TO: Faculty Senate, University of Idaho  
FROM: Teaching and Advising Committee (TeAC)  
RE: Proposal to Adopt Plus/Minus Grading, with Report  
DATE: 31 October 2018  

The Teaching and Advising Committee recommends that a plus/minus grading system be implemented at the University of Idaho beginning Fall Semester 2023. The recommended plus/minus grading system proposed would include grades from A to F, but not include the grades of A+ and D-. This is the same grade range used, for example, by Washington State University, Lewis Clark State College, and several regional and peer institutions. All colleges and universities in Idaho other than UI, use a plus/minus grade system.

Votes in favor of adopting a plus/minus system of grading were cast by faculty representatives from the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (two members), the College of Engineering, the College of Art and Architecture, the College of Letters, Arts, and Social Sciences (two members), and a student representative (ASUI Vice President); one member expressed support for plus/minus grading systems but abstained from voting; one faculty member (CLASS) also abstained.

In a separate vote to specify the precise range of grades to recommend to Faculty Senate, the committee voted unanimously to approve a plus/minus system that does not include A+ or D-.

List of Sections and Subsections of this Report:
- Proposed Changes to UI Catalog to Adopt a Plus/Minus Grading System (pp. 1-3)  
- Supplemental Notes on the Changes Proposed to the Catalog (pp. 3-4)  
- Rationale for Shifting from a Whole Letter Grade system to a Plus/Minus Grading System (p. 4)  
- Responses to Several Perceptions and Concerns Expressed by Faculty and Students about Shifting to Plus/Minus Grading (pp. 4-5)  
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Proposed Changes to UI Catalog, from the Teaching and Advising Committee, recommended to take effect Fall Semester 2023 to Adopt a Plus/Minus Grading System

Note: This proposal excludes the grades of A+ and D-. See supplemental notes on these recommended changes, a rationale, and responses to select questions and concerns, included below the specific changes highlighted in the catalog language (deleted language highlighted in red, with strikeouts, and new language to be added, highlighted in blue).

https://catalog.uidaho.edu/general-requirements-academic-procedures/e-grades/
UI 2018-2019 Catalog

E-1. Grading System

E-1-a

For purposes of reporting and record, academic work is graded as follows: A-superior; A-; B+; B-above average; B; C+; C-average; C-; D+; D-below average; F-failure; I-incomplete work of passing quality (see regulation F); W-withdrawal; WA-withdrawal to audit; WU-withdrawal from the university; P-pass (see below); IP-in progress (see E-2); N-unsatisfactory and must be repeated (used only in ENGL 101 and ENGL 102); S-satisfactory (used only in CEU courses); CR-Credit, and NC-No Credit (may be used only in professional development courses).

E-2. In-Progress (IP) Grades.

E-2-a. Grades in Undergraduate Senior Thesis or Senior Project

The grade of IP (in progress) may be used to indicate at least minimally satisfactory progress in undergraduate courses such as senior thesis or senior project that have the statement "May be graded IP" in the course description. When the thesis or project is accepted, the IP grades are to be removed (see E-2-c). Grades of IP in undergraduate courses are considered to represent grades of at least C or P. If, in any given semester, the instructor considers the student's progress unsatisfactory, an appropriate letter grade (C-,D+, D or F) should be assigned for that semester.

E-2-b. Grades in Graduate Research Courses

The grade of IP (in progress) may be used in courses 500 (Master's Research and Thesis), 599 (Non-thesis Master's Research), and 600 (Doctoral Research and Dissertation). When the thesis, dissertation, or other research document is accepted, or when a student ceases to work under the faculty member who is supervising his or her research, the IP grades are to be removed (see below). Grades of IP in graduate courses are considered to represent at least grades of B or P. If, in any given semester, the faculty member supervising the student's research considers the student's progress unsatisfactory, a regular letter grade (C+, C, C-, D+, D, or F) should be assigned.

E-2-c. Removal of IP Grades

Departments may use on a department-wide basis either the P/F grading system, or regular letter grades, as well as P, when removing the previously assigned IP grades (e.g., a student who enrolled for six credits in course 500 one semester, four credits another semester, and five credits an additional semester could have 15 credits of IP grades removed with different grades for each of the blocks of credit registered for each semester, such as six credits of A, four credits of B, and five credits of P).

E-4. Computing Grade-Point Averages

Grades are converted by assigning the following number of points per credit for each grade: A-(4.0); A- (3.7); B+ (3.3); B (3.0); B- (2.7); C+ (2.3); C (2.0); C- (1.7); D+ (1.3); D (1.0); D- (0.7); F (0.0). In computing the grade-point average, neither credits attempted nor grade points earned are considered for the following: courses graded I, IP, P, S, W, WU, N, CR, NC, correspondence courses,
continuing education units, credits earned under regulation I, or courses taken at another institution. Credit earned at non-U.S. institutions is recorded as pass (P) or fail (F), except for some courses taken through an approved study abroad program.

[The UI considers only the Institutional grade-point average official. Although both institutional and overall grade-point averages are printed on transcripts, the overall grade-point average (which includes transfer courses) is informational only. To calculate a grade-point average divide the Quality Points (course credits times the points assigned for the grade earned) by the GPA Hours (course credits attempted not including grades of I, IP, P, W, WU, or N). Earned Hours indicate the total number of semester credits successfully completed (course grades of A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, or P earned). Grades of P are included in Earned Hours but do not earn any quality points; grades of F are included in GPA Hours, but not in Earned Hours.]

E-5. Replacing Grades

E-5-b. Replacing a Grade by Repeating a Course

A student who has received a D+, D or F in a course at UI may repeat the course at the UI provided credit has not been earned in a more advanced vertically related course in the same subject area. Although all grades remain on the record, the first repeat will replace the grade and credit earned initially in the course. The second and subsequent repeats of the same course will be averaged in the student's institutional GPA. See the College of Law section for the exception to this regulation applicable to students in that college.

Supplemental Notes and Observations on the Proposed Changes:
1. Plus/Minus grading to be implemented beginning Fall semester 2023. This should provide sufficient time to transition to a plus/minus grading scale and provide for advance notice to incoming undergraduate and graduate students about this upcoming change.
2. A grade of C or better is still required to receive a grade of S.
3. The plus/minus system proposed above provides for a full range of grades from A to D, and does not use plus or minus grades for the failing grade of F. There is not an A+ grade available in this scale—this maintains the grade of A as well as the 4.0 as the top of the grading scale; the D- is not available—to maintain our current grade system criteria, this continues to draw a line at D rather than D-, for a passing grade and may prevent inadvertent awarding of a D- grade by faculty who either think it would be a passing grade, or who think it would not be a passing grade. The perception that a D- grade is too marginal to be considered in the same category as "below average" in the way that a D+ and D may be considered, and yet also too close to register a meaningful distinction from a failing grade, may be reasons why some institutions do not include the D- in their grading systems. These proposed changes would match the same range of plus/minus grades (excluding A+ and D-) used, for example, at Lewis Clark State College, Washington State University, Utah State University, and the University of Wyoming.
4. Institutions vary on whether descriptive, definitional language is attached for each grade and grade range, such as Distinguished and/or Superior, Above Average, Average and/or Adequate or Acceptable, or Below Average or Marginal. The revisions suggested above follow the lead of institutions that do not try to parse out precisely such definitions, because typically the same term is used for two to three different grades, which itself may pose a contradiction when, for example,
all grades in the B range are defined as above average, or all grades in the C range are defined as average.

5. These specific changes to the UI catalog would not apply to the College of Law, which already uses a plus/minus grading system as noted in the current catalog, and which therefore already has an approved system in place for its own range of plus/minus grades.

**Rationale for Shifting from a Whole Letter Grade system to a Plus/Minus Grading System**

- Plus/minus grades letter grades provide for a more specific representation of a student’s performance than a whole grade letter system.
- An academic transcript with plus/minus grades provides a more nuanced account of a student’s academic performance.
- A transcript of plus/minus grades can sharpen academic advising to support students’ progress towards degree.
- Plus/minus grades can support and clarify a sense of academic integrity, both in the student’s individual academic record and in differentiations/distributions of grades assigned among students.
- Transferring credits and grades from other Idaho colleges and universities, and also cooperative/shared degree programs between the University of Idaho and Washington State University (which uses this proposed plus/minus system) will enable one-to-one equivalencies, be more transparent, and more equitable.
- Other Idaho institutions use plus/minus grading, and it may be that the Idaho State Board of Education supports continued efforts to align the grading systems of the state’s institutions, as the institutions work in other ways to align and to clarify what institutions share in common, such as ongoing efforts to align select courses in general education.
- USAC and other study abroad program grades may be easier to transfer.
- Students may be motivated to persist to achieve a higher grade when there are at least ten passing grades possible in a plus/minus system compared to four grades in a whole letter grade system: with sustained effort, incremental improvement may enable a student to achieve the next higher grade.
- Faculty would have and may appreciate the flexibility to decide grades more readily in borderline cases.

**Responses to Several Perceptions and Concerns Expressed by Faculty and Students about Shifting to Plus/Minus Grading**

**Concern:** Students with 4.0 GPAs may have their ‘perfect record’ undermined.

**Response:** This may occur in a transition to a more accurate record of a student’s academic performance. Note, however, that the number and percentage of seniors who graduate with 4.0 GPAs is small, less than 3%. For UI graduates earning undergraduate degrees from 2015-2017, 2.9% (104 students of nearly 3500 graduates) graduated with 4.0 GPAs (104/3492 = .029).

**Concern:** Students may be more likely to challenge grades when they just miss achieving the next higher grade increment.

**Response:** As at present, faculty determine grades that students earn and achieve, and as before, continue to need to communicate as fully as possible criteria for evaluation to support student’ education and learning. As noted above, some faculty may decide that they can decide borderline
grade situations more readily, when in a plus/minus system shifting a grade increment involves a significantly smaller percentage than in a whole letter grade system. The priority remains awarding grades that are more closely commensurate with students’ performance than what is possible to specify under a whole letter grade system.

**Concern:** Might the shift to plus/minus grading affect enrollments and morale among students?  
**Response:** Other peer and regional institutions with plus/minus grading have experienced strong enrollments, and once established, the plus/minus system in due course becomes the anticipated ‘norm,’ as it is with all other university and colleges in Idaho, as well as with several of designated official peer- and aspirational-institutions, and also at Washington State University.

**Concern:** Might some students’ overall cumulative GPAs be affected negatively under a plus/minus system, particularly with students whose C average (2.0) may slip to C- (1.7), placing them on academic probation?  
**Response:** As research and the Teaching and Advising Committee report shows, studies vary a bit on this question, with some institutions showing no shift in the mean GPA following a change to plus/minus grading, another study showed a slight shift downward (-0.03) that was not statistically significant, while another study also showed a very slight decline. As the University of Texas stated when announcing its shift to plus/minus grading (to match all other institutions in Texas), for the substantial majority of students “effects on GPA will likely even out.”

**Research Report of the Teaching and Advising Committee on the Question of Adopting a Plus/Minus Grading System**

The Teaching & Advising Committee has explored different perspectives on the prospect of shifting from the current whole letter grade system to a plus/minus grading system. This inquiry included internal surveys of UI faculty (2016) and UI students (2017), and review of research reports from other colleges and universities, with examples from institutions that shifted to plus/minus grading scales as well as those that decided against such a shift.

Members of the committee acknowledge different perspectives on shifting to plus/minus grading, including varying degrees of support as well as expressions of reservation or opposition. Those who support shifting to plus/minus grading accord with the majority of UI faculty (60%) who favor switching to plus/minus grading. Some TeAC members voiced reservations about a shift, with concerns that echo those expressed by approximately a third of surveyed faculty, who anticipate, for example, that students may challenge grades more frequently under a plus/minus system. TeAC also recognizes that 65% of students are strongly opposed to a plus/minus system (at least 77% overall oppose a plus/minus system).

A representative sampling of the range of reasons and sentiments over this issue are collected at the end of this report, excerpted from comments by faculty and by students. These comments are preceded by a series of excerpts and encapsulations of studies from other universities. Full results from the surveys also are available.

**Summary-Review** observations from the committee’s findings, reflections, and conversations follow. As might be anticipated, particularly given such different perspectives on this issue, any ‘final’ determination and decision proceeds initially with the committee presenting these findings and
deliberations to the Vice Provost of Academic Initiatives, and to Faculty Senate for representative consideration, and these representatives in turn report to the university faculty and to the president.

Recent History of this Issue at UI: in spring 2005 UI faculty approved shifting to a Plus/Minus system of grading (FC-05-025, vote to approve by Faculty Council was 10-2, with one abstention; approx. 3/8/05; approved at General Faculty meeting 5/4/05): President Tim White vetoed the proposed change (6/28/05).

Here is the plus/minus grading system proposed in 2005 (FC-05-025), as quoted below:

“The University of Idaho uses letter grades and the four (4) point maximum grading scale. The grade A is the highest possible grade, and grades below D are considered failing. Plus (+) or minus (-) symbols are used to indicate grades that fall above or below the letter grades, but grades of A+ and D- are not used. For purposes of calculating grade points and averages, the plus (+) is equal to .3 and minus (-) equals .7 (e.g., a grade B+ is equivalent to 3.3 and A- is 3.7). (This statement would replace language in first two and half lines of E-1 Grading System in current catalog)

Grades are converted by assigning the following number of points per credit for each grade: A=4, A- =3.7, B+=3.3, B=3, B-=2.7, C+=2.3, C=2, C- = 1.7, D+=1.3, D=1, F=0.

(This would replace the first sentence in E-4 Computing Grade-Point Averages in current catalog).”

Observations from the Teaching and Advising Committee

A shift to plus/minus grading may register most visibly among the less than nearly 3% of graduating (undergraduate) students who have 4.0 GPAs (e.g., 104 students of 3500 graduating seniors, 2015-2017). It is to be expected that plus/minus grading would affect other students along a distribution within each grade range in which, for instance, students who might be likely to receive B- grades (according to, for example, an instructor’s point system) would fare differently than students who tend to receive B+ grades, with additional possibility of variation if some faculty members end up altering their grading practices in a shift to a plus/minus system. In other words, in aggregate, the distribution of GPAs for undergraduates should not be affected greatly by a shift to plus/minus grading though some studies suggest that overall GPAs may decrease; nevertheless, a high percentage of UI students oppose such a shift.

The committee’s discussion included the challenges posed for students in some disciplines where a plus/minus system could mean that it would be more difficult to earn a high grade—that is, the amount of work required to earn an A would increase “exponentially” for high-achieving students, and also that the number of students who challenge grades may increase under a plus/minus system. There was also some discussion about how precisely faculty could accurately differentiate among different percentages or grades within a range, in order to assign grades in a plus/minus system. On the other hand, the authority to assign and determine grades always rest with faculty, who must assign grades in any system of grading, whether there are whole grades or plus/minus grades.

Another concern has to do with undergraduate students who are on academic probation because of a cumulative GPA that falls below 2.0. Under a plus/minus system that counts the grade of C-, for example, the GPA equivalent for a C- grade (and for a cumulative C- average) is approximately 1.7. A similar concern is that students on financial aid must maintain Satisfactory Academic Progress for renewal of aid, which for undergraduates includes a minimum 2.5 GPA—“At the end of each
academic year, a student’s University of Idaho Grade Point Average (GPA), completion rate of all attempted classes (Pace) and maximum number of attempted credits are evaluated to determine if satisfactory progress towards a degree has been made” (https://www.uidaho.edu/financial-aid/keep-your-aid).

Examples of Plus/Minus Grading Systems

Example of Plus/Minus Grading System adopted by Western Kentucky University: As noted below, in approving a shift to plus/minus grading (2008), Western Kentucky University considered four different plus/minus grading systems; they adopted a “widely used” scale for a full range of grades from A+ to F, with no reduction in G.P.A. for a C-, as follows:

A+ (4.3)
A (4.0)
A- (3.7)
B+ (3.3)
B (3.0)
B- (2.7)
C+ (2.3)
C (2.0)
C- (2.0)
D+ (1.3)
D (1.0)
D- (1.0)
F (0.0).

For comparison note that Boise State University, in contrast to WKU, does not award extra points for an A+ (4.0 rather than 4.3), and a C- receives 1.7 (rather than WKU’s 2.0). As noted further below, BSU's scale is the same as that implemented at the University of Maryland in Fall 2012.

Example of Plus/Minus Grading Scale at Boise State University

A+ 4.0
A 4.0
A- 3.7
B+ 3.3
B 3.0
B- 2.7
C+ 2.3
C 2.0
C- 1.7
D+ 1.3
D 1.0
D-0.7
F 0

Example of Plus/Minus Grading Scale at Lewis Clark State College (same range as Washington State University, Utah State University, and University of Wyoming).

Grade Points Status
A 4.0 Distinguished
A- 3.67  Distinguished
B+ 3.33  Superior
B  3.0   Superior
B- 2.67  Average
C+ 2.33  Average
C  2.0   Average
C- 1.67  Below average
D+ 1.33  Below average
D  1.0   Below average
F  0.0   Failing

Additional Examples of Peer and Regional Institutions with Plus/Minus Grading
- Iowa State University (Aspirational Peer, full range, A to F, A/4.0, B+/3.67 ...)
- University of Nebraska, Lincoln (fullest range, A+ to F, A+/4.0, A/4.0, A-/3.67 ...)
- University of New Hampshire, Durham
- University of Wyoming (ranges A to F, with no D-, A/4.0, A-/3.667, B+/3.333)
- Utah State University (A to F, no D-, A/4.0, A-/3.67 ...)
- Washington State University (ranges A to F, with no D-, A/4.0, A-/3.7 ...)
- Virginia Tech (Aspirational Peer, ranges A to F, A/4.0, A-/3.67 ...)
- University of Montana (full range from A to F, A/4.0, A-/3.7 ...)
- Oregon State University (full range from A to F, A/4.0, A-/3.7, ...)

Idaho State University (full range from A to F, A/4.0, A-/3.7, ..., with grades in the A-range described as Excellent Performance, B range/Good Performance, C range/Adequate Performance, D range/Marginal Performance, F/Unacceptable Performance)

Additional comparison: the conversion scale used by the College Board is as follows A+ or 97 to 100 = 4.0 A or 93 to 96 = 4.0 A- or 90 to 92 = 3.7 B+ or 87 to 89 = 3.3 B or 83 to 86 = 3.0 B- or 80 to 82 = 2.7 C+ 77 to 79 = 2.3 C or 73 to 76 = 2.0 C- or 70 to 72 = 1.7 D+ or 67 to 69 = 1.3 D or 65 to 66 = 1.0 F or below 65 = 0.

An alternative grading system uses fewer points of differentiation (7-8 points along the scale): 4.0, 3.5, 3.0, 2.5, 2.0, 1.5, 1.0, 0, but this is not typical and not the case with other institutions in Idaho. Some committee members agreed that this alternative scale offers some greater ability to differentiate further among students' grades relative to a whole grade system while not prompting some of the perceived difficulties and effects of a finer grading scale, such as the plus/minus system (11-12 points along the scale).

UI 2018-2019 catalog, excerpts on the current grading system.
E-1. Grading System
E-1-a
For purposes of reporting and record, academic work is graded as follows: A-superior; B-above average; C-average; D-below average; F-failure; I-incomplete work of passing quality (see regulation F); W-withdrawal; WA-withdrawal to audit; WU-withdrawal from the university; P-pass (see below); IP-in progress (see E-2); N-unsatisfactory and must be repeated (used only in ENGL 101 and ENGL 102); S-satisfactory (used only in CEU courses); CR-Credit, and NC-No Credit (may be used only in professional development courses).
E-4. Computing Grade-Point Averages
Grades are converted by assigning the following number of points per credit for each grade: A-4, B-3, C-2, D-1, F-0. In computing the grade-point average, neither credits attempted nor grade points earned are considered for the following: courses graded I, IP, P, S, W, WU, N, CR, NC, correspondence courses, continuing education units, credits earned under regulation I, or courses taken at another institution. Credit earned at non-U.S. institutions is recorded as pass (P) or fail (F), except for some courses taken through an approved study abroad program.

**Internal UI Surveys: Perspectives on Plus/Minus Grading**

The Teaching and Advising Committee discussed perspectives from undergraduates (Spring 2017 survey, see Appended Studies) and faculty (Spring 2016 survey, see Appended Studies) on a potential shift from the current whole letter grade system to a Plus/Minus grading scale, for undergraduates. *Note:* other public colleges and universities in Idaho use a Plus/Minus grading scale for undergraduates.

**Faculty Survey:** The Spring 2017 survey shows that of 269 UI instructional faculty surveyed, 60% strongly agree or agree that the UI should shift to a Plus/Minus system (64% of faculty had taught at a college that used a Plus/Minus grading system); 78% believe that a Plus/Minus system would “allow faculty members greater precision in assessing student work”; 35% believe that a Plus/Minus system would “lead to more student appeals of grades.” *Note: Nearly ten years prior to this 2016 survey, UI faculty approved shifting to Plus/Minus grading, but President Tim White vetoed that proposed change.*

**Student Survey:** The Spring 2016 survey included a concise rationale for exploring a shift to Plus/Minus grading, along with contextual information of several examples of peer and aspirational institutions that use a Plus/Minus system, and a sample grading scale from Boise State University.

The spring 2016 survey of 820 UI students showed that they overwhelmingly oppose a shift to a Plus/Minus system (approximately 65% strongly disagree with and 12% somewhat disagree with). 44% of those students did not have experience with a Plus/Minus grading system; 31% had experienced a Plus/Minus system in high school. Students disagreed that Plus/Minus grading will allow for “more accurate representation of students’ performance,” will make it “easier to assign grades in borderline cases,” will reduce “grade inflation,” and will reduce “discrepancies when courses are transferred from another university or college.” Students also disagreed that a Plus/Minus system will make them “more competitive in the job market,” “more competitive in applying to graduate programs and/or professional schools”; they also disagreed strongly that a Plus/Minus system will help them to “earn a higher GPA at the University of Idaho,” or that a Plus/Minus system will help them to “better calculate” their GPA. 77.21% of the students stated that they have a scholarship or financial aid that depends upon maintaining a certain GPA; 60% stated that their current GPA was in the range of 3.5-4.0; 29% stated that their GPA was 3.0-3.49; 9% in the 2.5-2.99 range; 1% in the 2.0-2.49 range. *Note: according to the UI Registrar’s office, for UI graduates earning undergraduate degrees from 2015-2017, 2.9% (104 students of nearly 3500 graduates) graduated with 4.0 GPAs (104/3492 = .029).*
External Perspectives and Studies

The committee also surveyed and reviewed studies and rationales from other colleges and universities, including a number that have shifted to Plus/Minus grading and instances where faculty elected not to switch to or to reestablish Plus/Minus scales.

Excerpts and encapsulations of those studies appear immediately below, beginning with examples of institutions that decided to shift to a plus/minus system, followed by examples of more divided and also negative perspectives on implementing a shift to plus/minus grading, and concluding with further examples of several institutions that made the shift to a plus/minus system.

1. Western Kentucky University’s final “Report of the Senate Academic Quality Committee on Potential Revisions to the Grading System” (March 18, 2008)

The UI Teaching and Advising Committee (TeAC) reviewed the primary findings of WKU’s report; this report was an outcome that followed a vote of the WKU university senate in March 2007 to implement Plus/Minus grading. That vote followed earlier studies (2005-2006) of data and a three-semester pilot program “during which plus/minus grades were assigned by faculty but did not appear on student transcripts or affect students’ G.P.A.s” (report on prior data study entitled “Report on Plus and Minus Grading Fall 2006”).

The final report of WKU’s Senate Academic Quality Committee recommended unanimously changing in two years to a full-range plus/minus grading system that would be implemented “wholesale” without an opt-in or a rolling option for all students.

WKU’s report stated several reasons for advocating the shift to a plus/minus grading system, including citing research that suggests plus/minus grading increases student motivation and academic performance, that it promotes academic quality and fairness in grading, and that in repeated surveys, a majority of faculty were in favor of plus/minus grading.

The WKU committee considered four different plus/minus grading systems, and recommended a “widely used” (IV.4 ‘Rationale’) scale for a full range of grades from A+ to F, with no reduction in G.P.A. for a C-. This is WKU’s recommended Plus/Minus Grading Scale: A+ (4.3)/A- (3.7)/B+ (3.3)/B (3.0)B-(2.7)/C+ (2.3)/C(2.0)/C- (2.0)/D+ (1.3)/D (1.0)/D- (.7)/F (0.0).

2. Barnes and Buring, “The Effect of Various Grading Scales on Student Grade Point Averages” (U of Cincinnati College of Pharmacy, 2012)

Excerpt: “From 2005 to 2010 there was transition from use of predominantly whole-letter scales to plus/minus grading scales. The type of grading scale used did not affect the mean cumulative GPA. Students preferred use of a plus-only [whole letter] grading scale while faculty members preferred use of a plus/minus grading scale. In this study, there was no difference between the mean cumulative GPA calculated using a plus/minus and that using a whole-letter grading scale. Similar results occurred in a Principles of Management course in which the GPAs of 944 students taking the course either before or after implementation of plus/minus grading were compared. Mean GPA on a whole-letter grading scale before and after implementation of plus/minus grading was 2.2 and 2.2, respectively. Despite no change in the average course GPA after implementation of plus/minus
grading, the new grading scale did impact individual students’ grades with 129 (13.7%) grades being increased, and 115 (12.2%) grades being decreased. Although most faculty members and students believed implementation of plus/minus grading would decrease GPA, our study showed no difference in cumulative-mean GPA when calculated using retrospective application of plus/minus and whole-letter grading scales.

Excerpt: “The majority of comparable Universities considered currently employ suffix grading scales. Based on available information, use of a suffix grading scale would have negligible effects on GPA, grade distribution and credentialing. There was general agreement that use of a suffix [Plus/Minus] grading system is consistent with current standards in the majority of peer Universities considered and that the suffix grading system provides greater resolution in student grades that is relevant to some, but not all courses. Further, there is no conclusive evidence of negative effects on student GPAs, credentialing, or admission to post-baccalaureate programs.”

This year-long study by an ad-hoc committee comprised of faculty, student representatives, and the registrar, concludes that Plus/Minus grading has positive effects in four areas: “reduced grade inflation, better differentiation among students, increased student motivation, and enhanced image of grades and an undergraduate degree.” The reduced rate of grade inflation included data from Washington State University; their own institution’s study showed “that students involved in majors that traditionally have lower GPAs [such as the sciences] would be less affected by adoption of a +/- grading system.” The committee excluded A+ and D- from its scale [note that this, for example, matches the grading scale at the UI College of Law]. Bressette’s study also draws on others’ (psychometricians) research to argue that the reliability of grades increases as the number of marking categories also increases, such as in a shift from a five-letter grading scale to a 10-11 categories scale (plus/minus scale). The ah-hoc committee argues that adding a plus/minus system motivates students throughout the semester, because as the spread between grades becomes smaller, students “are able to increase their grades through extra effort even at the end of the semester,” or they may increase effort to avoid dropping to the next lower grade, whereas in a whole grade system, after mid-semester a student may determine that she or he is not likely to be able to improve to the next grade level, or fall to the lower grade level (38). The shift to a plus/minus system was set three years in the future, to enable most current students to complete their degrees before the change, and to give sufficient advance notice to future students.

5. Edgar, Leslie D., et al. “Student and Faculty Perceptions of Plus/Minus Grading and Its Effect on Course Grade Point Averages.” College Student Journal, vol. 48, no. 1, 2014, pp. 184–197. Analyzes results of providing instructors at the College of Agricultural, Food and Life Sciences at the University of Arkansas, the option of assigning plus and minus grades; consequently, one-half of courses were graded using plus/minus and one-half were graded with a straight letter grade system. A majority of students opposed plus/minus grading; a slight majority of faculty felt that plus/minus grading was fair to students, while others felt that though a plus/minus system helped average and low achieving students, it also resulted in lower student GPAs and preferred straight letter grades. Effects on GPA showed that for “straight letter grade, pre-period mean was 3.35 and
post-period mean was 3.32. The difference between the two periods, -0.03, was not statistically significant. For plus/minus the pre-period mean was 3.01 [significantly lower, perhaps indication of faculty grading practices who opted for plus minus grading system] and post-period mean was 2.89 with a difference of -0.12 which was statistically significant” (192). “Within the B, C, and D categories, the proportions of plus grades were larger than for minus grades . . . . the overall proportion of minus grades exceeded the plus grades . . . . This was attributable to no A+ grades being assigned” (193-194, 196). Again, while “a plurality of faculty agreed plus/minus grading helped average and low-achieving students, a majority of students disagreed” (195). Use “of the plus/minus grading system resulted in lower grades on average reversing grade inflation” (195). Also, “if the plus/minus system is retained, there may be value in removing the minus from the A scale since it is not counterbalanced with an A+ . . . . These findings by and large support previous research that noted students do not like the plus/minus grading system; primarily because students have the chance of earning an A-. However, faculty tend to support a plus/minus grading system because it allows them to differentiate between students in a course” (196).


Primary findings of this study show that “1) an overwhelming majority of students (83%) are satisfied with Southern Illinois University Edwardsville’s current whole letter grading scale, 2) most faculty (59%) favored a change to plus-minus grades, and 3) students and faculty alike noted that an accurate reflection of performance was the most important issue to consider when choosing a grading system. Based on the evidence collected, SIUE chose to retain the whole letter grading system for the time being” (49). In this study’s review of the literature on this issue, “Faculty and students in favor of plus-minus grades cite more accurate grades as a benefit of this system, while those opposed consider a low benefit/cost ratio as a downside” (50-51). In contrast, this study also notes that faculty at Northern Illinois University recently (2011) recommended a change from a whole-letter grading system to a plus-minus system (57).


Excerpts:
Cites Wake Forest University study supporting the “the common sense understanding that a student whose “true” grade is represented by the score of 81 on a 100 point scale is more accurately captured with a grade of B– (assuming 80 is the minimum required to fall in the B range) than either a grade of B or C” and an MIT survey: “A 1999 analysis of faculty and student reactions to the implementation of +/- at MIT over the previous three years revealed overwhelming support by faculty and strong support from students regarding the efficacy of +/-.”

On articulation with other Arizona institutions: “If adopted, ASU will be the only higher education institution among Arizona’s state universities and the community colleges to employ +/-” [report also notes, however, that all other universities in the Pac-10 system use plus/minus grading].

“Committee Recommendation: The majority expression of the Committee is that the University maintain a grading system that does not use +/- . However, given the previous resolution of the Senate to adopt a +/- system, the Committee has opted to place a +/- option before the Senate.”

8. Eastern Kentucky University, “Ad Hoc Committee on Plus/Minus Grading, 2002-2003”

Excerpts:
Only one of the seven other Kentucky public universities use plus/minus grading, and 50% of Kentucky’s other ‘benchmark’ institutions use plus/minus grading.
“Participants from the benchmark and Kentucky public universities reported that they thought plus/minus grading had a positive effect on student motivation and grading accuracy. Participants were split on grade inflation. . . . Furthermore, the nine benchmark and Kentucky public universities using plus/minus grading were asked what benefits their university perceived their plus/minus grading system to have. Reported benefits included more accurately reflects students’ work, more precision in grading, and increased student initiative. EKU faculty reported that positive effect of plus/minus grading was grading accuracy. EKU students reported no positive effects of plus/minus grading." The committee concluded: "Plus/minus grading was instituted on the EKU campus as a method of reducing grade inflation. Research from this campus, other campuses, and the scientific literature suggests that it does not accomplish that goal. In addition, members of the campus community perceive far more drawbacks than benefits of plus/minus grading. Furthermore, the majority of the faculty and students are opposed to re-establishing plus/minus grading on this campus. Therefore, the Ad Hoc Committee on Plus/Minus Grading recommends that plus/minus grading not be reinstated at EKU at this time."

With the experience of using plus/minus grading for the 2001-2002 academic year, this follow up survey reports that slightly more EKU faculty were dissatisfied with plus/minus grading (48%) than those satisfied (40%), and most faculty were against re-establishing plus/minus grading (51% vs. 41%).

9. Mohler, Chad. “Information on Plus/Minus Grading” (Truman State, 26 October 2000)
Excerpts:
Advantages of the plus/minus grading system
• More accurate reflection of differing levels of student achievement in a class
• Less grading error (greater reliability) in the grades that are assigned
• Greater fairness in grading: students who do (for example) B+-quality work will get a better grade than those who do B- quality work.
• More informative feedback to students on the quality of their work
• More honest to our liberal arts commitment to the value of a discriminating mind
• Students in the middle of a letter grade range will find themselves with greater motivation to do end-of-the-semester work. They will want to try achieve the “+” grade and avoid the “-” grade.
Under the current system, doing a little better or doing a little worse on end-of-the-semester work will have no effect on those students’ grades.
• For A-level students, a greater competitive edge in the grad school admission process: a 4.0 GPA from a school with the A- (3.667) grade looks better than a 4.0 GPA from a school without the A-grade, since the latter 4.0 may consist entirely of A’s, whereas the former 4.0 is straight A’s (and/or A+’s).
• Grading scale can be set up so that straight letter grades retain their current meaning (A equals a 4.0, B equals a 3.0, etc.).
Disadvantages of the plus/minus grading system
• Studies (e.g., Wake Forest’s and NC State’s studies) show that while plus/minus grading generally has little effect on student GPAs, GPAs may decrease very slightly in a plus/minus system. For instance, the mean undergraduate GPAs from the six semesters NC State has been using a +/- system are within four hundredths of a point of what they would be under a simple letter grade system. The Wake Forest study indicates that the GPAs of students with GPAs close to 4.0 may decrease by up to eight hundredths of a point. Students with GPAs in the D-range may also have GPAs reduced by a tenth of a point or so.
- Note that... the small decrease in near-4.0 GPAs can be made even smaller with the adoption of a 4.333 A+ grade (together with a cap on cumulative GPA of 4.0, if desired). See also the accompanying NC State charts.

- Possibility of greater clerical error in the recording of grades

10. Notes on “Plus and Minus Grading Options: Toward Accurate Student Performance Evaluations”
   The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (1996)
   Excerpt: Proposed grading scale excludes C- and an A+ is not calculated into the GPA (A+=4.0, A=4.0, A-=3.7, B+=3.3 ...). “The primary motivation for use of the plus/minus grading option stems from an ethical imperative. Faculty are ethically obligated to ensure evaluations of student performance are consistent, fair, and accurate... In essence, the implementation of the plus/minus grading option allows for better and more accurate information to and for students about their performance. ... The current system is too coarse. Students’ achievement can differ by nearly 25% and result in the same grade... Conversely, students' achievement may not differ by more than 1% yet result in adjacent grades 25% apart in value for GPA purposes.” “...the use of plus minus grading could support student motivation and success. ... In the current system, students ... can become... discouraged by having significant improvement evaluated as if there were no improvement and, in another circumstance, complacent by having significant decline in achievement evaluated as if there were no decline.”

11. Plus/Minus Grading Implemented Fall 2009 at the University of Texas
   (Jul 27, 2009)
   Excerpts:
   Starting in the Fall of 2009, the University of Texas will switch from its current [whole letter] system to a plus/minus system [A/4.0, A-/-3.67 ...C-/-1.67, D+/1.33, D-/1.67, F]
   Why is the University Switching*?
   Plus/minus grading allows for more accurate representation of students’ performance.
   Plus/minus grading makes it easier to assign grades in borderline cases.
   Plus/minus grading may be used to reduce grade inflation.
   All 11 of our peer institutions (the group of large public universities that UT Austin uses for comparison purposes) use some form of plus/minus grading.
   The new system will help with transfer student discrepancies.
   The more grade options we have means that students are awarded grades appropriate to their performance in a course.

Will Student’s GPAs be Affected*?
No. Effects on GPA will likely even out, and the effect on top students is as likely to be positive. In any case, given that most of our peer institutions use plus/minus grading, this change would increase the equity of comparisons for students from different universities.

12. Plus/Minus grading implemented fall 2012 at U. Maryland (A+, A/4.0, A-/3.7, ... C-/1.7, D+/1.3, D/1.0, D-/0.7, F/0):
   http://www.testudo.umd.edu/plusminusimplementation.html

Excerpts:
In Fall 2005, the [University of Maryland] University Senate voted to adopt a policy for plus/minus grading, which was approved by the President. A slight revision to the policy was passed by the Senate and approved by the President in Fall 2011. As of Fall 2012, plus/minus grading is the University’s new official grading policy. Under the policy, quality points for each letter grade from A through D reflect plus and minus components of the grade, as shown below. The plus/minus system applies to both undergraduate and graduate courses.

**Degree Requirements Based on Calculated GPA**

All existing requirements that are based on any calculated GPA of grades earned in more than one course will continue under the plus/minus policy. For example, the College of Education has a degree requirement that students must maintain an overall GPA of 2.75. This requirement is unaffected by the introduction of plus/minus grading.

**University Requirements for Graduation**

The University’s current requirements of a minimum overall GPA of 2.0 for bachelor's degrees and 3.0 for graduate degrees are unchanged.

Undergraduate students who matriculate to the University in Fall 2012 and after must earn a minimum grade point average of 2.0 in their major/minor/certificate requirements. All students must also earn an overall cumulative grade point average of 2.0 in all courses in order to graduate. Individual department, college, school or program requirements may exceed this minimum.

**Acceptance of Undergraduate Transfer Credits**

In general, credit from academic courses taken at institutions of higher education accredited by a regional association will transfer provided that the course is completed with a grade of at least C- and the course is similar in content and level of work offered at the University of Maryland, College Park. Grades of D- or better will be accepted from appropriate course work completed at a regionally accredited Maryland public institution. The University will accept grades of C- (or D- from Maryland public institutions) from students who matriculate to the University of Maryland in Fall 2012 or after. The University will accept transfer course grades of C- (or D- from Maryland public institutions) from current students for transfer courses completed in Fall 2012 or after.


Excerpt:

- The implementation of minus grades will not change the definition of a grade point deficit. A C average will remain a 2.00.
- Only grades higher than C will lower a deficit. Every credit of C+ earned removes .33 from a deficit (a C+ in a three-credit course removes .99 deficit points); every credit of B removes 1 deficit point; and every credit of A removes 2 deficit points.
- UF academic policies relative to “C” thresholds remain the same (“C” equals 2.0)!
- A “C-” will be treated differently than a “C” in repeat course processing since “C” is the threshold grade.
Currently an S/U course must be graded as a “C” or better to receive an “S.” Therefore, if a faculty member assesses the work of a student as a “C-” (1.67) or lower they should assign a grade of “U.”

General Education Credit

A “C-” (1.67) will not result in an award of General Education credit.

Writing and Math (Gordon Rule) Requirement

Students earning a “C-” (1.67) in writing/math courses taken to fulfill these requirements will not receive writing/math (Gordon Rule) credit.

President’s Honor Roll policy remains the same!

“A-” grades will not yield the perfect 4.0 GPA required to achieve the President’s Honor Roll designation.

Sampling of comments from 2016 Faculty Survey:

Potential benefits of giving plus/minus grades.

- Better ability to distinguish different levels of work. Makes smaller assignments more meaningful.
- Greater accuracy in grading - clearer differentiation in assessment!!! I do like the idea that students might work even a little harder to get the +
- Less rounding up of grades by faculty - more impact on students being able to increase GPA without having to earn an A
- It is more fair, currently someone earning a 71% and 79% end up with the same grade. The current system isn’t dynamic enough.
- More accurate assessment. No longer would a 79.5% and an 89.4% receive the same grade. Would provide motivation for students to do more than ”just get by.”
- Would provide a more accurate assessment of student performance.
- More accurate feedback will be necessary, leading to increased student learning Greater student buy-in, in some/many cases, to their grades
Faculty will be able to feel better about their grades
- 1) Better reflects actual student performance, particularly in courses where majority of the student work is in teams/groups. Reflects distinction between levels of effort that students can clearly understand. 2) Provides closer tracking of performance for students who are struggling to maintain passing grades, thereby allowing students to better understand when they need to be proactive about improving their performance.
- 1. Especially at midterms, it would more effectively communicate to advisers and to the student how the term was going. There’s a big difference between a C+ and a C- in a class. 2. It could potentially lower the grade-grubbing phenomenon if students understood that as far as their GPA went there was little difference between a B+ and an A-, unlike the giant leap that an A to B is.
- None - just more confusion and inequity.
The difference between a B- and a B+ is considerable. I have long felt that plus and minus grades would be fairer to students. The other benefit would be that I’m sure we would deal with less student appeals of grades. Although I have not taught at an institution that used a plus/minus grading system. I have attended a university that used plus/minus grades, and as a student, I felt it was much fairer than the college I attended that did not use plus/minus grades. Avoids inflation of GPAs at the top end; Enables me as instructor to differentiate between levels of achievement. More accurately describes student performance. It never really feels right to give a student who earns 89% the same grade as a student who earns 80%. Students may have greater motivation to work towards the next highest grade. -For graduate students, I think it will show important differences between top students. Will help decrease grade inflation. 

Potential drawbacks of giving plus/minus grades.

- More complex grading formulas. Definitely will take more time, particularly in large classes. I teach a 100-level course with more than 100 students, so time is an issue.
- I believe there are NO drawbacks to this system (multiple replies just like this, such as “
- Having worked in an R1 university that uses this system, I can honestly say I see no drawbacks whatsoever, only potential benefits.
- Having used as +/- system at the university level for 19 years prior to coming to UI, I do not believe there are any drawbacks. The system allows faculty to be more accurate and ultimately rewards students much more eff
- My experience is that there will be a lot more kibitzing and grade creep. It is a lot harder to argue from a B to an A than from a B to a B+ or even a B+ to an A-. You are really opening the grading system up to arguments about splitting hairs. 2. My experience is that plus/minus grades are often handed out subjectively and that they enable subjective grading. Again, one presumably has to have a hard rationale for assigning an A vs a B. Plus/minus opens the door to soft rationales (I feel like this student put in the extra effort, was most improved, etc.) and soft rationals are more subject to unintentional bias and even arbitrariness.
- students might see their gpa’s fall slightly - there may be slew of complaints
- Students might whine about the grade they receive. News flash: these will be the same students that whine under the current grading system. In addition, some UI employees (nonstudents) who do not teach nor evaluate student understanding nor assign grades will complain about the grading. 2) This will likely add a little more time to the assignment of the final grades in each course. For me this would be a fair trade (a modest amount of time at the end of the semester for the ability to assign plus/minus grades).
- Students did not want this when we asked them in the past
- In my opinion after using the plus/system for large university gen ed classroom grading, that most students receive a lower grade than they would for the same work on the current 5 point grading scale
- Added squabbling
- A definite drawback is that a +/- system will further promote grade inflation. In my classes at the introductory level, the median grade is typically at about the equivalent of a C+. As such the A, B, C, D, F system has sufficient resolution. If we had more subdivisions in our grades, professors and instructors would be more comfortable with a higher median grade since they would feel they have
more "steps" to the grading. Also, students will come to expect a higher median grade for all of their classes.

-I really don't see drawbacks; I've taught in both 2-year and 4-year schools that used a plus-minus system (which the checkboxes above didn't allow me to say), and I've seen it work extremely well and reduce grade inflation.

-Student disappointment at losing half a letter

Sampling of comments from the 2017 Survey of UI Students

-I feel very strongly against a plus/minus grading system. As a 4.0 student my whole life, I feel as though the current grading system accurately reflects my skills as a student. I don't think students should be penalized for having "less of an A" than someone else. An A should remain an A, whether you get a 90% in the class or 100%.

-I think that this would definitely bring down the all men's and all women's gpa on campus which will make our university less competitive with other schools. I currently have a very high cumulative gpa (3.81) after about 80 credits of undergraduate work and I definitely feel this would have a negative impact on my gpa. I really hope that this will not pass and I know the majority of students will be very upset.

-I don't see the point in changing it. It may reduce the amount of actual 4.0 students we have but in the end I think everyone's grades will still average out pretty equally. It would be interesting to take a study and look at say 100 students and their grades. Apply a +/- scale and compare if their actual GPA changed or remained pretty constant. Then report these findings to the students for a second opinion.

-It's very difficult to get an A in classes. I don't want to have to get a 93 to get an A. ---Not concerned with achieving any other grade other than A.

-I think that this grading system will keep students motivated to work towards achieving higher grades within individual classes, especially when they're well into the semester and would otherwise be locked into a letter grade. For example, if I have an 85% and I am 2/3 through the semester, the likelihood of me getting good enough grades to achieve an 'A' are slim so I will put in the minimum effort to sustain my 'B' rather than continue working hard towards a 'B+' if we had a plus-minus grading system. That being said, as I typically get A's that are in the lower end of the range, my GPA will likely go down as a result of this change but it would provide extra incentive to continue pushing towards that next break-point should this system be implemented.

-I appreciated the plus/minus grading system at my undergrad school. Also, I would suggest including an A+. At times, I was in a very small % of students (1-3% of a total class) at that performance level and it was good reference for ppl writing my LOR to see that I had earned A+s in rigorous and competitive classes.

-I think it is a good switch if the University’s comparative schools have implemented the plus/minus system. It mostly helps to separate the low/high within the A's/B's. -Maybe some value in that but GPA is an increasingly less important component of my portfolio because there is already so much variation in course difficulty levels.

I believe that a plus minus grading system should still allow a student to maintain the same GPA as a traditional letter system. There will be times that the system falls in the students favor and times it does not. It does make achieving a 4.0 more difficult however for the majority of students they will see in a benefit in working hard to try and do their best because someone with a 80% in a class and someone with an 89% will not be treated the same which can be very frustrating and demotivating.
As a student, teaching assistant, and instructor of record in Computer Science - I am strongly in favor of UIdaho adopting a +/ grading system. It helps not only in grading, but better evaluating students' performance. As of now, students who work hardest and students who not so hardworking get the same grade: "A". This creates a vacuum of no-motivation of hardworking students because they see others no working so hard get the same grade as well.

-This is literally the dumbest thing this university could do. If I got a 90% in a class, that should be an A. PERIOD! Therefore I should get a 4.0 for that course, not anything else. It’s bullshit that if I work my ass off to get an A, that it not be rewarded as such. I have heard that a majority of students are against this, and a majority of professors are for it. Why should the professors get any say in this? They’re not paying for anything. The students are the ones paying for an education, so they should get a say in things like a grading scale. If this passes, I guarantee a drop in attendance at the University of Idaho. I warn you not to pass this.

-I think that the grading system that is currently in place does a fine job of representing students and their achievement in classes. I believe that I have earned the grades I received even if they were on the fringe of a higher or lower grade. I am sure that many other students share my same opinion and I believe that the student body opinion should take precedence in this matter, seeing as we as a student body are paying to be enrolled at this university. I do not think that the teachers opinion should outweigh the students in this matter and hope that the university decides to back its students in the end.

-I strongly believe that we should switch to this system. It is unfair that if I have an 89% I get the same grade as someone who has an 81%. Furthermore, it sucks that I’m 1% away from getting an A but I lose a whole point on my GPA. Switching to the plus/minus system more accurately depicts a students GPA.

-A plus minus grading system would create an unnecessary stressor. With the current system students can be more confident that their grade will be near their perceived performance. With the smaller range of a plus/minus system any small change (up or down) will result in a GPA change (instead of only borderline grades). I feel this constant change of grade would cause stress that currently doesn’t exist.

-It would be more difficult for students to maintain a 4.0 GPA if a difference is made between A and A+ (I like that for selfish reasons), and so it could easily make for less competitive pre-med graduates (my area of concern). However, it’s probably a good idea in that it would combat grade inflation, and allow for more nuanced assessment.