Teaching and Advising Committee
Minutes
6 November 2017

Phinney 102 Conference Room
Present: Stephan Flores (Chair), Allan Caplan, Helen Joyner, Matt Doumit, Christine Slater, and Carlos Vazquez.

Stephan called the meeting to order at 12:31 p.m.

The Minutes of the meeting of October 30 were approved, with abstentions from those who were not able to attend that meeting.

The committee discussed perspectives from undergraduates (Spring 2017 survey) and faculty (Spring 2016 survey) on a potential shift to Plus/Minus grading. We also noted that other public colleges and universities in Idaho use a plus/minus grading scale for undergraduates.

For example, of 269 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.” Nearly ten years prior to this 2016 survey, UI faculty approved shifting to plus/minus grading, but President Tim White vetoed that proposed change.

In stark contrast, last spring’s survey of 820 of students showed that students overwhelmingly oppose (approximately 65% strongly disagree with and 12% somewhat disagree with) a shift to a plus/minus system. 44% of those students did not have experience with a plus/minus grading system; 31% had experienced a plus/minus system in high school. As noted, 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.

Stephan observed that from what he recalls from past ‘briefings’ on shifts to plus/minus grading that statistically it primarily affects students who have 4.0 GPAs, and would of course affect other students differently along a distribution within each grade range in which, for instance, students who might tend to receive B- grades would fair differently than students who tend to receive B+ grades, yet this understanding is not reflected in the high percentage of students who oppose the shift, even though its major effect would be on the relatively smaller percentage of students who currently have 4.0 GPAs. In other words, a shift to a plus/minus grading system would not affect most students’ cumulative GPA because overall the effects even out. He thought it might be useful to know what the distribution of grade ranges are at UI (for instance, how many students have 4.0 GPAs at each class level and across different colleges at UI), and then to compare these with the surveyed students self-reported GPAs.

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 would challenge grades, would likely 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, or at least whether there are whole grades or plus/minus grades.

Such discussion shifted conversation to different grading systems, beyond whole or plus/minus grades. In a plus/minus system, typically letter grades convert to decimal grades as follows: 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, and F/0.0. 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.

Matt described another grading system that used 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. Some committee members agreed that this might offer some greater to differentiate further among students’ grades relative to a whole grade system while not prompting some of the difficulties and effects of a finer grading scale, such as the plus/minus system (11-12 points along the scale).

The committee will continue this discussion. Stephan suggested that he could find and share examples from other universities that had researched the issue and had shifted to a plus/minus grading system.

The meeting adjourned at 1:30 p.m.

Minutes submitted respectfully by Stephan Flores.