

January 18, 2000

GEORGE BROWN, CHAIRPERSON  
COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

Re: **The NES Discussion**

Dear George:

The answer to the question before us of the "usefulness" of the Narrative Evaluations will represent a major turning point in the history and working future of this campus regardless of how it turns out. As we work through this, let us take the opportunity, without any undue rush, to carefully assess the validity of the charge of "uselessness" and, if found to be so, to rise above the heap of average institutions and create a process that not only challenges the students to work at their limit but also to provide them with sufficient feed-back so that they can increase that limit.

In my time at UCSC, I have written many evaluations, having taught at least one introductory chemistry class (average audience of ca. 300) plus others each year and certainly I have read many more in my capacity of Senior Preceptor at Cowell and my long service on the Committee on Admissions and Financial Aid. I believe that the collective package of a student's evaluations, 36 for a regular student and 18 or so for a transferee, gives a true picture of what the student has accomplished and suggests the future capabilities of the student. No matter how poorly the evaluation is written or how mechanically stylized it appears, the collective result is consistent with other information, such as advisor and/or preceptor personal discussion with the student.

I am unclear as to whether the proponents of the demise of the "NES" are speaking more due to their perception of uselessness in transmitting valuable information to the student or to others, where appropriate, or to their desire to reduce their workload. The end result is the same. If it is truly workload, then it is natural for the quality of the evaluation to decline and, with that, it automatically becomes "less useful," which quickly becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Regardless of the true motivation, if the "NES" slips away, we will fall into a system of average grading to represent the true performance. I mean by this that we would use the accepted process of taking the combined work of the student and average it to produce a data point in a class distribution. This data point does not reflect the growth that the student has accomplished during the quarter. It can be burdened by a slow start, such as when a new area is started, and not reflect the true position for the student on the learning curve. A simple statement on the evaluation can easily explain the difference between an average grade and where the student really is in preparation to move forward in the subject area.

Since I believe that the evaluation has and should continue to have value, I submit the following plan to address the workload issue and to improve the value of the evaluation. I will appreciate being given time to discuss this with your Committee and/or at one of the fora.

### **"An Improved Narrative Evaluation System"**

1. A narrative evaluation, using the current description of quality and characteristics of the work performed, would be issued to all undergraduates who have earned a class ranking equivalent to

a classical grade of "B" or "A," i.e., ca. top 30% of the class.

2. A narrative evaluation would not be required to be issued to those undergraduates whose work has been judged to be in the area of general understanding of the course material, but without particular distinguishing features. This would apply to the classical grade group of "C," i.e., ca. next 50%.

3. For the small category that might receive a grade of "D," i.e., earned credit hours but not progress toward requirements, a uniform evaluation would be prepared by CEP to reflect this "marginal pass." This item would apply only if the grade of "D" becomes an allowable grade at UCSC. If not, this category would fall into the non-passing category, which is dealt with below in #4.

4. A uniform evaluation would be prepared by CEP that would automatically be recorded for students who received a failing grade of "F."

### **Comments on the Above Four Points**

1. Students who are performing better than the majority of their peers should be recognized and have comments made to describe those characteristics, that demonstrated this higher level of performance, in a formal evaluation of the work.

The availability of this evaluation might well improve the average performance of more high "C" students as they sought improved participation and success in class. Would it not be a happy day, when possibly 50% of the class were truly performing at the good to excellent level? Based on the fact that our students represent the best 12% in the state, we should expect higher performance. This plan might start that trend.

2. The middle 50% group has always been a problem. What can one say other than to give some vital statistics in a quantitative course? Everyone knows what a "C" grade means. This plan would decrease the evaluation writing workload by greater than 50%, when items 3 and 4 are included, with no loss in the reporting of meaningful academic information to both the student and ultimately to appropriate outsiders.

3. There are cases when a student tries a new field and does not catch on or becomes interested, but when an "honest" attempt with good attendance and participation is made. Such circumstances might warrant a grade of "D," if allowable in the future.

A draft of an uniform evaluation could be:

"This student regularly participated in the class but the quantity and quality of the work performed, while showing some gain in knowledge, does not certify the ability to move forward in this area or to receive credit toward any requirements."

4. Too many students perform unsatisfactorily for a variety of reasons. Some information needs to be conveyed as to why! A small menu of reasons could be prepared from which the best could be selected. Two samples are given below:

i. "This student did not attend or participate frequently enough to gain any academic recognition."

ii. "This student participated in the class, but the work submitted was not of sufficient quality to receive a passing grade."

Respectfully submitted,

Stanley M. Williamson