

Streamlining the NES and Renewing the Campus Commitment

The NES makes it possible to report an assessment of student performance that is more informative than a simple letter grade. Institutional commitment to narrative assessment has benefited our students and the campus. The benefits justify renewing that commitment, though to a reformed system that addresses the realities of campus growth and uses available technology to support faculty effort.

Here we discuss the benefits of providing written evaluations and then describe our proposed reforms of the NES. Our proposal emphasizes the flexibility available within the current system, which allows evaluations to range (at faculty discretion) from a multidimensional assessment to a summary grade supplemented by description of coursework. We also outline concrete steps to improve its implementation and provide support for faculty effort.

Students and many faculty find that the written evaluation system supports a culture with an emphasis on learning. Students have maintained their enthusiasm regarding the importance of written evaluations for their learning, even in a context that includes grades. Maintaining the centrality of written evaluations will continue to foster a learning-focused environment. Research points out the importance of multidimensional assessment for student learning, and indicates that even in the context of a summary grade, written assessment can support a learning-focused environment.

Other major universities are interested in following our innovations to address national concerns about assessment systems for student learning. Our experience with written evaluations and the potential of combining the strengths of written evaluations with summary grades place us in a leadership position.

The advantages of performance evaluations include:

- attracting good students through an innovative approach to assessment of learning,
- supporting a learning-focused environment and collaborative learning,
- countering grade inflation or explaining student records if grades are not inflated,
- evaluating student performance in classes taken on a pass/fail basis, and
- providing a more accurate and informative evaluation for graduate programs, employers, and the students themselves than is possible with letter grades alone.

Many graduate schools and employers indicate that written evaluations are an advantage to our students in many fields in obtaining graduate placements, jobs, and fellowships. This is supported by recent data on the success of our undergraduates in graduate schools. UCSC is 14th in the nation in the proportion of its undergraduate alumni who go on to achieve doctorates, outperforming all other UC campuses except Berkeley.

Maintaining our commitment to multidimensional evaluation of learning is especially important with the demographic changes in our student population. (Currently, 16% of our frosh come from underrepresented groups, the same average as the UC as a whole.) According to many alumni and students of color and many faculty members, multidimensional evaluations aid in the success of students who are first in their family to attend college. The evaluations help them understand what is expected in college and help them diagnose what they need to be doing to improve, while giving encouragement to build on their areas of strength.

We urge a “NO” vote on proposals to make narrative evaluations optional or to abolish them.

And we urge a “YES” vote on the Rogoff-Ladusaw Reform Resolution on page 3. Page 2 (of this reform proposal) summarizes the proposed reforms:

Rogoff-Ladusaw NES Reform Proposal Summary

1. We propose that the Committee on Educational Policy issue **revised guidelines for writing evaluations**, emphasizing that evaluations should succinctly report the quality and characteristics of student performance, and stressing flexibility for instructors in determining the extent of their evaluations.

CEP's guidelines are advisory only and cannot legislate content. However, guidelines will make it clear that the goals of requiring performance evaluations can be met by a wide range of evaluation types. (Discussions during the last year have revealed that the extent of faculty discretion has not been well known.) Below are illustrative guidelines and samples of different types of evaluations.

At the discretion of the instructor, student performance evaluations may range from a simple summary statement (which may be a letter grade with a brief description of coursework) to multidimensional evaluations.

The norm of **multidimensional evaluations** includes assessment of such dimensions of student performance as understanding of material, technical skills, going beyond requirements, timeliness, and improvement or unevenness in performance. For example,

Interdisciplinary course on the cultural basis of human development; involved essay writing on a twice-weekly basis. 138 students.

Overall, Afesa's work indicated a well developed understanding of the ideas of the course. Afesa made impressive progress in understanding the material, as evidenced by improvements in coherence and organization of ideas expressed. Afesa's seven 2-4 page essays and lab reports were usually of good, sound quality, reflecting active engagement with the topic, though in places the work should have been pushed further; later ones were very well developed, with clear connections between ideas and evidence to support the arguments. Afesa's six Reading Responses showed thoughtful engagement with the ideas. Her presentation on Gender Roles was outstanding.

Students were assessed on their final language proficiency by an ACTFL proficiency exam. The grade reflects the extent to which their skills improved during the course. This student's performance was as follows:

Listening comprehension:	satisfactory
Speaking:	poor
Reading comprehension:	excellent
Writing:	very good
Attendance and participation:	excellent

In difficult situations such as some large classes, a **simple statement** of quality (which may be a letter grade), along with a boilerplate coursework description for the class as a whole, may be provided instead of normal multidimensional evaluation. The form of coursework description is up to the instructor. It may consist of such information as a concise description of course content, the basis of student assessment, and/or perhaps the size of the class and standard of judgment. For example,

The course covered basic concepts of inorganic chemistry and qualitative analysis. The grade is based on a numerical average of two midterms and a final exam. There were 250 students in the class, of which 60% earned a grade of B or better.

Kevin's work earned a B-.

When a simple statement of the quality of student performance is the dominant form used for a course, comments may also be provided for some of the students (e.g., noting extraordinary contributions or mixed performance).

2. We request that the administration provide **support to simplify the process of writing evaluations**, with software and transitional staff consultants to assist interested faculty with templates and records.
3. We request that **fair policies for oversight of timeliness, if any are necessary, be devised jointly by faculty and administration.**
4. We request continuing support for the Registrars' work to **reformat the transcript** as a concise and professionally formatted document. (A model version of a 3-page transcript is available.)

Frequently asked questions about the Reform proposal

How does this address faculty workload issues?

- The text of a minimal evaluation could be generated from a single coursework description (provided for the class as a whole) plus the grade report.
- Several companies with user-friendly software applications are interested in tailoring their programs to our needs for both prose and list-form evaluations. The software would reduce the keystrokes and the need to cut-and-paste, and facilitate providing individual comments.

What value are minimal evaluations (a coursework description plus a letter grade)?

- A course description tells what sort of learning experience the letter grade evaluates (e.g., essays, multiple choice tests, or team or solo presentations or performances). This information is valuable to selection committees, and students indicate that they appreciate a record of the kind of work assignment that was the basis of a grade.
- The *possibility* of a more extensive evaluation positively influences student attitudes and performance.

Why issue performance evaluations on the official transcript? Are they redundant with feedback during the quarter?

In addition to its value for outside readers, the official evaluation transcript supports a campus culture in which students take learning goals seriously. The report that we give the 'outside world' tells the students what we value. Anticipation of the written evaluations at the end of the term orients students' attitudes and efforts during the quarter toward multiple aspects of learning. The cumulative official record also helps students detect patterns in their performance across quarters.

Is this costly? According to UCSC budget analysts, central cost does not significantly differentiate this proposal from a grades-only system. Both involve small transition costs; neither have major savings or costs over the current system (which costs about \$10-15 per student per year, most of which is required for any assessment system).

Resolution:

Whereas the Santa Cruz Division of the Academic Senate has been committed since the founding of the campus to providing a rich and challenging educational experience for its undergraduates, including multidimensional assessment of student performance;

Whereas the campus has grown to the point where new guidelines for student performance evaluations are needed that will reaffirm UCSC's commitment to its educational goals while allowing for flexibility in the range and extent of student assessment;

It is Resolved:

That the Santa Cruz Division of the Academic Senate affirms its commitment to multidimensional assessment of student performance whenever practical;

That at the discretion of the instructor, student evaluations may range from a coursework description plus a simple summary of the quality of student performance, which may be a grade, to more extensive multidimensional assessment;

That the Santa Cruz Division of the Academic Senate affirms its commitment to maintaining the status of student performance evaluations in the official transcript;

That the transcript be formatted concisely and professionally to provide an easy-to-read report of the student's evaluations.

That this resolution serve as the basis for the UCSC administration and Academic Senate committees to provide the infrastructure support and fair policies to implement this intent.

Respectfully submitted, Barbara Rogoff and William A. Ladusaw, and colleagues