

Mac McKerral, Chair, University Senate
Mr. Cory Dodds, President, Student Government Association

November 13, 2012

Dear Mac and Cory:

I have now been privy to numerous discussions regarding the failed attempt some years ago to institute a plus-minus grading system at WKU. Upon review of the documents at <http://www.wku.edu/senate/documents.php>, it is clear that the main motivation for such grading systems is to motivate students to achieve the next level. Also, as I understand it, the attempt to institute such a grading system at WKU failed largely because of student concerns, particularly the implications of the minus grades.

I would therefore like to propose, for the consideration of the Senate Executive Committee and the Student Government Association, a new grading system that still provides students incentives to achieve a higher grade, but without the negative aspects of minus grades. Specifically, I propose that WKU institute two new grade points, the B+ and C+. The table below shows how these grades could be applied – the table is based on the traditional (60, 70, 80, 90) break points, but this is not required: the essence of the idea is to reward students *in the top one-third* of the B and C grading levels with a plus grade and an extra 0.5 quality points. Using the top one-third rather than the top one-half of the range provides the necessary motivation for students to improve their grade, while leaving the grade for the bottom two-thirds of the range unaltered: “a solid B is a B.”

Grade	Points	Quality Points
A	90 - 100	4.0
B+	87-89	3.5
B	80-86	3.0
C+	77-79	2.5
C	70-76	2.0
D	60-69	1.0
F	< 60	0.0

The system has no minus grades. Note also that there are no A+ or D+ grades; the former has no effect on the GPA (unless we move to a system with possible quality points greater than 4.0, which I would not endorse) and I believe the latter involves “splitting hairs” at grade levels associated with mediocre performance.

The proposed system offers, I believe, an important benefit to students who narrowly miss an A grade. Such students would earn a B+ grade, which does result in a reduced number of quality points compared to an A, but the effect is not as drastic as losing a whole quality point (for example, for a 15-hour semester with 4 A grades and a B grade, the GPA is 3.8; with 4 As and a B+ it is 3.9). As pointed out at http://www.wku.edu/senate/documents/reasons_why_wku_should_adopt.pdf, “an 88% student has more in common with a 91% student than with an 81% student and their grades should reflect that.” Further, the B+ grade that appears on the transcript would reflect the “near miss.” Similar considerations apply, of course, to the student who narrowly misses a B.

Assuming that the distribution of points across the ranges from 70-79, and from 80-89, is uniform, then approximately one-third of the 50% or so of students who currently earn B or C grades (see http://www.wku.edu/senate/documents/plus_minus_grades_final_report.pdf), or about 1/6 of the student body, would see their grade for the course improve by 0.5 points. This would cause an increase in overall GPA of about $(1/6) \times 0.5$ points, or roughly 0.1 point. However, this modest grade inflation could well be offset by faculty awarding, for example, the 89% student a B+ instead of the A that the faculty member might be tempted to award under the current grading system.

I herewith submit this proposal jointly to the SEC and the SGA for their consideration.

Best,

A. Gordon Emslie
Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs