

# Assessment and grading at the University of Alberta: policies, practices, and possibilities

A report to the Provost and the University

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Overheard 19 March 2010: Student A: "I'm guessing the average on that test will be 48 – 50 %." Student B: "No problem; it's curved."

"It's so much easier to suggest solutions when you don't know too much about the problem." (Malcolm Forbes)

## **Executive Summary**

Assignment of grades is the final step in a process of assessing students' learning over the duration of a course. The grade should be an accurate, fair representation of a student's achievement in that course. Based on a scan of campus, grading practices at the University of Alberta are quite variable. Examples of practice range from pass-fail, norm-referenced ("the curve"), "absolute" (i.e., translation of percentages to letter grades), to criterion-based systems. All of these are permitted under our current policy framework.

The pressing need to move the grading policy from the GFC Policy Manual to the UAPPOL framework presents us with an opportunity to have an inclusive conversation about assessment and grading, and to come to a consensus on both the purposes of assessment, and principles surrounding assessment, that would govern university-level policy. My advisory committee discussed both of these issues, and offer the following as a starting point for the broader discussion:

### **Purposes of assessment:**

- to evaluate – should produce a judgement about the student's achievement of the learning goals/outcomes of the course.
- to rank students – for scholarships and advancement (e.g., entry into graduate or professional programs).
- to communicate – the grade in the end is all the outside world will know (or perhaps, all the student will remember) about their achievement in that course
- to improve – both learning on the part of the student, and teaching on the part of the instructor.
- to motivate – general agreement in the literature that assessment drives student learning – what they study, what they focus on, how they approach their learning.
- to encourage self-assessment and reflection on learning by the student.

### **Principles:**

#### **Assessment:**

- should be integrated into and aligned with the learning experiences and intended outcomes of a course
- must validly and reliably measure expected learning outcomes, both disciplinary content and higher-order outcomes
- should build students' ability to self-assess and self-reflect, and promote deep learning
- should involve varied assessment strategies, as appropriate for the subject
- should include early opportunities for students to align their understanding of expectations on assignments with those of the instructor
- must be transparent

- students should know the criteria – both for course and for individual assignments – beforehand. For the former, on the syllabus; for the latter, at the very latest when the assignment is given
- each assignment/assessment should be linked to stated course learning outcomes
- the means by which the various summative assessments are aggregated and transformed into a letter grade must be clearly articulated on the course syllabus and applied equitably to all students
- should be guided by a clearly-articulated policy at the department/faculty level that is consistent with university policy
- must have proper oversight to ensure fairness
- should be consistent: an A means excellence, independent of discipline, but disciplinary expertise must define excellence within a discipline, and within a course (especially one with multiple sections).

Once the university-level policy is formulated, each faculty would need to articulate (or re-affirm) its own policy, respectful of its own disciplinary culture or cultures, that is aligned with the university-level policy.

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## Introduction

This report stems from two questions. One – by the Provost – “do we grade on the curve?” The answers he received differed, depending on who he asked – deans, instructors, students. This sort of discrepancy is disquieting. The second question was posed by the author at the September 2009 meeting of the Committee on the Learning Environment: “is there any pedagogic reason to grade on the curve?” The convergence of these two questions led to me being asked to look into the question of grading at this university. Given my lack of formal education in matters regarding assessment, evaluation, and grading, and in the time-honoured traditions of the university, my first action was to strike a committee of wise people to help me (cf. Appendix 1).

This report attempts to answer these two questions, and to propose a way forward that has the potential to improve students’ learning and instructors’ teaching, as well as improve the alignment of our practices with the ideals articulated in *Dare to Discover* and *Dare to Deliver*. This report is based on consultations across the academy with students, instructors, administrators, and staff (cf. Appendix 2), discussions with my advisory committee, and lessons from the literature and from other institutions.

In my view, further progress requires consideration of the purposes of grading, and how grading relates to more global issues of assessment for learning, assessment of learning, alignment of assessment with course goals and objectives – indeed, with the quality of our teaching. This report is the beginning of a conversation in the academy, not the end of one.

### **What do we mean by assessment, and how does that differ from grading?**

A brief comment on nomenclature is in order, so that the reader can understand (if not agree with) how terminology is used in this report. “Assessment” in this report means both “formative” and “summative” assessment. “Formative” assessment is primarily designed to inform students and instructors about a student’s understanding of a particular topic, or about progress towards achieving a particular learning outcome of a course. By and large, formative assessments are low- or no-stakes exercises during the learning process. These are also described as “assessments *for* learning.” In contrast, “summative” assessments are learning transactions, such as essays, examinations, and projects, that evaluate the student’s achievement and form part of the basis for the student’s grade in the course. Such assessments are also described as “assessment *of* learning.” Of course, summative assessments also inform students and instructors about the student’s accomplishments, and in that sense are also assessment *for* learning.

As will be discussed after the environmental scan, a recurring theme in recent literature on teaching in higher education is that assessment should be aligned with the intended outcomes or objectives of a course, which also should dictate the instructional strategies that are employed during the course. This is central in the shift from teaching-centred to learning-centred education that is core to ‘Discovery Learning’ – a key element of *Dare to Deliver*.

## How do we assess – and grade – at the University of Alberta?

The University of Alberta is a large and complex entity, no less on the academic side than on the research side. There is a large range of interesting and innovative assessment methods – both formative and summative – being used across campus. In my conversations with instructors, I gathered a number of these stories, which I originally intended to insert as case studies in this report. Rather than lengthen this report, I am exploring other ways of disseminating these stories, hopefully with some pedagogically-informed commentary, through the Centre for Teaching and Learning.

At the end of a course, grades are assigned, and the mechanism(s) used for that are what originally interested the Provost. In some disciplines at the University of Alberta, students are graded on a pass/fail basis, but the majority of grades allocated each term are letter grades from A<sup>+</sup> to F. And at least some of those are norm-referenced – i.e., graded on “the curve.” A common narrative I heard in my conversations across campus<sup>1</sup> was one in which the “curve” – the suggested distribution – was used as a guideline, but allowances are made for classes in which numbers were small, or the cohort was either better or worse than previous years’. There are parts of campus in which the suggested distributions are more strictly adhered to, and others in which they are ignored. Two faculties, for example, have policies in place where they use a specified conversion from percentages to letter grades. In both cases, there is scrutiny of submitted grades that compares the mean grade with that suggested by GFC policy. There are instructors sprinkled throughout the rest of campus who use the same sort of grading scheme, or who use various types of criterion-referenced approaches.

Our current policy (Appendix 3) is quite flexible, allowing either “absolute” or “norm-referenced” grading procedures to be used in a course, as long as the procedure is made clear to the students in the syllabus. Although both are permitted, much of the text in the GFC policy is written such that it appears that norm-referenced grading is recommended. This bias is clear from wording like

These judgements (of student achievement) are based on a combination of absolute achievement and relative performance in a class.

Grade distribution should reflect those shown in this document.

These distributions are provided for guidance in your grading. It is not necessary for the grades in a particular class to follow any of the distributions exactly; rather, approximating the distribution for an appropriate level will ensure consistency in grading across fields of study and time.

An interesting outcome of my consultations was to find that not only the grading practices vary across campus, but so does the amount of discussion surrounding assessment and

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘campus’ is used in the most inclusive manner possible, to refer to all of the campuses of the University of Alberta.

grading. In some units, there are clearly articulated policies – in some cases, frequently revisited – concerning how the GFC policy would be applied in that faculty or department. In other units, how grading is done is left entirely to the discretion of the instructor (with oversight and scrutiny of the resultant marks by the appropriate authority – Chair, Associate Chair, or Associate Dean, depending on the unit). This leads to some level of inconsistency even within a single department – a point to which we shall return shortly.

## What are the suggested distributions?

As may be seen in Figure 1 at right, the suggested grade distributions for undergraduate courses are not “normal” in the sense of being Gaussian, but are skewed towards higher grades. And there is a systematic increase in the mean with the level of the course. There is a puzzling up-tick at “F” in the 100-level suggested grade distribution.

The graduate-level distributions are even more skewed (see Figure 2), which may reflect the current policy that a grade of C or below in a graduate course is a failing grade.

The suggested grade distributions do have increasing mean GPAs with increasing level of the course (Table 1 below).

Level	Mean GPA
100	2.62
200	2.83
300	3.00
400	3.11
500	3.2
600	3.3

Table 1. Suggested mean GPA for different level courses from the GFC Policy Manual, Section 61.

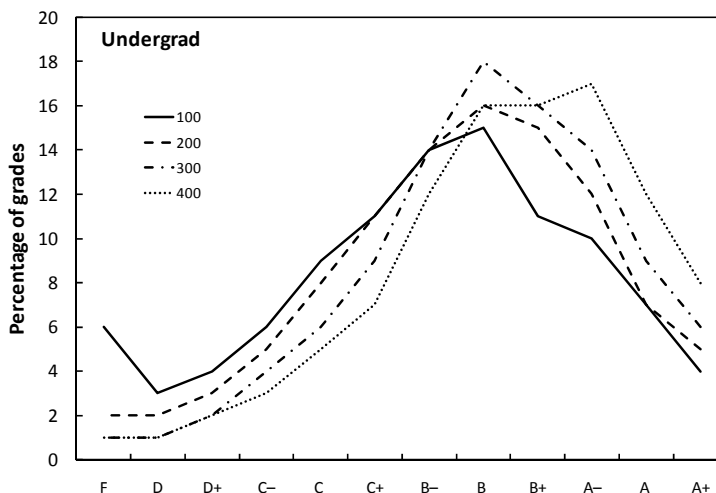


Figure 1. Suggested grade distributions from the GFC Policy Manual, Section 61. Ordered by year of course: 1<sup>st</sup> year (100-level) – solid line; 2<sup>nd</sup> year (200-level) – long dash; 3<sup>rd</sup> year (300-level) – dot-dash; 4<sup>th</sup> year – dotted line.

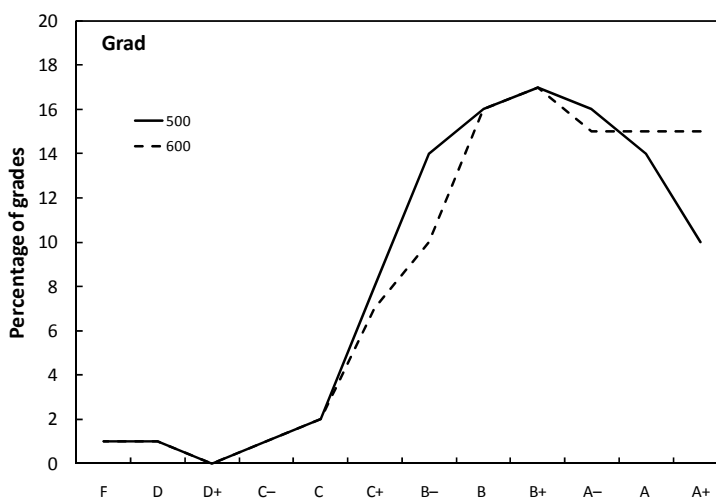


Figure 2. Suggested grade distributions from the GFC Policy Manual for graduate courses.

The Registrar’s Office confirmed that these distributions were implemented at the time of the switch to the A/B/C/D/F grading scheme in 2003-2004, were fine-tuned after the first term of implementation, but have not been adjusted since.

How well do our grades actually follow these distributions? And has there been any change over time? This discussion is based on the grade distribution reports from the Registrar’s Office.

Figures 3 and 4 contain the aggregate, whole-university dataset for two academic years, 2004-2005 (dashed line) and 2008-2009 (solid black line) compared to the suggested distributions (wide gray line). At the undergraduate level, the actual and suggested distributions are similar, with the 2008-09 grades slightly higher than those from 2004-05 (Figure 3). The graduate distributions (500- and 600-level) bear only a passing resemblance to the suggested distributions, and show evidence for grade compression towards the high end (Figure 4).

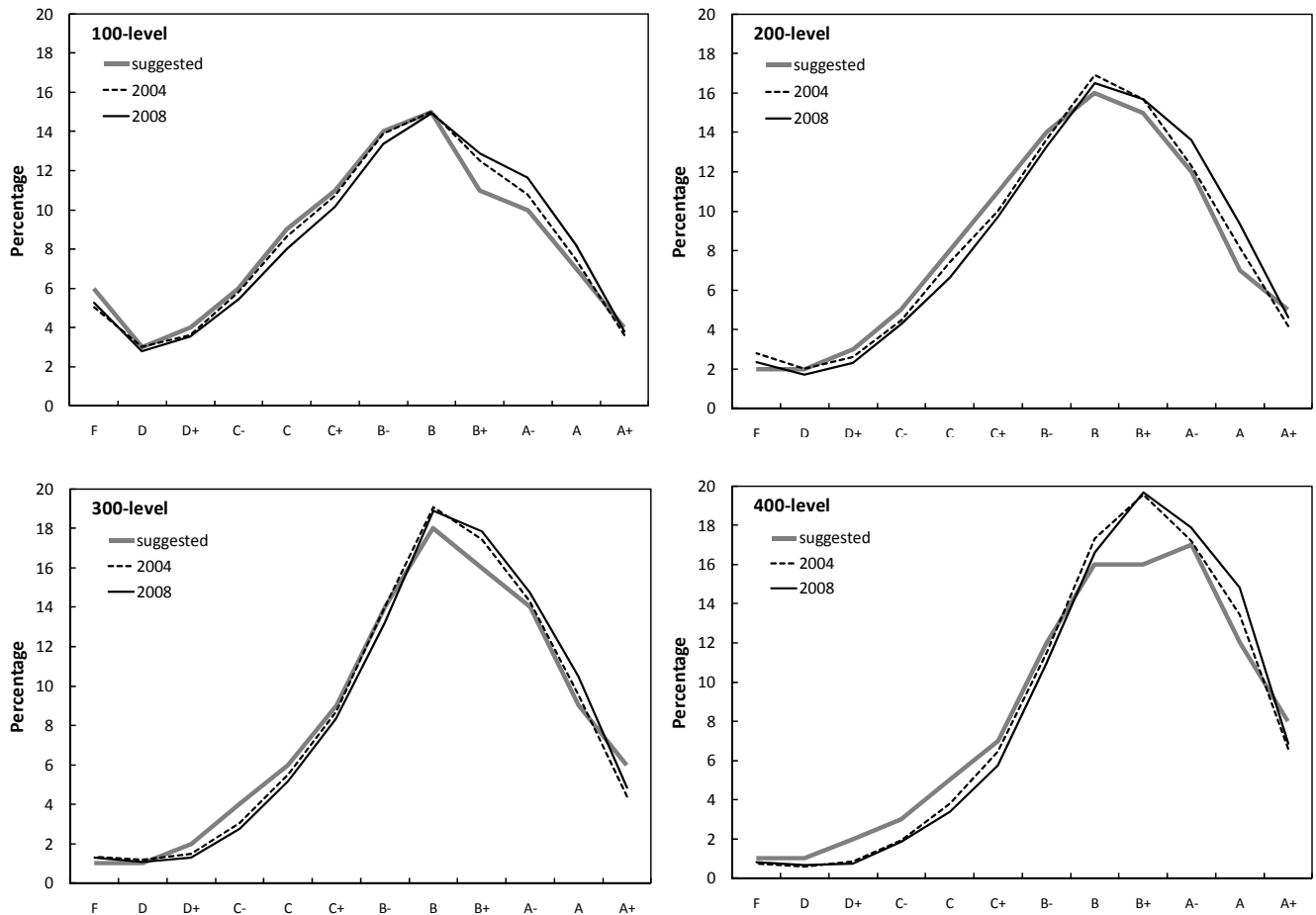


Figure 3. Suggested grade distributions for undergraduate courses compared to actual grade distributions for 2004-05 and 2008-09. Data on actual grade distributions are aggregated at the whole-University level. The thick gray lines are the suggested distribution for each level course, the dashed lines are the data for 2004-05, and the solid black line are the data for 2008-09.



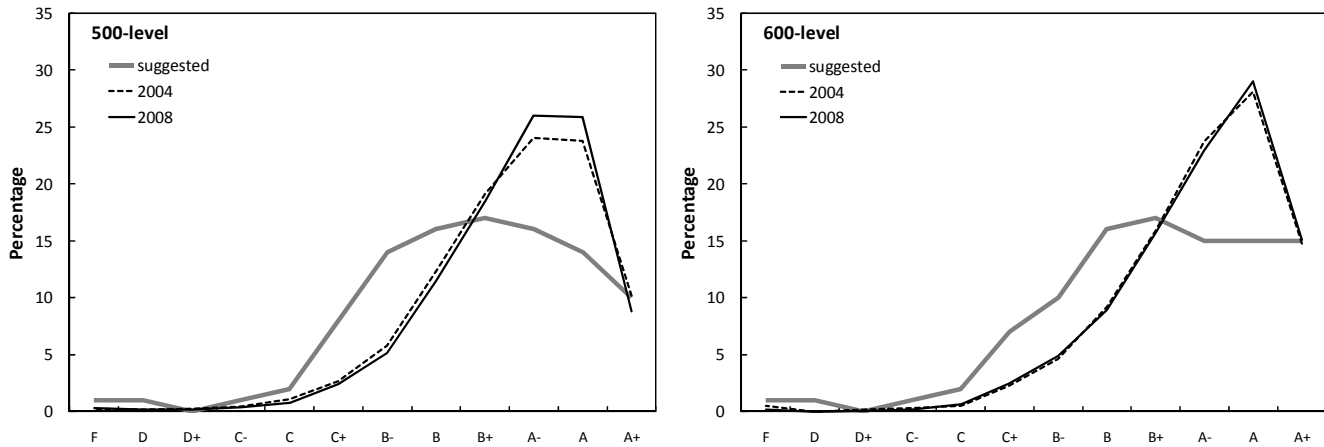


Figure 4. Suggested grade distributions for graduate courses compared to actual grade distributions for 2004-05 and 2008-09. Data on actual grade distributions are aggregated at the whole-University level. The thick gray lines are the suggested distribution for each level course, the dashed lines are the data for 2004-05, and the solid black line are the data for 2008-09.

### Should we be consistent?

In some departments, there is no departmentally-articulated policy on grading. This leads to variability. What consequences does this have on students? As an example, consider two courses in the same department. Both of these courses are at the 200 level, are designed to appeal to a broad audience, and attract >200 students per section.

The first of these two courses has the following statement regarding grading in its course outline:

“The ranking of a student’s performance is based on the percentage grade calculated as 30% Midterm Exam and 70% Final Exam. The letter grade distribution will be assigned to conform closely to the following distribution: A+ 5%, A 7%, A- 12%, B+ 15%, B 16%, B- 14%, C+ 11%, C 8%, C- 5%, D+ 3%, D 3%, F 1% (Median: B).”

The actual grade distribution in this course follows the suggested one very closely.

In contrast, the other course has this to say about grading in its course outline:

“Quizzes (2) 40%; Final 60%

Your final grade in this course will be a combination of your numerical score and the U of A 4-point scale as given below:

- >90% A+
- 85-90% A
- 80-85% A-
- 75-80% B+
- 70-75% B
- 65-70% B-
- 60-64% C+
- 55-59% C
- 50-55% D
- <50% F”

In this case, the actual grade distributions are skewed to higher grades in the C to A+ range relative to the suggested distribution. Does this mean that the grades are inflated? Or that more students achieved more of the intended learning outcomes of the course?

Of course, there is merit to the transparency both of these courses have on their syllabi with respect to their grading schemes. Contrast this with another course in the same department, where the syllabus outlines the weighting and the dates of the two midterms and the final, and states that “*Individual components of the course will be given a numerical mark. The grading system will be applied using a combination of absolute achievement and relative standing in the class.*”

## How *should* we grade?

“Grades are inherently ambiguous evaluations of performance with no absolute connection to educational achievement” (Felton and Koper, 2005). In particular, norm-referenced grading schemes have been criticized for years:

There is nothing sacred about the normal curve. It is the distribution most appropriate to chance and random activity. Education is a purposeful activity, and we seek to have students learn what we have to teach. If we are effective in our instruction, the distribution of achievement should be very different from the normal curve. In fact, we may even insist that our educational efforts have been *unsuccessful* to the extent that the distribution of achievement approximates the normal distribution. (Bloom et al., 1981)

One of the persistent controversies in college teaching is whether to grade “on the curve” (norm-referenced grading) or against an absolute standard (criterion-referenced grading)...I believe that grading on the curve is educationally dysfunctional. If possible, your grades should, both in the students’ eyes and in actuality, be more nearly based on absolute standards than on relative standing in a particular class. (McKeachie and Svinicki, 2006)

Grading “on the curve” makes learning a highly competitive activity in which students compete against one another for the few scarce rewards (high grades) distributed by the teacher. Under these conditions, students readily see that helping others become successful threatens their own chances for success... Perhaps more important, grading “on the curve” communicates nothing about what students have learned or are able to do. Rather, it tells only a student’s relative standing among classmates, based on what are often ill-defined criteria. Students who receive the high grades might actually have performed very poorly but simply less poorly than their classmates. (Guskey and Bailey, 2001)

So why grade on the curve? For some purposes, such as scholarships and awards, a student’s rank in a class, or in a cohort, is necessary – although such ranking could be the consequence rather than the basis for assigning a grade. Grading on the curve is also quite straightforward and requires no judgement regarding the level of achievement of the students. It makes the grading transparent to the students, with the caveat that they wouldn’t know what they have to do to achieve a specific grade, because it will depend on how everyone else does as well. On the more positive side, as

the students pointed out in their focus groups, marking on the curve offers them protection – if an examination is set such that the average is very low, curving the results means that not everyone flunks the course (the summary that the Students' Union prepared of the student focus groups is included as Appendix 4 of this report).

The alternative to norm-referenced grading is a criterion-referenced scheme, and it has been pointed out by a number of authors that the two systems "...are not as far apart as their proponents might lead us to believe, the standards in a criterion-referenced system usually being derived from some idea of the norms for performance at a given level of the course" (Toohey, 1999). McKeachie and Svinicki (2006), among others, make the same point. Yorke (2009) goes further, and outlines a number of reasons that the boundary between norm- and criterion-referenced grading schemes are blurred, including: loosely stated criteria that may be combined in variable ways, the scaling – back of a grade distribution that is skewed towards the high end, and tacit influence by norm-referencing of assessors.

But as Toohey (1999), among many others, have pointed out, there are significant benefits to a criterion-referenced scheme:

One of the significant advantages of criterion-referenced schemes is that they force teachers to make their assessment standards explicit – difficult though this often is. Hidden assessment criteria have long been used as a powerful mechanism for keeping students in their place and have undermined much of the educational function of assessment.

It is important to distinguish a criterion-referenced system, with clearly articulated standards or criteria, from the percentage system that is used at other post-secondary institutions, including some in Canada. Such systems are described as "presumably based on absolute judgments about students' performance... While this system is widely used and seemingly unambiguous, there are several problems associated with it that the teacher should be aware of..." (Bloom et al., 1981).

The problems they point to are:

- This system, although not linked directly to norm-referencing, is not necessarily criterion-referenced (was what was taught aligned with what was tested?)
- Neither the grades nor percentages are necessarily comparable across tests
- What about the combination issues - what if one of the assessment tasks – or topics – was “easy” and the other “hard” - as judged by the average mark, for example. What is the fair way to combine those two to get a final mark?

Another issue is how to define the cutoffs between grade categories:

A widely debated issue with regard to percentage grades and particularly their translation to letter grades is how to set appropriate cutoffs between grade categories... What these individuals fail to recognize, however, is the relative and very arbitrary nature of these decisions... a much more significant consideration is the difficulty of the tasks that students are asked to perform or the complexity of the assessment questions they are required to answer. The cutoff percentage representing an excellent level of performance on an extremely challenging task or very difficult

set of questions might be quite different from what would be considered excellent on a relatively simple task... Our point in this discussion is not that cutoff percentages are unimportant. We believe that they are vital and necessary in nearly all teaching situations. But setting cutoffs is a more complex process than most educators anticipate and typically much more arbitrary than most imagine. What we must keep in mind is that mathematical precision in setting cutoffs is not a substitute for sound professional judgment. (Guskey and Bailey, 2001)

We do have two faculties that tend to assign grades in this fashion; in both cases, the students have more positive views of grading than is the norm. The students definitely appreciate the transparency and clarity of expectations.

Most recent literature in assessment and course design in higher education favour a criterion- or standards-based approach to assessment. Furthermore, we cannot talk of summative assessment and grading in isolation. A pervasive theme in the literature on pedagogy in higher education is the idea that assessment needs to be built into the design of a course, rather than tacked on at the end as high-stakes summative assessments, as an afterthought. This theme is well established and clearly articulated in the assessment literature intended for faculty who are not themselves expert in matters of pedagogy (like the author). Indeed, we need to turn our attention away from grading *per se* – the final part of the assessment exercise – to assessment more generally, and consider how do to this in a manner aligned with our stated learning outcomes. We need to make sure we have defined what we want the students to learn, and design our instruction around helping them learn it, including formative assessment, and then assess how well they learned it. For those readers who have already done so, well done.

This perspective contrasts with the “traditional” view of assessment that was certainly part of my landscape as a student and instructor until quite recently. Given I found a summary of “contemporary” and “traditional” views of assessment helpful, readers of this document might also find it useful.

<b>Contemporary approaches: Assessment is...</b>	<b>Traditional approaches: Assessment is...</b>
Carefully aligned with goals: the most important things we want students to learn	Planned and implemented without consideration of learning goals, if any even exist
Focused on thinking and performance skills	Often focused on memorized knowledge
Developed from research and best practices on teaching and assessment methodologies	Often poor quality because faculty and staff have had few formal opportunities to learn how to design and use effective assessment strategies and tools
Used to improve teaching and learning as well as to evaluate and assign grades to individual students	Used only to evaluate and grade individual students, with decisions about changes to curricula and pedagogies often based on hunch and anecdote rather than solid evidence

(from Table 1.2 of Suskie 2009)

## Where to from here?

“...change depends on generating consensus on principles rather than prescribing specific practices...” (Joughin, 2009).

With this in mind, I do not presume to prescribe any specific practices. But we have the opportunity to consider our assessment policies as we work to move them from their current home in the GFC Policy Manual to UAPPOL. I suggest we take this opportunity to have an academy-wide discussion, in which we try to reach consensus on two questions: (1) why do we assess? and (2) are there principles of fair and appropriate assessment on which we can agree? My subcommittee has spent a number of hours discussing and debating these two questions, especially the latter. Our discussions benefited from insights gained in my consultations with administrators, faculty members, teaching staff, and students (cf. Appendix 2). I offer here their answers as a possible starting point for the academy-wide discussion:

### Why assess?

- to evaluate – should produce a judgement about the student’s achievement of the learning goals/outcomes of the course.
- to rank students – for scholarships and advancement (e.g., entry into graduate or professional programs).
- to communicate – the grade in the end is all the outside world will know (or perhaps, all the student will remember) about their achievement in that course.
- to improve – both learning on the part of the student, and teaching on the part of the instructor.
- to motivate – there is general agreement in the literature that assessment drives student learning – what they study, what they focus on, how they approach their learning.
- to encourage self-assessment and reflection on learning by the student.

### Our principles:

#### Assessment:

- should be integrated into and aligned with the learning experiences and intended outcomes of a course
- must validly and reliably measure expected learning outcomes, both disciplinary content and higher-order outcomes (beyond regurgitation – what can they do with that content?)
- should build students’ ability to self-assess and self-reflect, and promote deep learning
- should involve varied assessment strategies, as appropriate for the subject
- should include early opportunities for students to align their understanding of expectations on assignments with those of the instructor
- must be transparent

- students should know the criteria – both for course and for individual assignments – beforehand. For the former, on the syllabus; for the latter, at the very latest when the assignment is given
- each assignment/assessment should be linked to stated course learning outcomes
- the means by which the various summative assessments are aggregated and transformed into a letter grade must be clearly articulated on the course syllabus and applied equitably to all students
- should be guided by a clearly-articulated policy at the department/faculty level that is consistent with university policy
- must have proper oversight to ensure fairness
- should be consistent: an A means excellence, independent of discipline, but disciplinary expertise must define excellence within a discipline, and within a course (especially one with multiple sections).

As a next step, a wider discussion around the above points is needed, with ensuing consensus forming the basis for revised university policy that applies at the academy level. Each faculty would then formulate disciplinary specific policy on assessment and grading, and do so in a manner that would both be respectful of the traditions and norms in their discipline(s), and align with the university-level policy. Note that this would not necessarily prohibit the continued use of norm-referenced grading, for example, but its continuance would require conscious, justified and justifiable, decisions on the part of faculties to continue that practice.

I believe that these discussions, at both the university and faculty levels, would also be a good way to start conversations around teaching, and engage all teaching staff, in particular, in reflecting on teaching matters. I discovered in my conversations around campus that many units develop their own culture around grading schemes – a culture that is still compliant with our current policy, but may not reflect the range of possibilities that current policy allows. For example, I spoke with one colleague in a faculty that has significant pedagogic expertise, who acknowledged that they taught their own students not to grade “on the curve” – yet felt that they were forced to do so themselves by GFC policy. This colleague was surprised to discover that GFC policy does not force the use of the curve.

These discussions, and the policy revisions that flow from them, would also send a strong positive signal that policy is not written in stone and is unchangeable. In my conversations around campus, with instructors and with administrators who have oversight over grading, they often conveyed a sense of powerlessness – that the policy was fixed by others and there was no possibility of changing “the system.” I would like to think we can. To quote the Dean of the Faculty of Extension, “we *are* the academy.”

As a final thought, I leave you with the following table and question: Is it deep learning that we really want our students to do?

### Strategies that promote deep, lasting learning

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*A growing body of research evidence indicates that undergraduate students learn most effectively when:*

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- They understand course and program goals and the characteristics of excellent work.
  - They are academically challenged and given high but attainable expectations.
  - They are graded on important goals. While students do pick up some things through faculty and staff modeling, discussions, and the like, they focus their time and energy learning what they'll be graded on and therefore learn those things more effectively than ungraded concepts.
  - They are taught by instructors engaged and passionate about the subject.
  - New learning is related to their prior experiences.
  - They spend significant time studying and practicing.
  - They use or apply memorized facts in some way, because facts memorized in isolation are quickly forgotten.
  - They are given a variety of ways to learn and to demonstrate what they've learned.
  - They spend more time actively involved in learning through hands-on practice and receiving information in a variety of formats.
  - They engage in multidimensional real-world tasks in which they explore, analyze, justify, evaluate, use other thinking skills, and arrive at multiple solutions. Such tasks may include authentic class assignments, field experiences, and service-learning opportunities.
  - They engage in learner-learner, learner-teacher, and learner-content interaction.
  - They participate in co-curricular activities that build on what they are learning in class.
  - They reflect on what and how they have learned and see coherence in their learning.
  - They have a synthesizing experience such as a capstone course, independent study, or research project.
  - Assessments are used as learning activities in their own right.
  - They receive prompt, explanatory feedback on their work.
  - They have opportunities to revise their work.
- 

Adapted from Table 18.3 of Suskie (2009)

## Afterword

This report is based on my consultations across campus with administrators, academic teaching staff, students, and the discussions with my advisory committee. It was also informed by my efforts to understand the literature around assessment, learning, and teaching in institutions of higher education. It became obvious very early on to me that there is an extensive body of literature as well as a lot of active research in the field of assessment, and that I was in no position to become an expert. My goal shifted to becoming informed – as a teacher myself – on current thoughts on appropriate practice. So my focus was on the significant, influential, and established literature directed at practicing teachers in higher education, rather than the “cutting edge” of assessment literature.

In large part, my interest in this topic was kindled by discussions surrounding the importance of teaching in meetings of the GFC Committee on the Learning Environment, on which I have served since January 2006, and the more recent discussions about the role of UTS

(now CTL) in the professional development of instructors on campus. This has led to ongoing discussions on teaching matters with Professor Heather Kanuka, the Academic Director of CTL, and to my attendance at the workshops and lectures given by Drs Tom Angelo and Royce Sadler in Spring 2009. Angelo's sessions got me thinking about how to do formative assessment better, and whether my focus on "covering the content" rather than on student learning was really a useful one. Sadler's talks got me thinking about learning outcomes and standards-based assessment. The reader would be correct in concluding I am still evolving as an instructor.

Subsequent to taking on this project, my thinking about assessment has been influenced as well by the reading I have done. I have found the following readings of considerable help; perhaps others might as well.

Paul Ramsden's *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*.

Two articles on Derek Rowntree's website "Designing an assessment system" (<http://iet-staff.open.ac.uk/D.G.F.Rowntree/assessment.html>) and "Teaching better through formative feedback" (<http://iet-staff.open.ac.uk/D.G.F.Rowntree/feedback.htm>).

A number of articles on the "Assessing Learning in Australian Universities" website of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, including "Core principles of effective assessment" (<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/CorePrinciples.pdf>), "A comparison of norm-referencing and criterion-referencing methods for determining student grades in higher education" (<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/NormCritRef.pdf>), and "Getting started with student assessment" (<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/docs/GettingStarted.pdf>).

Also informative were documents from the LTSN Generic Centre in the UK, "Assessment: A Guide for Lecturers" by George Brown (<http://www.swap.ac.uk/docs/ltsnguide03lecturers.pdf>) and Peter Knight's "A briefing on key concepts: Formative and summative, criterion and norm-referenced assessment" (<http://www.swap.ac.uk/docs/ltsnbrief07keyconc.pdf>).

## **Acknowledgements**

I am very grateful for the dedication, commitment, and time the members of my committee devoted to this project over the course of this term. They were very tolerant of my unreasonable demands on their time, and I thank them. The members of the committee from the Faculty of Education, Heather Kanuka, Cheryl Poth, and Kathleen Nickle, spent an amazing amount of additional time discussing these issues with me outside of the committee meetings, and so I would like to acknowledge their patience in helping me learn. Kathleen and Cheryl also guided me into some of the vast literature surrounding assessment.

I also thank all of the members of the campus community who took time out of their busy schedules to meet with me to talk about assessment and grading. The Students' Union was very



helpful; I would like to thank Leah Trueblood, VP Academic, and Dustin Chelen, the SU representative on my committee. Without their efforts I would have missed a very important perspective. I would like to thank the Provost, Carl Amrhein, and Vice Provost (Academic Programs) Olive Yonge, for giving me the excuse to talk to so many members of the academy I otherwise never would have met, including many of our colleagues who are amazingly passionate about and engaged in the learning of their students. Finally, although I am grateful for all the help and guidance I have received from my committee and others, I want to emphasize that this is *my* report, and I accept full responsibility for its contents.

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## **Appendix 1. Terms of reference and membership of CLE Subcommittee on Assessment and Grading.**

### ***Terms of Reference***

The subcommittee will explore issues related to assessment and grading practices at the University of Alberta:

- Survey expectations and experiences of students, instructors and administrators.
- Review recent literature on effective/best/exemplary practices.
- Identify examples/stories where assessment supports excellence in learning and teaching at the University of Alberta and how they came about.
- Formulate recommendations.

The subcommittee is advisory to the Provost's Fellow and to CLE.

### ***Membership of the subcommittee***

Sanjay Beesoon (Graduate Student representative)

Katy Campbell (Academic Staff and Dean of Extension)

Dustin Chelen (Undergraduate Student representative)

Donna Coombs-Montrose (NASA representative)

Steve Harvey (Academic Staff, Chair AASUA Teaching and Learning Committee, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry)

H. James Hoover (Academic Staff, Faculty of Science, and Associate Chair (Undergraduate) in the Dept. of Computing Science)

Heather Kanuka (Academic Staff, and Academic Director, Centre for Teaching and Learning)

Suzanne Kresta (Academic Staff, Faculty of Engineering)

Robert Luth (Chair, Provost's Fellow, Academic Staff, Faculty of Science, and Associate Chair (Undergraduate) in the Dept. of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences)

Kathleen Nickle (Research Assistant, Graduate Student)

Cheryl Poth (Academic Staff, Faculty of Education)

Ada Schmude (Associate Registrar, Office of the Registrar and Student Awards)

Natalie Sharpe (University Director and Advisor, Student OmbudService)

### ***Meetings of the subcommittee***

29 January 2010, 05 February 2010: Framing terms of reference and discussing consultation process and questions to ask.

05 March 2010, 19 March 2010, 09 April 2010: Reporting to the committee on results of consultations; discussions on principles of assessment.

## **Appendix 2. Consultations**

My consultations spanned February and March 2010, following extensive discussions in my subcommittee to hammer out the topics – and specific questions – to frame the conversations with faculty and staff. The questions I used as a springboard for most conversations with instructors and with administrators (Associate Deans, Chairs, and Associate Chairs) are reproduced below. Most of these conversations were approximately an hour in length.

I spoke with 32 faculty or other lead instructors, and 30 Associate Deans, Chairs, and Associate Chairs (most of whom spoke with their faculty hat on as well as their administrator hat, which nearly doubled the number of instructors I spoke with). I also spoke with a number of others who offered different perspectives: the Registrar, the Director of the Student OmbudService, the Director of the Writing Across the Curriculum Program, the General Counsel, the Director of the Office of Strategic Analysis, members of OPSG (the Online Program Support Group), an Executive Director from the Instructional Design group in the Faculty of Extension, and with the Teaching and Learning Committee of AASUA. In all, I consulted with members of the Faculties of Agricultural, Life and Environmental Sciences, Arts, Augustana, Campus Saint-Jean, Education, Engineering, Extension, Graduate Studies and Research, Law, Medicine and Dentistry, Native Studies, Nursing, Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Physical Education and Recreation, Rehabilitation Medicine, Science, and the Schools of Business and Public Health.

The Students' Union was very helpful in organizing three focus groups, which were facilitated by Kathleen Nickle and Dustin Chelen, members of my committee. In addition, I had a number of one-on-one conversations arising from those focus groups – the students had an open invitation to contact me if they wanted to discuss issues in person or at greater length.

Despite concerted efforts by both the GSA representative on my committee, Sanjay Beesoon, and myself, input from graduate students was regrettably sparse. Hence the focus in this report on the undergraduate courses, at least in the analysis of the grade distribution data.

Harry Prest, Associate Dean at Augustana Faculty, was kind enough to arrange a number of meetings during my visit there, and I was able to speak with Chairs, faculty members, and students. For the students, I used the same template for the focus groups that Kathleen and Dustin had created for the focus groups on North Campus (also attended by CSJ representatives).

### **Questions/topics for Faculty:**

1. Tell me about how you assess learning.
2. How do you use student feedback to alter your teaching?
3. Tell me about an example where the assessment(s) used help to maximize learning. What about one where it undercut learning?
4. What would you do to improve assessment of student learning in your courses?
5. Assigning grades is the final step in a term-long assessment and evaluation exercise – tell me how you go about this step.

**Topics for Administrators:**

- (1) your Faculty's policies around assessment and grading
- (2) issues that you see arising from assessment and evaluation of student achievement
- (3) mentoring of new instructors with respect to Faculty expectations
- (4) issues related to grade appeals
- (5) oversight/sign-off on grades

## Appendix 3. University of Alberta policies on assessment and grading.

From the GFC Policy Manual:

### 61. Grading System

**Note from the University Secretariat:** The *Post-Secondary Learning Act* gives General Faculties Council (GFC) responsibility, subject to the authority of the Board of Governors, over "academic affairs" (section 26(1)). GFC has thus established the Grading System, as set out below.

The complete wording of the section(s) of the *Post-Secondary Learning Act*, as referred to above, and any other related sections, should be checked in any instance where formal jurisdiction or delegation needs to be determined.

**NOTE FROM THE UNIVERSITY SECRETARIAT:** GFC regulations concerning the grading system are contained in the Calendar with the exception of the following regulations. In accord with a motion passed by the GFC Executive Committee on November 9, 1992, the academic regulations contained in the Calendar may not be changed without GFC approval.

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### [61.1 The Four-Point Letter Grading System \(Also See Pass/Fail, 61.2\)](#)

#### Purpose of the System

During the 1965-66 Session, the General Faculties Council agreed that in September, 1966, a nine-point grading system would be introduced. The main purpose of the new system was to achieve a more uniform distribution of marks than had existed in the past between different courses and between different sections of the same course, so that there would be a reasonable degree of comparability between the marks in the courses. A number of changes to the grading system have been made since 1966. For instance, the grade of 3, which until 1986 will be a conditional grade falling between a pass and a failure, will be a failing grade beginning September 1986. GFC policy in effect from 1966-1985 covering the grade of 3 as a conditional grade may be obtained from the Secretary to GFC.

At its meeting on March 15, 1999, General Faculties Council approved the following motion: THAT General Faculties Council approve a proposal from the CAAST [Committee on Admissions, Academic Standing and Transfer] Subcommittee on Standards (SOS) for revised comments for the University of Alberta Grading system, described in Section 61.1 (The Nine-Point Grading System), Subsection A (Grading System Outline for Undergraduate Students) and Subsection B (Grading System for Graduate Students), of the GFC Policy Manual, as set out in the right-hand column of the attached comparative table, with the changes to take effect immediately.

At its meeting of March 19, 2001, General Faculties Council approved the proposed 4.0/alpha grading scale with the inclusion of an F(4) to designate reexamination privileges, for implementation at the University of Alberta on September 1, 2003, (GFC 19 MAR 2001) (EXEC 12 JAN 2004)

The changes have been made as shown below:

<b>A. Course Grades Obtained by Undergraduate Students:</b>		
<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>Grade Point Value</b>
Excellent	A+	4.0
	A	4.0
	A-	3.7
Good	B+	3.3
	B	3.0
	B-	2.7
Satisfactory	C+	2.3
	C	2.0
	C-	1.7
Poor Minimal Pass	D+	1.3
	D	1.0
Failure	For F(4)*	0.0

**\*Note:** F(4) denotes eligibility of a student to apply for a re-examination in a course. (EXEC 1 MAR 1999) (GFC 15 MAR 1999) (EXEC 17 JUN 2002) (EXEC 12 JAN 2004)

<b>B. Course Grades Obtained by Graduate Students:</b>		
<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>Grade Point Value</b>
Excellent	A+	4.0
	A	4.0
	A-	3.7
Good	B+	3.3
	B	3.0
Satisfactory	B-	2.7
	C+	2.3
Failure	C	2.0
	C-	1.7
	D+	1.3
	D	1.0
	F	0.0

(EXEC 1 MAR 1999) (GFC 15 MAR 1999) (EXEC 17 JUN 2002)

**C. In addition to the grades described above, the University of Alberta currently records the following grades and remarks:**

## Final Grades

AE aegrotat standing

AU registered as an auditor

AW registered as an auditor and withdrew

CR completed requirements, no grade point value assigned

EX exempt

NC failure, no grade point value assigned (EXEC 13 JAN 2003)

IN incomplete

IP course in progress

IP\* withdrew from or failed course in progress

W withdrew with permission

(EXEC 17 JUN 2002)

## Remarks

1 grade includes a mark of 'O' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both

2 grade includes a mark of '0' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both, and deferred final examination granted

3 credit withheld

4 reexamination granted

5 failure (assigned to failing Graduate Student grades)

6 failure, grade includes a mark of '0' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both (assigned to failing Graduate Student grades only)

7 failure, grade includes a mark of '0' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both, and deferred final examination granted (assigned to failing Graduate Student grades only)

8 Disciplinary sanction for serious instances of Inappropriate Academic Behavior

9 failure, disciplinary sanction for serious instances of inappropriate academic behavior (assigned in the same circumstances as the remark of 8 but to failing Graduate Student grades only)

(EXEC 17 JUN 2002)	(EXEC 06 DEC 2004)
(EXEC 13 JAN 2003)	

## 61.2 Pass/Fail and Credit/No Credit Courses

Courses may be graded on a pass/fail or credit/no credit basis upon specific approval of the appropriate Faculty Council. (GFC 29 JUN 1981) (GFC 17 JUN 1996)

Grade Point Averages for Promotion and Graduation - see Section 7.

Grades in Prerequisite and Corequisite Courses - see Section 37.

GFC approval of 1982-83 Calendar - see Section 25.

## 61.3 University of Alberta Marking and Grading Guidelines

### General Principles

Both the insight provided by marking and the grades awarded are very important to students. Therefore, not only must grading provide a fair and accurate representation of performance, but it must also be understood to do so by the students receiving the grades. Grading systems should be made clear and marking should provide sufficient insight into the strengths and weaknesses of individual pieces of work to ensure that students understand the appropriateness of grades assigned. Students should feel that the instructor cares enough about them to be thorough and accurate in marking and recording at every stage of the evaluation process and that the instructor will be approachable if they have reason to believe that an error has been made.

Consistency in evaluation across sections of the same course and from year to year should be maintained.

Marks and grades must be treated with care and confidentiality. Posting of grades must be done by student ID rather than by name. Grades should not be posted in hardcopy format for classes with 25 or fewer students.

### **Weighting of Term Work and Final Examinations**

In each course in which a final examination is held, a weight of not less than 30 per cent and not more than 70 per cent will be assigned to the final examination, except where a departure from this arrangement has been authorized by the council of the faculty in which the department offering the course is situated. The remaining weight for the course will be assigned to term work.

### **Course Requirements, Evaluation Procedures and Grading Parts are presented in the University Calendar (23.4).**

The policies set out below are intended to provide instructors and their students with general course information. GFC, in approving these guidelines, expects that there will be a common sense approach to their application and understood that circumstances might develop, during a term, where a change to the course outline as set out in Section 61.6(a) of the GFC Policy Manual, made sense to all concerned. Such changes shall only occur with fair warning or general class content. (GFC 29 SEP 2003)

Students concerned about the application of these guidelines should consult, in turn, the instructor, the chair of the department by which the course is offered, and the dean of the faculty in which the course is offered.

a. At the beginning of each course, instructors are required by GFC to provide a course outline which must include the following:

- i. a statement of the course objectives and general content.
- ii. a list of the required textbooks and other major course materials.
- iii. a list of any other course fees as described in the Student Instructional Support Fees Policy and their associated costs. (EXEC 04 DEC 2006)
- iv. an indication of how and when students have access to the instructor.
- v. the distribution of weight between term work and final examination.
- vi. identification of all course activities worth 10% or more of the overall course mark.
- vii. whether marks are given for class participation and other in-class activities as well as the weight of such participation.
- viii. dates of any examination and course assignments with a weight of 10% or more of the overall course mark.
- ix. the manner in which the official University grading system is to be implemented in that particular course or section, i.e., whether a particular distribution is to be used to determine grades, or whether there are absolute measures or marks which will determine them, or whether a combination of the two will be used. (GFC 29 SEP 2003)



- x. an indication of how students will be given access to past or representative evaluative course material. (EXEC 18 JUN 2007)
- b. Every course outline should contain the following statement: "Policy about course outlines can be found in Section 23.4(2) of the University Calendar." (GFC 29 SEP 2003)
- c. Every course outline should contain the following statement:
- “The University of Alberta is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Students are expected to be familiar with these standards regarding academic honesty and to uphold the policies of the University in this respect. Students are particularly urged to familiarize themselves with the provisions of the Code of Student Behaviour (online at [www.ualberta.ca/secretariat/appeals.htm](http://www.ualberta.ca/secretariat/appeals.htm)) and avoid any behaviour which could potentially result in suspicions of cheating, plagiarism, misrepresentation of facts and/or participation in an offence. Academic dishonesty is a serious offence and can result in suspension or expulsion from the University.” (GFC 29 SEP 2003)
- d. Nothing in any course outline, syllabus or course web-site may override or contravene any Calendar regulation or GFC policy. In resolving any discrepancy, GFC policy and Calendar regulations will take precedence. (GFC 29 SEP 2003)
- e. Instructors may indicate in the course outline the date, time and place on which the deferred examination for the course will occur, should one be required. See §23.5.6, (GFC 29 SEP 2003)
- f. Instructors should discuss with the class their expectations with respect to academic honesty issues and outline both permitted and prohibited behaviour. (GFC 29 SEP 2003)
- g. Instructors must follow copyright regulations as established by the University from time to time in the duplication of course material. (GFC 29 SEP 2003)
- h. Instructors should allow students a reasonable time in which to complete an assignment, bearing in mind its weight.
- i. Instructors should mark and return to students with reasonable dispatch all term examinations and, provided the students submit them by the due date, all course projects, assignments, essays, etc.
- j. All projects, assignments, essays, etc. should be returned on or by the last day of classes in the course, with the exception of a final major assignment (which may be due on the last day of classes), which should be returned by the date of the scheduled final examination or, in non-examination courses, by the last day of the examination period.
- k. Upon request, instructors are required to provide the method which was used to translate final and, where appropriate, term marks into grades.

### **The University of Alberta Grading System**

The University of Alberta uses a letter grading system with a four-point scale of numerical equivalents for calculating grade point averages.

Grades reflect judgements of student achievement made by instructors. These judgements are based on a combination of absolute achievement and relative performance in a class. Some instructors assign grades as intervals during the course and others assign marks (eg percentages) throughout the term and then assign a letter grade at the end. Instructors must adapt their approaches to reflect the letter grading system. Grade distribution should reflect those shown in this document. (EXEC 03 FEB 2003)

<b>Grading in Undergraduate Courses</b>		
<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>Grade Point Value</b>
Excellent	A+	4.0
	A	4.0
	A-	3.7
Good	B+	3.3
	B	3.0
	B-	2.7
Satisfactory	C+	2.3
	C	2.0
	C-	1.7
Poor Minimal Pass	D+	1.3
	D	1.0
Failure	F[or F(4)]*	0.0

**\*NOTE:** F(4) denotes eligibility of a student to apply for a reexamination in a course. (EXEC 12 JAN 2004)

<b>Grading in Graduate Courses</b>		
<b>Descriptor</b>	<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>Grade Point Value</b>
Excellent	A+	4.0
	A	4.0
	A-	3.7
Good	B+	3.3
	B	3.0
Satisfactory	B-	2.7
	C+	2.3
Failure	C	2.0
	C-	1.7
	D+	1.3
	D	1.0
	F	0.0

#### Illustrative Sample Distribution of Grades

These distributions are provided for guidance in your grading. It is not necessary for the grades in a particular class to follow any of the distributions exactly; rather, approximating the distribution for an appropriate level will ensure consistency in grading across fields of study and time. (EXEC 03 FEB 2003)

<b>Distribution of Grades in Undergraduate Courses (shown in percentages)</b>				
<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>1st year Courses</b>	<b>2nd year Courses</b>	<b>3rd year Courses</b>	<b>4th year Courses</b>
A+	4	5	6	8
A	7	7	9	12

<b>Distribution of Grades in Undergraduate Courses (shown in percentages)</b>				
<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>1st year Courses</b>	<b>2nd year Courses</b>	<b>3rd year Courses</b>	<b>4th year Courses</b>
A-	10	12	14	17
B+	11	15	16	16
B	15	16	18	16
B-	14	14	14	12
C+	11	11	9	7
C	9	8	6	5
C-	6	5	4	3
D+	4	3	2	2
D	3	2	1	1
F	6	2	1	1
Mean	2.62	2.83	3.00	3.11
Median	B-	B	B	B+

**Note:** The above-noted (revised) grade distribution in undergraduate courses was approved by the GFC Executive Committee, acting under GFC's delegated authority, at its March 1, 2004 meeting. This scale, which appears in Section 61.6 (University of Alberta Marking and Grading Guidelines) of the GFC Policy Manual, is effective beginning Winter Term (WT) 2004. (EXEC 01 MAR 2004)

<b>Distribution of Grades in Graduate Courses</b>		
<b>(shown in percentages)</b>		
<b>Letter Grade</b>	<b>500 level</b>	<b>600 level</b>
A+	10	15
A	14	15
A-	16	15
B+	17	17
B	16	16
B-	14	10
C+	8	7
C	2	2
C-	1	1
D+	0	0
D	1	1
F	1	1
Mean	3.2	3.3
Median	B+	B+

(EXEC 10 MAR 2003)

Course Abbreviation:

Course Number:

Instructor:

Number of Students in Class:

Grade	Number of Students	% of Total
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(G)	(N)
A+	
A, A-	
B+, B	
B-, C+	
C, C-	
D+, D	
F	
Total	
Class Median	

### Procedures for Registering Complaints About Marking, Grading and Related Issues

a. Where the above guidelines have not been followed or where students have concerns about the instructor's teaching, the student should make the concern known to the appropriate individual in the following sequence:

- 1) Instructor
- 2) Chair of the department in which the course is taught
- 3) Dean of the faculty in which the course is taught (some faculties have delegated this authority to departments)

b. A student needing advice on these matters should see the student advisors in the Office of the Dean of Students.

c. These procedures do not constitute a mechanism for appeals and grievances regarding the academic standing or individual grades of a student. Appeals and grievances of that nature are dealt with in §23.8 of the Calendar.

### Cheating and Plagiarism

The University of Alberta considers plagiarism and cheating to be serious academic offences. Plagiarism and cheating can be avoided if students are told what plagiarism and cheating are and if possible sanctions are made clear at the outset. Instructors should understand that the principles embodied in the Code of Student Behaviour are essential to our academic purpose. For this reason, instructors will be fully supported by departments, faculties and the University in their endeavours to rightfully discover and pursue cases of academic dishonesty in accordance with the Code.

At the beginning of each term, instructors should review with their students the definitions of plagiarism and cheating which appear in the Code of Student Behaviour (Section 30.3.2). A sheet summarizing the appropriate sections of the Code is made available to all instructors at the beginning of each term.

Instructors are also requested to inform students that when cheating and/or plagiarism occurs, a number of penalties can be imposed, such as lowering a grade or expulsion from the University (outlined in Section 30.4.2 of the Code).

(GFC 27 MAY 2002)

(GFC 29 JUN 1981)	(EXEC 03 FEB 2003)
(GFC 17 JUN 1996)	(EXEC 10 MAR 2003)
(EXEC 01 MAR 1999)	(GFC 29 SEP 2003)
(GFC 15 MAR 1999)	(EXEC 01 MAR 2004)

(GFC 19 MAR 2001)	(EXEC 06 DEC 2004)
(GFC 27 MAY 2002)	(EXEC 04 DEC 2006)
(EXEC 17 JUN 2002)	(EXEC 18 JUN 2007)
(EXEC 13 JAN 2003)	

University of Alberta Grade Summary Sheet

GFC policy requires that instructors complete and submit to the department chair with the final grades for each course section the grade summary sheet.

## From the University Calendar (2010-2011):

### 23.4 Evaluation Procedures and Grading System

**Important Notification:** Effective September 1, 2003, the University of Alberta implemented a letter grading system with a four-point scale of numerical equivalents for calculating grade point averages. Letter grading scales are more commonly applied throughout North America.

- (1) **Weighting of Term Work and Final Examinations:** In each course in which a final examination is held, a weight of not less than 30 percent and not more than 70 percent will be assigned to the final examination, except where a departure from this arrangement has been authorized by the council of the Faculty in which the department offering the course is situated. The remaining weight for the course will be assigned to term work.
- (2) **Course Requirements, Evaluation Procedures and Grading:** The policies set out below are intended to provide instructors and their students with general course information. GFC, in approving these guidelines, expected that there would be a common sense approach to their application and understood that circumstances might develop, during a term, where a change to the course outline, as set out in [§23.4\(2\)a.](#), made sense to all concerned. Such changes shall only occur with fair warning or general class consent.

Students concerned about the application of these guidelines should consult, in turn, the instructor, the chair of the department by which the course is offered, and the dean of the faculty in which the course is offered.

- a. At the beginning of each course, instructors are required by GFC to provide a course outline which must include the following:
  - 1) a statement of the course objectives and general content
  - 2) a list of the required textbooks and other major course materials
  - 3) a list of any other course fees as described in the 'Student Instructional Support Fees Policy' and their associated costs
  - 4) an indication of how and when students have access to the instructor
  - 5) the distribution of weight between term work and final examination
  - 6) identification of all course activities worth 10% or more of the overall course mark
  - 7) whether marks are given for class participation and other in-class activities as well as the weight of such participation
  - 8) dates of any examination and course assignments with a weight of 10% or more of the overall course mark
  - 9) the manner in which the official University grading system is to be implemented in that particular course or section, i.e., whether a particular distribution is to be used to determine grades, or whether there are absolute measures or marks which will determine them, or whether a combination of the two will be used. Instructors should refer to the University of Alberta Marking and Grading Guidelines.
  - 10) an indication of how students will be given access to past or representative evaluative course material
- b. Every course outline should contain the following statement: "Policy about course outlines can be found in [§23.4\(2\)](#) of the University Calendar."
- c. Every course outline should contain the following statement: "The University of Alberta is committed to the highest standards of academic integrity and honesty. Students are expected to be familiar with these standards regarding academic honesty and to uphold the policies of the University in this respect. Students are particularly urged to familiarize themselves with the provisions of the Code of Student Behaviour (only at [www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/secretariat/studentappeals.cfm](http://www.uofaweb.ualberta.ca/secretariat/studentappeals.cfm)) and avoid any behaviour which could potentially result in suspicions of cheating, plagiarism, misrepresentation of facts and/or participation in an offence. Academic dishonesty is a serious offence and can result in suspension or expulsion from the University."
- d. Nothing in any course outline, syllabus or course web-site may override or contravene any Calendar regulation or GFC policy. In resolving any discrepancy, GFC policy and Calendar regulations will take

precedence.

- e. Instructors may indicate in the course outline the date, time and place on which the deferred examination for the course will occur, should one be required. See §23.5.6.
- f. Instructors should discuss with the class their expectations with respect to academic honesty issues and outline both permitted and prohibited behaviour.
- g. Instructors must follow copyright regulations as established by the University from time to time in the duplication of course material.
- h. Instructors should allow students a reasonable time in which to complete an assignment, bearing in mind its weight.
- i. Instructors should mark and return to students with reasonable dispatch all term examinations and, provided the students submit them by the due date, all course projects, assignments, essays, etc.
- j. All projects, assignments, essays, etc., should be returned on or by the last day of classes in the course, with the exception of a final major assignment (which may be due on the last day of classes), which should be returned by the date of the scheduled final examination or, in non-examination courses, by the last day of the examination period.
- k. Upon request, instructors are required to provide the method which was used to translate final and, where appropriate, term marks into grades.

- (3) **Missed Term Work:** Excused absence for missed term work is not automatic and is granted at the discretion of the instructor. Instructors are not required to grant excused absences for unacceptable reasons that include, but are not limited to personal events such as vacations, weddings, or travel arrangements. When a student misses some term work (e.g., classes, labs, assignments, quizzes, term papers, reports, etc.) without acceptable excuse, a final grade will be computed using a raw score of zero for the term work missed. Any student who applies for or obtains an excused absence by making false statements will be liable under the Code of Student Behaviour.

Any student who is incapacitated because of illness, is suffering from severe domestic affliction or has other compelling reasons (including religious conviction) may apply for an excused absence for missed term work. Students should consult their Faculty for detailed information on requirements.

To apply for an excused absence, a student must present supporting documentation pertaining to the absence to the instructor within two working days following the scheduled date of the term work missed or as soon as the student is able, having regard to the circumstances underlying the absence.

- a. Where the cause is incapacitating illness:
  - 1) a medical note cannot be required.
  - 2) If a student chooses to provide a medical note, the University of Alberta Medical Statement Form may be downloaded from the Online Services section of [www.registrar.ualberta.ca](http://www.registrar.ualberta.ca).
  - 3) Instructors may request other adequate documentation at their discretion such as a form from the student's Faculty or a statutory declaration.
- b. In other cases, including domestic affliction or religious conviction, adequate documentation must be provided to substantiate the reason for an absence.

The instructor has the discretion either to waive the term work, or require the student make-up the term work. For a waiver, the percentage weight allotted to the term work missed is added to the percentage weight allotted to the final exam. For the make-up of term work, the student is required to complete equivalent term work as decided by the instructor. If the student does not complete the missed term work as prescribed by the instructor, a raw score of zero will be assigned for the missed term work.

- (4) **Procedures for Registering Complaints about Marking, Grading, and Related Issues:**

- a. Where the above guidelines have not been followed or where students have concerns about the instructor's teaching, the student should make the concern known to the appropriate individual in the

following sequence:

- 1) Instructor
  - 2) Chair of the department in which the course is taught
  - 3) Dean of the Faculty in which the course is taught (some Faculties have delegated this authority to departments)
- b. A student needing advice on these matters should see the student advisors in the Office of the Dean of Students.
- c. These procedures do not constitute a mechanism for appeals and grievances regarding the academic standing or individual grades of a student. Appeals and grievances of that nature are dealt with in [§23.8](#) of the Calendar.
- (5) **Assigning Grades:** Grades reflect judgements of student achievement made by instructors. These judgements are based on a combination of absolute achievement and relative performance in a class. The instructor should mark in terms of raw scores, rank the assignments in order of merit, and, with due attention to the verbal descriptions of the various grades, assign an appropriate letter grade to each assignment.

Course Grades Obtained by Undergraduate Students:

Descriptor	Letter Grade	Grade Point Value
Excellent	A+	4.0
	A	4.0
	A-	3.7
Good	B+	3.3
	B	3.0
	B-	2.7
Satisfactory	C+	2.3
	C	2.0
	C-	1.7
Poor	D+	1.3
Minimal Pass	D	1.0
Failure	F or F4	0.0

**Note:** F4 denotes eligibility of a student to apply for a reexamination of a course.

Course Grades Obtained by Graduate Students:

Descriptor	Letter Grade	Grade Point Value
Excellent	A+	4.0
	A	4.0
	A-	3.7
Good	B+	3.3
	B	3.0
	B-	2.7
Satisfactory	C+	2.3
	C	2.0
	C-	1.7
Failure	D+	1.3
	D	1.0
	F	0.0

- (6) In addition to the grades described above, the University of Alberta currently records the following grades and remarks:

**Final Grades**

AE aegrotat standing

AU registered as an auditor

AW registered as an auditor and withdrew



- CR completed requirements, no grade point value assigned
- EX exempt
- IN incomplete
- IP course in progress
- IP\* withdrew from or failed course in progress
- NC failure, no grade point value assigned
- W withdrew with permission

**Remarks**

- 1 grade includes a mark of '0' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both
- 2 grade includes a mark of '0' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both, and deferred final examination granted
- 3 credit withheld
- 4 reexamination granted
- 5 failure (assigned to failing Graduate Student grades only)
- 6 failure, grade includes a mark of '0' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both (assigned to failing Graduate Student grades only)
- 7 failure, grade includes a mark of '0' for final examination missed, or for term work missed, or both, and deferred final examination granted (assigned to failing Graduate Student grades only)
- 8 disciplinary sanction for serious instances of inappropriate academic behavior
- 9 failure, disciplinary sanction for serious instances of inappropriate academic behavior (assigned in the same circumstances as the remark of 8 but to failing Graduate Student grades only)

- (7) **Grade Point Average (GPA):** All courses have been assigned an appropriate weighting factor, which along with a student's grade point values, enables the Registrar's Office or the Dean's office to compute the Grade Point Average.

The Grade Point Average (GPA) is a measure of a student's weighted average, obtained by dividing the total number of grade points earned by the total units of course weight attempted.

**Rules for Computing the GPA**

- a. The GPA for any period is based on the final grades, including failing grades in all courses taken during a specified period.
- b. GPAs are calculated according to the following formula:  $GPA = \frac{\text{sum of [grade point value x units of course weight]}}{\text{sum of units of course weight}}$

$$GPA = \frac{\text{sum of [grade point value x units of course weight]}}{\text{sum of units of course weight}}$$

- c. A reexamination mark or a deferred examination mark replaces the original final examination mark. The revised final grade is included in the computation of the GPA.
- d. When a student has a deferred, incomplete or a missing grade, the GPA is not computed until a final grade is reported.
- e. Grades of IN5 are counted as numeric grades of 0.00 in the computation of any GPA.
- f. Grades of W (withdrew) are excluded from the computation of the GPA.
- g. Grades of CR and NC are not included in the computation of any GPA.
- h. Any GPA is rounded to the nearest decimal place using standard rounding rules – that is it is rounded up with a value of 5 or greater in the first nonsignificant place and rounded down with a value of 4 or less in the first nonsignificant place

**Types of Grade Point Averages:** Faculties may use different averages for various decisions regarding academic standing, promotions, and graduation, as long as these have been approved by General Faculties

Council. Such averages are descriptively labelled.

- a. **Admission Grade Point Averages (AGPA)** see §14.2.1.
- b. **Fall/Winter and/or Spring/Summer Grade Point Averages** are reported on transcripts and is used by most Faculties to determine academic standing.
- c. **Term Grade Point Average** may be calculated at the end of Fall, Winter, Spring or Summer, and used to determine eligibility for reexamination (see §23.5.5).
- d. **Promotion and Graduation Grade Point Averages** are Faculty specific and are defined in the Faculty sections of the Calendar.
- e. **Faculty Grade Point Average (FGPA):** The Faculty Grade Point Average (FGPA) is a cumulative measure of a student's grade points obtained while registered in a Faculty in all years and terms, including Spring/Summer. FGPA is a weighted average obtained by dividing the total grade points earned by the total units of course weight attempted. The FGPA is currently used by the Faculty of Arts.

#### **Rules for Computing the FGPA**

- 1) The rules related to calculation of GPA [see §23.4(7)] also apply to the calculation of FGPA.
  - 2) The initial assessment and any subsequent reassessment of academic standing using FGPA is based on a student's performance in a minimum of nine units of course weight (★9). If, at the time of review, the student has attempted less than ★9 since the last assessment while registered in the Faculty, the assessment will be deferred until the next assessment period.
  - 3) Assessments are performed at the end of a student's registration in Fall/Winter (or at the end of a student's program) and are based upon the final grades in all courses taken in that and prior periods while registered in the Faculty. At the discretion of the faculty an assessment may also be performed at the end of a student's registration in Spring/Summer.
  - 4) If a student is required to withdraw and subsequently allowed to continue (after a successful appeal or after successfully completing required work at another institution) the FGPA will be calculated from the term in which readmission or continuation is granted, not from the time of first admission into the Faculty. Such a restart of FGPA will be allowed only once for any student in a Faculty.
  - 5) Students continuing in a Faculty following a restarted FGPA as described above must thereafter maintain a minimum FGPA of 2.0.
- (8) **Aegrotat Standing:** Aegrotat standing may be granted, in special circumstances, on the grounds of illness to deserving students who have completed at least one year at the University of Alberta in the Faculty in which they are currently registered. Any student wishing to take advantage of this privilege should apply without delay to the dean of the Faculty concerned. Any other student absent from a final examination because of illness may apply for permission to write the regular deferred examination.
- (9) **Competence in Written Work:** General Faculties Council urges all instructors of University undergraduate courses to provide that suitable portions of course testing or other course work should be in the form of written essay responses and to emphasize to students that competence in written work is integral to competence in a subject and will constitute part of the basis on which the student's course grade is determined.

All instructors should make clear at the outset of each course their expectations in regard to the standard and importance of writing in assignments and examinations. Refer to §24.16 for information on Effective Writing Resources.

- (10) **Official Grades:** Student grades are unofficial until they have been approved by the appropriate Faculty Council at the end of Fall/Winter or Spring/Summer. Prior to approval by Faculty Council, unofficial grades are reported on transcripts and so noted. Students can generally expect that official grades will be available in early June for Fall/Winter, and early September for Spring/Summer. Students obtain their Statement of Results on Bear Tracks (<https://www.beartracks.ualberta.ca>) following the approval of grades.

## **Appendix 4. Findings from Student Focus Groups**

**(Submission from the Students' Union - see next page)**

### **Findings from Student Focus Groups**

Prepared by the Students' Union Advocacy Department

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#### **Overview**

University of Alberta students were asked a range of questions on the challenges they have experienced due to current assessment and grading practices on campus. Students from various years and faculties were surveyed, and this report is therefore meant to represent a broad perspective across campus.

While students touched on several issues, often personal in nature and specific in content, a few general themes emerged that cross the entire spectrum of a student's learning experience. Interestingly, though not surprisingly, the general issues on assessment and grading in many ways mirror those found by a recent CLE subcommittee with respect to teaching evaluation.

The first recommendation provided by that subcommittee was to determine the purpose of evaluation. If we can find the purpose(s), we can find a guide of our values and a template for our regulation. For students, this means balancing the need to grow as learners with the ability to demonstrate that very learning.

With a thorough understanding and recognition of the purposes and values of assessment, we can then examine more closely the methods used and the weight given each tool. Students did precisely this, observing the benefits of multi-faceted and comprehensive assessment that is flexible enough to adapt to each student's and each instructor's learning processes.

Finally, students stressed what to many is the most important aspect of assessment: transparency and accountability. This involves both an oversight and regulation of assessment practices as well as a clear outline of expectations and process. Above all, students yearn to be scholars, to be given the opportunity to substantively contribute to their learning experience and to their academic community – and this can be no more immediately effected than through the transformation of static grading into a dynamic and integrated dialogue between student and instructor throughout the entirety of their undergraduate experience.

#### **Purpose of Assessment**

Assessment is currently used both for summative and formative purposes. Recognizing this, we must work to create a balance that goes deeper than simply providing a grade with feedback (though work is still needed here, as discussed below). Two themes introduced by students with respect to the effects of these purposes on their learning were deeper learning and peer engagement.

Students stressed the importance of deeper learning, examining the effects of current modes of

assessment. As one student noted, “I know [the instructor] wants regurgitation so I’ll memorize things that I’ll remember for two days just so I’ll get an ‘A’ on the exam, but once the class is done, I don’t remember any of it.” The avoidance of regurgitation was a theme often presented by students, and one that meets the University’s visions of lifelong learning and critical thinking.

It was also observed by a number of students that a purely summative assessment may detract from cooperation among students. This was noted specifically with respect to the use of the curve: “I do sometimes question whether I should help someone out. Do I want to help out this friend... if he does poorly, then that’s just better for me.” The lack of peer engagement can hinder the development of important aspects of the learning experience, ranging from the ability to work effectively in groups to the ability communicate critical concepts.

## Method and Weight of Assessment

Critical to meeting and balancing the purposes of assessment noted above is an examination on what types of assessment are used and how they are weighted. Students touched on numerous specifics, but general themes of multi-faceted and constructive assessment emerged.

In discussing the use and weight of exams, most students noted the additional stress and time management involved. Strategy and prioritization can become as big of an issue as understanding the material, and success can rarely be guaranteed. “I understood the material,” recalled one student. “I think it’s just because I had problems with test anxiety... or just alternate forms of understanding the material.” In this way, exams were viewed in a similar way to the curve: there is a certain point where the rigidity imposed on students affects both their ability to learn and on the accuracy of the assessment itself. Put another way, there should exist a diversity of assessment methods such that the assessment of a student’s learning is not skewed by any factors external to that learning and that it is that learning that remains at the core of the assessment. Students from smaller faculties and campuses, like Augustana Campus or Campus St. Jean communicated their satisfaction with their diversity of assessment methods in comparison to other students.

The theme of deeper learning maintained a level of import in the discussion of assessment methods: essays, group work, presentations, portfolios, and class discussion were seen as opportunities to both learn while illustrating knowledge of a concept – though opinions on the efficacy of each method often varied. For any of these methods to be truly effective, the feedback and assessment offered must effectively reconcile the instructors’ expectations with any marks provided – all with an eye to developing the student’s learning toward those expectations. Many felt that current forms of assessment restricted them from receiving regular feedback from their instructor. It is also worth noting that students viewed participation as an intrinsic part of the learning process, and that marks based on attendance or participation were therefore seen as redundant.

Finally, there was some discussion on how assessment should progress through an undergraduate program. As students advance in their program, course content increasingly relies on a critical approach (as noted in the research framework circulated by a recent CLE subcommittee): “In my third and fourth year it’s more interpretation, whereas in the first two years it’s just memorizing things.” Assessment should recognize and reflect a student’s progression through their program, which is generally accompanied by changes in class size as well. For instance, it was suggested

that the curve, along with more heavily weighted exams, can be more effective in a student's first couple years (providing assessment does not simply facilitate learning by rote), while the third and fourth years would benefit from an increase in class discussion and peer assessment.

## Transparency and Accountability of Assessment

Whatever types of assessment are used, and for whatever purpose, students must be able to discern where their marks are coming from and why. This must be true within a single assignment and must extend throughout the course, from section to section, and on to the entire program. Students felt strongly that clear criteria and transparency in the process of awarding final grades are key areas they would like to see improved.

At every stage of a student's learning, they should be able to see where they have progressed and where they need improvement. They should then be able to take this assessment and see where it fits within the entirety of their program. One student explains: "For learning outcomes, I'd like to see why concepts are useful for future courses. I have some courses where I'll learn about the second world war, but I don't know why that's important all on its own... isolated."

This constant awareness originates most broadly from properly developed curricula and comprehensive academic advising. But on its most basic level, it comes from instructors clearly laying out their expectations, both in terms of learning outcomes and assessment structure. If students can see what they are expected to know, and where their marks are coming from – whether through rubrics, outlines, or other means – they will be in a much better position to achieve those expectations. "I think providing your students with a rubric on how they are going to be graded will actually make them work harder, in a sense: they'll know what they need to do to get a better mark."

Transparency of this process centres on the syllabus: "I'd like to see clarity," one student says. "On the syllabus, it should say exactly how you're going to be graded. If they're going to curve, throw some percentages on there so at least you know." Since the syllabus is the contract between student and instructor, it should outline the grading process for students clearly and concisely. Students should be able to see how their marks will be derived or calculated, and how they can expect these marks to be rationalized. Moreover, students should have the opportunity understand the rationale behind the instructors assessment system.

Accountability of this process centres on appeals, a process which must be accessible. "I actually appealed my statistics grade in my undergrad, and it was a long process," one student recalls. "Because nobody tells you how to go about appealing grades." The appeals process should also be outlined in the syllabus, and all assessment structures should be set up with this process in mind.

With expectations clear, and with grading regulations transparent, accountability should follow: students would have access to all the information that is at the core of their degree. That is, students will have greater ownership over their marks, and with it will gladly take on the responsibility that goes with it: "We're not complaining about getting a bad mark. We just want to know how we got that bad mark."

The final issue for students would then be consistency: "We have a beautifully laid out syllabus that explains the grading, but the way you're graded – even though it follows the rubric – is

different for every tutor [or instructor].” There must be an effective level of oversight, and every effort must be made to ensure a consistent and thorough system on assessment is created.

This system is precisely what has been discussed above, through all the issues raised by students. We must aim to create a more tightly integrated learning process, and with it an open dialogue between student and instructor at every step of that process.