

## **Argument for the REPEAL OF MANDATORY EVALUATIONS**

We think our main concern should be the content of the students' files when they graduate from UC Santa Cruz and apply for a job or for graduate school.

The national standard is as follows:

Essay, GRE, GPA and transcript, three letters of recommendation, plus additional material such as sample papers and artwork.

We believe that this is the right amount of material and it represents a good balance between anonymous grades and personal evaluation.

As it stands now, Santa Cruz students will also have one evaluation for each course they attended. Many of the courses are not essential to future employers who must screen for the few evaluations that they find useful. Most employers will simply skip the evaluations altogether and rely on the letters of recommendation. We believe the faculty's time is better spent by focusing on the letters of recommendation rather than writing evaluations for each student.

Note that we simply propose to repeal MANDATORY evaluations. This was intentional. We wanted to leave the possibility of allowing the instructor to provide voluntary evaluations for some or all of the students. However this should be at the discretion of the instructor. Voluntary evaluations would probably be used only in cases when the instructor is in a position to write something meaningful. In particular, templates would become superfluous.

Whatever system we decide on should acknowledge the *de facto* system we have now. An evaluation may simply say: B+ performance. However, such evaluations are redundant. Course descriptions should only be used if the instructor thinks they will add to a student's file without cluttering it.

### **SUMMARY**

We propose to repeal MANDATORY evaluations, leaving the possibility of setting up a voluntary system. The student's file should be a short, convincing summary of the student's work.

Just as a matter of democracy, faculty should have the opportunity for a straight up or down vote on whether to repeal mandatory evaluations. Such a vote should not preclude the opportunity to consider an alternative voluntary system afterwards.

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## **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.

November 13, 2000

## **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

## Narrative Evaluations and Educational Culture

by Students for Evaluations Reform

There is a reason why there has been such a groundswell of student engagement in pedagogical debate surrounding the issue of Narratives and their reform. It is a commitment to the educational culture that brought many of us here in the first place, that has helped keep us here, and that will help us move forward productively once we leave. This commitment has motivated the participation, the extended dialog, and the organizing that so many of us have been engaged in.

And after a year, despite the various changes in the contours of the debate, student commitment to the NES as the primary and central evaluation system of the university has not diminished. In fact, it has become increasingly clear that what is at stake is the distinguished character of undergraduate education at UCSC, of which the NES is an indispensable centerpiece.

### An Argument for Culture

The narrative evaluation system, even when supplemented by grades, provides for an educational culture that emphasizes educational content and quality. Too often, the entire educational tenure of a student is seen as the means towards a transcript which is incommensurably separate from the educational experience of the student. Narratives work decidedly in the service of a different and more reasonable relationship to the learning process: one in which we see our education as its own culminating goal. The narrative evaluation system privileges learning over ranking and thereby makes learning our highest priority at all stages of our student career.

It is essential that the narratives be recorded as our official transcript, not only because it sets a standard for a nuanced portrait of student involvement, but because this official inclusion changes the focus of a student's relationship to their professors. Multidimensional evaluation as an unofficial mode of communication between faculty and students would become the secondary focus for students' interactions with faculty if moved to the background in an institutional culture prioritizing ranking. Narrative evaluation as the central institutional tool for the evaluation of students focuses student-faculty communication more toward substance, away from the quantitative expedients implicit in a grades-only system.

This has not changed with the presence of letter grades, since it is still evident that the narratives are the only institutional outlet for the expression of some of the most crucial components of a student's work throughout the quarter. Beyond the artifacts of student performance that are averaged to come up with a grade, a student's learning during a quarter consists of work done in the process of engaging in the course.

The daily class activities – the ability to hold fruitful discussions, to formulate and fine-tune provocative and stimulating questions, to participate in the education of colleagues – are the invisible substance of a strong education, made visible by a narrative evaluation transcript. Personal relationships among students and between students and faculty are encouraged, nurtured, and expressed as part of the work of an institution with a strong narrative evaluation system.

### Cultural Solutions

The types of priorities that narratives set for UCSC lead us to believe that the flaws of the NES can be dealt with culturally. Just as narratives are a versatile evaluation of student performance, they are capable of being adapted to the type of teaching and learning environment they are employed in. Narratives are not gutted by a diversity of formats and applications. Some classes will tend towards more detail, some towards less personal and more general evaluation.

This versatility is a strength of the evaluation system, but it is the possibility of an evaluation with great detail and personality that makes the system vital. It is also, incidentally, what makes the NES a system that attracts some of the best and brightest students, who very quickly outgrow the narrow parameters of a quantitative scale of ranking.

### Powerful Motivations

Throughout our year of organizing around narratives, we have had substantial discussions with students whose support for narratives is motivated by diverse perspectives we think it important to incorporate in the discourse of evaluation reform. Although the most common motivations have been spelled out above, and now just as ever before the commitment to the culture of narratives is a prime student concern, less common perspectives often tell a more concrete story of the impact of narratives. These include, among others, the testimony of women in the sciences (a field in which women are commonly underrepresented) who cite the NES among other factors that have contributed to their excellence in UCSC science departments.

In addition, students who are the first in their family to gain higher education often credit the evaluations with demystifying expectations they would not otherwise have understood. Other students claim that the narrative evaluations were a precondition to the creativity they were able to bring to their field.

Common to these is a motivation that the narratives serve to strengthen. It is the motivation of those who understand the fragile complexity of an educational project. The narratives help students recover an interest in learning for its own sake, after many of us experience the damage to our educational motivation that derives from the priorities we experience at most high schools.

We students are interested in supporting the centrality of a different, more reasonable method not only for our four years of learning, but in the hopes that the NES will make impact on the pedagogical culture of the country. Commensurate with this, we support the current CEP and Rogoff-Ladusaw proposals as the best avenues to achieve these ends. We encourage you to look upon this vote as an opportunity to reaffirm UCSC's commitment to a form of assessment that promotes an exemplary culture of learning.

## **STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF THE NARRATIVE EVALUATION SYSTEM FROM THE UCSC ALUMNI ASSOCIATION**

To the Academic Senate, Santa Cruz Division:

We—current and former leaders of the UC Santa Cruz Alumni Association, members of the UCSC Foundation Board, and a former Regent of the University of California—are writing you in support of the Narrative Evaluation System (NES), to be considered at the November 27 Senate meeting.

The alumni of the university have strong opinions on the NES. We are concerned that this next decision comes too soon after the recent, lengthy discussion of mandatory grades. The decision for mandatory grades changes the dynamics of the debate. We believe that adequate time is required for a thoughtful discussion of the new situation.

We are in a unique position to represent UCSC graduates. Over the past year we have heard from hundreds of alumni about the value of the NES to their academic experience. We have also found a high level of support for narrative evaluations among current students. Many alumni and students told us that the NES was one of the key reasons they chose to attend this UC campus. Alumni continue to believe that the NES contributed to their success at UCSC and to their subsequent careers.

During the discussion of mandatory grades, alumni representatives have communicated with nearly the entire faculty about this issue. Just as the faculty members have graciously considered our views, we have carefully considered the arguments being made in opposition to the NES. Now that the campus has instituted mandatory grades, it can no longer be argued that the NES penalizes students. While we understand the workload issues and the structural problems with the NES, we believe two things: (1) that the benefit of the NES far outweighs any detriment, especially in light of potential enhancements (noted in the October 19, 2000, Committee on Educational Policy report AS/SCP/1290-1) that can significantly reduce workload concerns; (2) if there are problems with the NES, they can, and must, be solved.

On the first point, we continue to believe that the NES exemplifies best practices in student assessment. The Narrative Evaluation System:

- embodies the university's commitment to the highest quality undergraduate education
- fosters a challenging learning environment
- provides meaningful feedback to students and to future reviewers of students' academic performance
- combats grade inflation
- recognizes students whose work exceeds expectations
- rewards group effort and teamwork
- describes academic achievement and improvement to academic performance that cannot be adequately represented by a letter or number
- provides qualitative feedback and specific, constructive suggestions on how every student can improve
- supports academic risk-taking by students

- prepares students for future careers where written evaluations have become the standard for performance review

In short, the NES supports Ernest Boyer's recommendation—in the Carnegie Foundation's *College: The Undergraduate Experience in America*—that faculty “give students careful and concise criticisms (that) help them understand the strength and weaknesses of their performance.”

On the second point, we believe that the NES as currently practiced is flexible enough to suit the needs of any particular discipline or course. Faculty members who do not value narrative evaluations can produce textual equivalents of their grade books. Faculty members who do value narratives can write whatever they deem useful for their teaching and their students. We hope that your decision-making process will provide for consideration of proposals to meet the needs of the faculty during preparation of the NES, while leaving the NES in place.

UCSC alumni remain committed to this outstanding university. In our view, narrative evaluations are an essential part of what makes UCSC unique. We therefore hope that the Academic Senate will preserve and seek to revitalize the NES. We are confident that your deliberations will result in a rich, multifaceted student assessment system consistent with faculty workload requirements.

Respectfully Submitted,

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