

<p>(541) 346-5511 letters@dailymerald.com</p>	<p>TODAY</p>  RAIN 47°/38°	<p>THURSDAY</p>  RAIN 42°/31°	<p>FRIDAY</p>  MOSTLY SUNNY 48°/33°	<h1>OPINION</h1>	<p>EDITORIAL BOARD Andrew Edwards Opinion editor Allie Gragreen Managing editor Ashley Chase Editor in chief Dave Martinez Photo editor Matt Petryni Columnist</p>
	<p>TALK TO US • Limit submissions to 600 words • Submissions should include name, phone number and address • The Emerald reserves the right to edit all submissions • One submission per person per calendar month</p>				
<p>NEWS STAFF (541) 346-5511</p> <p>ASHLEY CHASE Editor in Chief</p> <p>ALLIE GRAGREEN Managing Editor</p> <p>ASHLEY CHASE Editor in Chief</p> <p>DAVE MARTINEZ Photo Editor</p> <p>MATT PETRYNI Columnist</p> <p>LAUREN FOX</p>	<p>IN MY OPINION TRUMAN CAPPS</p> <h1>Everyone can't 'B' winners</h1>				

Daytime TV is basically the epitome of sloth. A medium generally reserved for people who, for whatever reason, are sitting around watching TV in the middle of the day rather than working, it caters to their perceived laziness with a parade of advertisements shilling labor-saving products. Amid the ads for herbal supplements, miracle diets, online dating sites and ShamWow towels, it's clear we've started to shift our responsibilities off ourselves and onto other people and things in our environment.

No longer is it our own fault that we're fat -- it's because of a hormone deficiency that a pill can fix. The reason we can't find suitable partners isn't because we spend all of our time inside playing World of Warcraft, it's because we haven't been matched to a member of the opposite sex based on 29 dimensions that apparently determine happiness. The economy isn't a

mess because of our rampant speculation in the housing market, it's because people haven't been buying enough ShamWow towels.

This shift in responsibility has now become evident in higher education. A recent study from the University of California, Irvine reported that 1/3 of students surveyed expected a B simply for showing up to class on a regular basis. An increasing number of college professors say students will visit them during office hours attempting to haggle a higher grade on a paper, arguing that they tried very, very hard and the professor was unfair in giving them a C or a B- for what the student thought was a really strong effort.

Just in case you've forgotten, a B is traditionally defined as "above average." So what this means is that a significant percentage of America's future leaders and entrepreneurs think they're above average simply by virtue of the fact that they know how to show up to a specified location on time with some semblance of regularity.

How about that for an ego problem – I've been called pompous before, but I've never assumed that my professor will give me a good grade because I made his or her class that much more awesome by coming in every day and just being me. To be fair, though, we students aren't the only ones with this problem – President Bush showed up to work just about every day (when he wasn't on vacation) and still seemed to fancy himself as an above average leader.

I'm mystified by the commonly held notion that professors "give" us our grades. They give us our grades in the sense that they pull out a marker and write a letter on the papers we hand in or calculate a percentage at the end of the term, but they make these decisions based on material that we create and give to them.

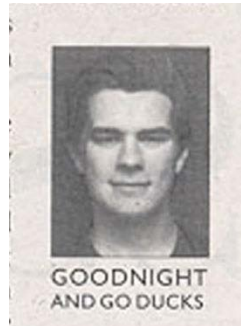
Professors don't "give" us grades – they look at our work and evaluate it against their standard of quality, and the grade reflects how close we came to what they were looking for. Sure, it's tough to know exactly what a professor expects of you – thank God they print that sort of information on the syllabus. Effort does factor into the equation; it always takes effort to make something good. However, it's fully possible to expend a decent amount of effort and make something bad. The real trick, I suppose, is to make the effort in your classes to actually learn something and then incorporate that effort into your essay writing and test-taking endeavors. Just because you spend a few hours on something doesn't mean it's going to be any good – take this column, for instance.

I think this problem is rooted in our upbringing, where we were taught that everyone was a winner and, if we tried hard enough, we can do literally anything. As useful as these ideas may have been to our youthful psyches, they were perpetuated throughout our schooling and they evidently persist today in our world of grade inflation and deferred responsibility.

The simple fact is that we can't all be winners (as evidenced by the University of Washington's football team) and trying alone is not a one-shot formula for achieving your dreams. If it were, half of the adults in this country would be astronauts, and the other half would be princesses.

If you want to succeed, you do have to try, but you also have to learn and compromise. That means actively participating in your classes, not just showing up, and also learning to sacrifice some more of your leisure time to really go the extra mile on your term paper. It means eating right and exercising, not just taking a pill and hoping for the best. It means going out and meeting people instead of entering facts about yourself into a Web browser.

As far as ShamWow is concerned, though, you can just keep on doing what you're doing.
TCAPPS@DAILYEMERALD.COM



A Proposal to Improve the UO Culture Connected with Grades

from: The Undergraduate Council 5-5-09

Rationale

This recent article in the Oregon Daily Emerald entitled “Everyone can’t ‘B’ winners” put a spotlight on the distorted culture that currently envelops academic effort and grades on our campus. The author of the article, a UO student named Truman Capps, is disturbed by the widespread view that grades reward effort, not necessarily actual accomplishment, and that a B is expected simply for showing up to class. Clearly, faculty are not the only members of our community concerned about grade inflation and the culture connected with grades. Students are troubled as well. The Undergraduate Council views this broad interest and concern as a positive sign, an opportunity to engage in a campus-wide dialog that will benefit faculty and students alike through increased clarity and more effective communication.

In preparation for this dialog, the 2005-06 Undergraduate Council undertook a systematic analysis of UO grade trends from 1992 to 2004:

<http://www.uoregon.edu/~ucouncil/documents/resources/03082006%20UO%20Grade%20Inflation%20Report.pdf>

gathered examples of responses to grade inflation from UO and other institutions:

http://www.uoregon.edu/~ucouncil/documents/resources/02272006-HO2_Resource_Examples%20of%20Responses%20to%20Grade%20Inflation.pdf

and collected local reactions to this information. The current Council (2008-09) has drawn on this work to consider what grades ought to mean and whether our current grading practices promote an appreciation of that meaning. By “current practices,” we mean both the distribution of grades we award and the way we communicate what each grade means. Below, we summarize the Council’s thinking and propose three ways to improve the UO grade culture.

What do grades mean? The fundamental problem facing colleges and universities is that the original meaning of grades has been lost. There is a strong sense among current students that grades represent rewards for an individual’s effort or good intentions. Innumerable anecdotal accounts go something like this — “Student X thought she or he should get an A or a B just for showing up for class, even though the work was mediocre.” Such expectations, however unreasonable they seem to

instructors, likely result from students' experiences with grades in middle school or high school.

In contrast, the Undergraduate Council believes that a grade ought to be an assessment of the quality of a particular piece of work, relative to some objective standard. It is neither a gift for good behavior nor a comment on the student as a person. Although a portion of a grade may reflect improvement, independent of the final level of accomplishment, the overall grade is meaningful only when it communicates a student's achievement relative to course expectations. Providing fair and comprehensive evaluations, in the form of grades, is the responsibility of faculty as educators, and the effort to award grades responsibly should be encouraged and valued by the institution. It is our view that if faculty provide more explicit guidelines and criteria, students will have a better understanding of our expectations, which in turn will result in fewer unpleasant surprises on the part of students, fewer confrontations between faculty and students, and better performance in the classroom.

Beyond awarding meaningful grades and based on discipline-specific standards, the Council believes that the University has a responsibility to help students understand what grades mean, and that this endeavor requires everyone's active participation. Faculty can spell out their grading criteria on syllabi and can communicate them in class, but this effort will have little impact without the collaboration of the larger community of academic advisors, student affairs staff, and student leaders. Working together, we can correct misconceptions as our new students get started and model a more realistic approach to grades as they progress. We can explain at the outset how our grading criteria may differ from the ones they've encountered previously. New student orientation programs (IntroDUCKtion and others) provide ideal opportunities for this, and the key ideas can be re-enforced through FIGs and residential experiences during the freshman year.

Do our current practices promote understanding of grades?

Distribution of grades: The Undergraduate Council's grade trend study examined grade distributions in UO undergraduate courses that had large, stable enrollments and that had been taught continuously over the study period (1992-2004). In these courses, the proportion of As increased by 10 % and the proportion of As and Bs together increased by 7 % during the 12-year interval. Meanwhile, the SAT scores of incoming students showed only a modest increase in the math portion of the test and no change in the verbal section. Thus, relative to these nationally normed indicators of academic ability, it appears that UO grades have undergone inflation.

To put these data in perspective, the grade trend study compared the undergraduate GPAs at UO and other universities. We found that GPA increase at UO over the period of the study was 5% -- about the same as the national average for public and private schools combined [see collection of national data at <http://gradeinflation.com/>]. A final

conclusion from the study was that there is differential grade inflation on our campus: grade distributions vary considerably by school/college and CAS division, and have shifted upward at different rates among these units.

Communication of what grades mean: At present, the only university-wide statement addressing what grades mean is the definition of letter grades in the UO Catalog: A, Excellent; B, Good; C, Satisfactory; D, Inferior; F, Unsatisfactory (no credit awarded). There is no discussion of the purpose of grades, the university's philosophy with respect to grades, or the importance of communicating the difference between grading in college and the grading students may have encountered before college. Individual academic units may discuss the qualities that earn As, Bs and so on in their disciplines, but the conclusions that emerge from those discussions are not typically communicated beyond the units, and rarely appear on course syllabi. It is not that syllabi omit the topic of grades, but they commonly deal only with the mechanics – for example, the proportions of total course points that correspond to each letter grade and the relative contributions of papers, lab reports, exams and so forth to the total.

In short, it appears that our current practices do not promote an appreciation of the meaning of grades and in fact, have the potential to do serious harm. Specifically we are concerned about the effects described below:

- **Effects on distribution of students across programs:** Many students seem to be aware of systematic differences in grade distributions across departments/majors and some anecdotal evidence suggests that students respond to these differences. How hard the student will have to work to obtain a UO bachelor's degree with a B average is, in a way, the "price" of a particular major. Students who merely seek a degree, *via* the path of least resistance, may be attracted to programs that are "lower-cost" in this sense. Although programs that are in high demand have little concern about scaring away potential majors by imposing strict grading standards, others may be forced by "market pressures" to move toward lower standards. Uneven grading practices have differential effects on more ambitious students, as well. For example, they favor students in some majors over others in the competition for academic honors such as Phi Beta Kappa and Latin Honors.
- **Influence upon teaching evaluations:** Departments do not generally employ grade distribution information directly in promotion and tenure decisions for faculty. However, there is empirical evidence to suggest that teaching evaluations are systematically related to students' expected grades in a course, and teaching evaluations are routinely considered in promotion and tenure cases. Thus a faculty member's grade distributions, to the extent that they are reflected in teaching evaluations, do factor indirectly into promotion and tenure considerations. Among the most troubling of the anecdotes the Council has received were those indicating that junior faculty sometimes avoid candid

evaluation of student work because of the perceived risk to their teaching evaluations, and hence to their tenure cases.

- **Reduction in the usefulness of transcripts:** For grades to convey useful information, there must be a clear understanding of the kind of work described by a grade, and the grading system must have the capacity to distinguish multiple degrees of mastery of subject matter. We understand that academic fields, courses, and individual teachers differ from one another, but we also recognize that grade inflation leads to grade compression -- the situation in which distinctions in student work are compressed into the top of the grade scale. A and B grades become nearly the only ones awarded and the significance of our students' transcripts is reduced. We are not being candid with future employers and instructors, and we risk harming our graduates, if we send them into a world that will judge their work more realistically than we have done.
- **Substitution of external assessment rubrics for grading:** Responding at least in part to the diluted meaning of grades, accreditation agencies and other outside bodies have begun promulgating alternative assessment rubrics. [Although these may be useful in some settings, they are not inherently better-designed than existing grading schemes or locally developed rubrics, and in the worst cases, devolve to skill set checklists, standardized tests and inappropriate disaggregation of student work in the effort to generate quantitative scores.](#) Such rubrics substitute externally formulated benchmarks for the deeply internalized standards of intellectual judgment that faculty already possess and regularly apply as members of academic disciplines. If universities fail to reassert the integrity of grades, they may deprive faculty members of a key means to instill these standards in their own students. Grades are deeply embedded in the culture of the university and remain a preferred instrument not only to assess but actively to promote academic quality.

The Council believes that the current situation cannot be sustained, and therefore recommends explicit efforts to change the unhealthy culture that surrounds grades. Below, we outline three strategies to achieve this goal: The first is to promote a thoughtful approach to grading by asking departments to discuss their grading philosophies and make them explicit and public. The second is to put course grades in context by making grade distributions part of the information that is routinely given to individual faculty and departments. The third is to aid the interpretation of grades on transcripts by reporting context information along with the grade itself. We think that this third strategy may be the single most effective way to help students develop a more balanced view of grades since it will protect students who take demanding courses and earn Bs, or even Cs.

Proposal

1. Each department and undergraduate program should discuss its grading practices and formulate a rationale for them that will be available to their faculty and students, as well as to the Provost and the rest of the University academic community. For example, the rationale could appear on the department's website, as well as on the syllabi of its courses. Syllabi should help students understand the qualitative features that distinguish work at the A, B, C, D and F levels in that discipline, as well as the relative weights given to particular pieces of course work, such as papers, exams, or lab reports.

Care should be taken to communicate how grading at the University differs from grading students may have experienced in high school or in other institutions of higher education. In particular, students should understand that a University grade communicates a student's achievement relative to course expectations. Such information may be particularly useful and meaningful to entering students, but each academic unit should also provide a clear description of its grading standards to students in its Major, Minor, or Certificate programs.

Departments should also discuss the degree to which grade inflation threatens to compromise their evaluation of student work and, if appropriate, develop discipline-specific ways to prevent or reduce inflation. The approaches will likely vary among units and should suit the design and level of specific courses.

2. Instructors of Record should receive a report of the grade distributions in their Undergraduate courses, plus the average grade distributions in other courses that are considered comparable by their departments. Reports reflecting the past term's grade distributions would be available at the beginning of each term, and would remain available to Instructors as long as they are employed at the University. This would allow instructors and department chairs to examine individual grading practices in relation to the following:
 - an individual's own practice in the same or similar courses over time
 - the department's practice in comparable courses offered that term (if any)
 - the department's practice in comparable courses offered over time

Reports on departmental grade distributions would be made available to both internal and external reviewers when departments undergo their regular program reviews.

To see how two institutions report grade distributions, go to

Indiana University: <http://registrar.indiana.edu/gradedist.shtml>

NC State: <http://www.ncsu.edu/registrar/courses/grade.html>

3. Grades reported on transcripts should be accompanied by context information that indicates the frequency with which students in those courses earned higher or lower grades. Several different kinds of context information are in use by universities in the US and Canada: mean grade (McGill, U. British Columbia), median grade (Dartmouth, Cornell) and percent A-range grades (Columbia). At this stage, we do not know what context information would be most useful on our campus, but we propose adopting this general approach, with the details to be worked out later. To preserve confidentiality, the context would not be reported for courses whose enrollments were below a specified minimum.