengths and weaknesses, or notable instances of excellence or deficiency. On the one hand, whereas one student's C performance may be radically different from another's, a final grade cannot make any of the many distinctions which may be of use to graduate or professional programs, employers, or the students themselves. On the other hand, any ambiguity about the instructor's overall assessment of a student's work is resolved by the summary grade. With a system that includes both narrative and summary grade assessment, UCSC may well have the best of both worlds.
2. Given the widely recognized problems resulting from grade inflation, many colleges and universities now annotate transcripts in some way (for example, by providing the median grade in each course so one can tell whether an A- is above, at, or below the median grade in that course), and others are considering doing so. UCSC has in place a system to contextualize its grades and give substance to its GPA's. We should at least consider the problem of grade inflation before abandoning it.
3. Many instructors of both lower division and upper division courses do not find it pedagogically effective to give grades to on-going work during a quarter. Narrative performance evaluations permit these instructors to de-emphasize grades as a means of assessment during a course and then provide an explanation for the grades they assign at the term's end. There seems little rationale for taking away this option from those instructors who find more detailed, personalized evaluations both possible and effective when those who do not are already free to submit minimal summaries.
4. Whereas in some disciplines, circumstances, and professional situations, faculty members have observed that narrative evaluations were ignored in selection processes for admissions to post-graduate education, scholarships, awards, or employment, in other circumstances UCSC students have benefited from a transcript that includes narrative evaluations.

5. CEP has instructed the Registrar's Office to propose ways to revise the appearance of the narrative portion of a UCSC transcript to make it easier to read and more professional in appearance.

6. The new grade legislation permits students to take up to one quarter of their courses for grade notations of Pass/Not Passed and allows course sponsoring agencies, with the approval of CEP, to offer courses as "P/NP only." If there are no narrative evaluations, there is no meaningful assessment of students' work in these courses.

7. A great many of UCSC's alumni and current students support the continuation of narrative evaluations and attest to their value as enhancing their education and helping them to pursue graduate and professional education and secure employment. If overriding objections to narrative evaluations (such as workload issues) can be addressed, the considered opinions of students and alumni should be weighed carefully.

In conclusion, CEP urges that both the NES and the newly adopted grading system be maintained while we see if issues of workload can be resolved and while we determine whether the two systems will in fact work together to create a superior system of assessment that enhances the quality of undergraduate education at UCSC. Abolishing narrative evaluations is always a possibility, should we come to agree that their value is insignificant. Once that step is taken, however, there will be no turning back.

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