

Committee on Educational Policy
REPORT ON THE PENDING SENATE BUSINESS REGARDING NARRATIVE
EVALUATIONS

To the Academic Senate, Santa Cruz Division:

On December 3, 1999, at a special meeting of the Academic Senate, a motion was introduced to institute a conventional grading system at UCSC and to make narrative evaluations an optional rather than mandatory part of an instructor's assessment of students' course work. At a regularly scheduled meeting on February 23, 2000, the Senate voted to divide the question, deciding at that meeting to adopt a conventional grading system and deferring the matter of narrative evaluations to the next regular meeting scheduled for May 31. That meeting did not take place.

Currently, the proposal to adopt a conventional grading system is being decided by mail ballot. If the new grading regulations are approved and if the pending motion or other motions are introduced to make narrative evaluations optional or to abolish them altogether, CEP recommends that those motions be defeated at this time so that the faculty can consider the utility of a revised conception of narrative evaluations in the new context of mandatory grades.

In recent months, the context of the discussion of whether or not to continue to require narrative performance evaluations at UCSC has changed in two important ways. First, 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.) are relevant only in the context of the lack of a conventional grading system and therefore become moot once UCSC adopts such a system.

Second, 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/new/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 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. 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.
2. 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.
3. 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.

4. It now seems very likely that software will soon be available to simplify both the drafting and submission of narratives. This fall some faculty members have seen promising preliminary demonstrations provided by a company that is willing to try to develop a product that would meet UCSC's needs because it sees the possibility of marketing it to other colleges and universities. If faculty members think that narrative evaluations have educational value and represent enhanced assessment in some contexts, it seems premature to abolish narratives just at the point when the technology to reduce significantly their impact on workload may be coming into existence.

5. Plans have already been made by the Registrar's Office 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. 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 over-riding 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, before the existing regulations on narrative evaluations be altered, Senators enter into careful and collegial discussion of the question of the value of a flexible, feasible system of narrative evaluation in the context of the new grading regulations. 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.

Respectfully submitted,

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY:

Donald Brenneis

Margaret Brose

Robert Chang, Student Representative

Mark Franko

Claire Gu

William Ladusaw, Provosts' Representative

Isaac Menashe, Student Representative

Justin Revenaugh

Carol Freeman, Chair