Grades, Grade Inflation and Other Academic Awkwardness

Is B the new C?

By Allen Stairs

Let’s introduce our topic with a pop quiz. You’ve given a 20-question multiple-choice test. A student gets 15 right. What’s the letter grade?

You might think: “15/20 is 75%, which is C,” but that’s a poor answer. If the items were hard, 15 out of 20 might be brilliant; if they were easy, it might be shameful. The raw score doesn’t mean much by itself. But before we can decide what score means what letter, we need to know what letters mean.

Let’s idealize. Imagine a large 100- or 200-level class whose members are a fair sample of Maryland students. They’ve done a multiple choice test, and your sense is that they performed “respectably”: not unusually well, not unusually badly. If the average score was 15 out of 20, it seems reasonable to translate this into whatever letter grade means that a student is on track—”average” in a sense that carries no shame. What is that letter grade?

Naively, one might say C. Two things suggest otherwise.

First, “C” is a 2.0 on the numerical grade scale. A student whose GPA dips below 2.0 goes on academic warning. If we gave Cs to students we took to be doing respectable work, then a student who performed respectably in all courses would be one slip-up away from academic warning.
Good teaching supports increased student learning. This connection requires feedback on the course between the student and teacher so that both are able to know and understand what is expected and what occurs in the course. For the first time this semester the campus is using a uniform University-wide course evaluation system for all courses. The faculty was notified about this system by the provost in his Oct. 19th email to the faculty. The history and specifics of this initiate are briefly described in Renee Braird Snyder’s article in this edition of the Newsletter and in-depth information is available at the Course Evaluations web site https://www.irpa.umd.edu/Assessment/crs_eval.shtml.

As with all new initiatives there are pros and cons, and with constructive feedback from faculty and students the University-wide system will evolve to better serve the needs of faculty and students. However, no single evaluation system can be expected to meet the needs of all courses. To address this, the University-wide instrument will in subsequent semesters allow faculty and departments to add questions that are specific to the needs of individual courses and instructors.

What is especially useful about the system is that individual faculty will be able to obtain feedback on their course with little effort on their part. Faculty will be able to access the results from their courses in early 2008. Students will be automatically notified about the project by Institutional Research and Evaluations and encouraged to fill out the online survey. Students who fill out the survey will be reward by being granted access to the information from the student questions for courses they may be interested in taking provided that at least 70 percent of the students in the course completed the fall survey. In order to gain access to course information each student must fill out the surveys for all of their fall courses.

The 15-question survey asks for student responses and opinions about a number of course parameters.

Several of the items are certain to be of interest to faculty who wish to improve their teaching and student learning. These items include questions that ask: how responsive the instructor was to student concerns, whether the course content kept students engaged, whether students felt they were treated with respect, how intellectually challenging the course was, and how much the student learned. This type of student feedback is necessary if faculty want to address the learning needs of all students in their courses. As with any course evaluation there will be disgruntled students who will vent their displeasure by giving low scores and there will be those students who will rate the course as if it is the “best thing since ice cream.” Outlying responses of these types while madding and gladdening are of very little use in course improvement. However by looking at the median and mode of the responses a useful snapshot of the course can be obtained that will help the instructor in thinking about whether she or he met their goals for the course and whether they want/need to change one or more things in a subsequent course offering.

Since the University-wide questions will remain constant across courses and semesters, faculty will be able to obtain...
Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars Program: Celebrating Outstanding Students and Their Exceptional Teachers

by Anna Bedford, Publications Coordinator, CTE

Each year colleges at the University identify a number of Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars based upon their student population. The colleges select their specified number of graduating seniors for the honor of being a Philip Merrill Presidential Scholar, based upon academic record, research, and other forms of leadership. Once selected, the Scholars each name a teacher from their K-12 education and a faculty member from their time at the University who have contributed to their success.

Carvel LaCurts previously taught math at a public high school in Maryland. At the end of this school year, LaCurts will enjoy something rare in the lives of teachers - public recognition, thanks, and celebration. LaCurts was identified by one of the twenty-four 2007-2008 Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars as the most important teacher and mentor from her K-12 experiences. The decision was not a difficult one for this particular scholar, because her high school math teacher, the man who inspired her to go on and study math at Maryland, is also Katrina LaCurts’ father.

While LaCurts is coming from nearby Worcester County, other K-12 teachers will travel to the University from across the nation for the 2008 Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars celebrations taking place in November. Bringing a student’s designated teacher to campus is full of challenges for Assistant Dean Lisa Kiely, who leads the Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars Program. This year a substantial number of the Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars nominated their kindergarten teacher. Even though the students haven’t been out of school long, teachers retire or move schools, sometimes making them elusive honorees.

Kiely recalls, from a couple of years ago, the search for an uncommonly good Baltimore teacher with a rather common name. However this particular teacher was no longer working in Baltimore, he had retired, according to the school, and moved to Florida. Armed with some twenty Florida listings from directory assistance the staff began a series of calls to Florida hoping one of the numbers on the list would lead to a special teacher; and it did.

The program has never been unable to find a teacher yet. Some have been located as far away as Hawaii, and Alaska, and for one teacher in Indonesia the president’s office was even able to arrange for a visa so they could attend the celebratory banquet. “It is challenging,” says Kiely, but facilitating a reunion with their former pupil, and bringing the teachers to hear their students talk about the enduring influence they’ve had makes the hunting and hard work coordinating the event worthwhile. The teachers feel

Katrina LaCurts
“My father’s love of mathematics inspired me to pursue the field in college.”

Armed with some twenty Florida listings from directory assistance the staff began a series of calls to Florida hoping one of the numbers on the list would lead to a special teacher; and it did.
Second, every college in this University has a higher average (mean) grade than 2.0, though there’s lots of variation. In one college where most 100-level courses are activity-oriented, the average 100-level GPA in fall 2006 was 3.63. In another, science-oriented college, it was 2.73. In yet another strongly-quantitative college, it was 3.51 for 100-level. The figure for ARHU, my college, was about 3.0, right around the University average. That suggests that 15 out of 20 on our hypothetical test means B work.

Is B the new C? If so, what should we make of this?

Some people insist that, dammit, C means average, and that saying otherwise means caving in to grade inflation. But if they grade accordingly, they impose a cost on their students, whose progress towards degree, not to mention requirements for keeping scholarships, don’t fit with treating “C” as a pat on the back.

We can also ask just what we mean by “grade inflation.” I don’t have data, but I’m willing to guess that 25 years ago, the average grade was lower. However, our students are mostly better now. How should we factor that in? I’d resist “grading on the Bell curve.” Ideally we should be grading to standards, and if all the students in my class meet a reasonable standard for earning an “A,” that’s what they should get. But operationalizing this is hard. It calls for a campus-wide discussion of what our standards should be, whether they should shift as the caliber of students improves, and how our expectations should map onto letter grades. It would be wonderful to see a conversation like that happen.

An addendum, however. I doubt that we’re likely to go back to using “C” as the average grade. If not, all the more reason to fully implement the +/– grading system.

Allen Stairs is Associate Chair of the Department of Philosophy.

Problem-Based Learning
Special Guest Speaker: Deborah Allen, University of Delaware

Tuesday, November 13
12:00-3:00 pm
1103 Bioscience Building

Deborah Allen, Associate Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Delaware, and has published widely on topics of education and pedagogy. Allen will join the Teaching and Learning Series for a special look at problem-based learning.
Communicate: Strategies for International Teaching Assistants is a workbook designed to prepare international teaching assistants (ITAs) in their roles as educators of U.S. undergraduates. Each section, ranging from “Introducing a Syllabus” to “Defining a Term,” integrates exercises on teaching strategies, language skills and cultural awareness, the three areas that Janice Smith, Colleen Meyers, and Amy Burkhalter consider key to ITA development.

Exercises like “The Ideal University Level Teacher in My Culture and in the United States” and “Characteristics of the Average U.S. Undergraduate Student” are clearly designed to facilitate discussion and thereby point to how the workbook is of little use to ITAs in search of a self-guided reference and training manual.

At the same time, exercises frequently pitch ITA opinions against “native English-speaker opinion” in a way that, in my view, harms meaningful discussions about successful teaching and learning practices and expectations in U.S. higher education. After all, there is not one way of how Americans think about teaching in higher education, and, clearly, being a native speaker of English alone does not guarantee good teaching practices.

Communicate introduces language skills, cultural awareness, and teaching strategies as interrelated key components to ITA development, but ultimately privileges concerns about language barriers and cultural difference over pedagogy.

Communication is therefore only selectively useful. It, however, broaches the larger question of whether ITAs even constitute a group where group members share similar backgrounds, experiences and concerns and whether general ITA training manuals are therefore feasible. Communicate: Strategies for International Teaching Assistants, by Janice A. Smith, Colleen M. Meyers, Amy J. Burkhalter. Paperback: 256 pages. Publisher: Waveland Pr Inc. Language: English. ISBN-10: 1577665309. ISBN-13: 978-1577665304. Product Dimensions: 10.8 x 8.4 x 0.8 inches . $27.95

Try Clickers for a Day

Are you interested in the student response devices known as clickers? CTE has a loaner program. You can borrow a set of radio frequency (RF) clickers and a laptop equipped with the RF receiver which makes any classroom with an LCD projector a clicker classroom.

For more information about classroom response technology, visit http://www.clickers.umd.edu, see the November-December 2005 issue of Teaching & Learning News, or contact CTE at cte@umd.edu.
Transition to a Campus-Wide Course Evaluation System: Your Support is Needed for CourseEvalUM

by Renee Baird Snyder, PhD Coordinator for Course Evaluations
Institutional Research, Planning and Assessment

Our campus is in a transition year as we move from diverse systems of course evaluation to a single online system as decided by the Senate several years ago. This fall we are running a large pilot of the software system developed specifically for this project. Essentially, all courses from College Park and the Shady Grove courses offered by College Park that began on or after the standard fall term start date and will end on or before the standard fall term end date will be evaluated using this new online system. Exceptions to this are courses with fewer than 5 students and potentially courses such as internships and dissertation credits if your department scheduler tags them as not to be evaluated.*

Faculty will be able to see the results for fall evaluation of their courses online after the online grade submission deadline in January. They will be able to access results to all 15 items. Student access to the results of a specific sub-set of items by course is permitted if a student completes all of his or her evaluations for fall and if at least 70% of students registered in the given course completed their evaluation of it. Administrators will see results of the eight administrative-use items but not the seven student-use items.

For this fall the evaluation, dubbed CourseEvalUM, will include only the 15 University-wide items. These items were developed by various Senate Task Forces (including faculty, staff, and students) and an Advisory Group (whose membership was appointed by the deans, SGA, and GSG), routed by the Provost to all faculty for feedback, approved by the Senate, and have been statistically evaluated. By fall 2008 the system will have the capacity for multiple blocks of items, including the 15 University-wide items, and another 25 item slots that can be used by a college or school, its affiliated departments, and its individual faculty. So, for instance, a college could add 15 items of its own, allowing departments 5 items and faculty 5 items.

The CourseEvalUM system will be open from Tuesday, November 27 through Wednesday, December 12. We are asking for help from faculty and instructors:

1) Please remind your students during this time frame to check their official University email accounts, as that is where we will send notification asking their participation in the CourseEvalUM system. Several reminders in class and on course listservs would be beneficial. There is campus evidence that more reminders and faculty enthusiasm increase student participation.

2) Additionally, if your department is using a back-up system for this transition year in order to collect data that cannot be captured in the current 15-item pilot, then please make sure students know that both evaluations are important, why they are both important during this phase-in of new and phase-out of old, and acknowledge that their individual participation in both is critical to the transition year. We need your help in individual classes to support the process.

* More information about the new system, including additional links to a faculty and administrator page, a student page, a demo page, more information on courses that may not be evaluated this fall, the list of evaluation items and drop-in language for your online syllabi and course listservs can be found at: https://www.irpa.umd.edu/Assessment/crs_eval.shtml.
Upcoming Grant Opportunities for Teaching & Learning

Improvement of Instruction Grants
The Office of Undergraduate Studies and the Center for Teaching Excellence sponsor the Improvement of Instruction Grants (IIG) program during the academic year. IIG selection criteria give priority to proposals that contribute to the University’s efforts to improve undergraduate teaching and learning, and we solicit projects that have the potential to produce the greatest impact.

Previous Improvement of Instruction Grants have underwritten exciting initiatives at the University of Maryland; these projects have fostered the development of valuable and effective educational programs.

Individual faculty members, as well as departmental or interdisciplinary clusters, are invited to apply. Previous Grants can be viewed at http://cte.umd.edu/grants/iigabstracts/2006-2007abstracts/index.html.

Proposals will be due early in the spring semester, so visit the CTE website for deadlines in January.

Lilly-East Travel Grants for Graduate Students
The 2008 Lilly-East Conference is scheduled for April 16 through 18, 2008, and will be hosted at the University of Delaware. Lilly Conferences combine interactive workshop sessions, discussions, and feature presentations, with opportunities for informal discussion about excellence in college and university teaching and learning. They bring together faculty and graduate students from across disciplines and types of academic institutions.

Conference Proposals are due on December 3, 2007. For more information about the conference, including proposal submission and guidelines, visit: http://www.udel.edu/lillyeast/.

CTE will fund graduate teaching assistants whose proposals are accepted. To apply for the Lilly-East travel grant, visit http://cte.umd.edu/grants/Lilly-GrantApplication.html.

Graduate Teaching Assistant Development Grants
Graduate Teaching Assistant Development Grants help departments and colleges improve their development, support, and recognition of graduate teaching assistants. The purpose of these grants is to advance graduate teaching assistant professional development, thereby enhancing undergraduate student learning.

Graduate Teaching Assistant Development Grants are made possible by the Center for Teaching Excellence, the Graduate School, and the Office of the Provost. Grant criteria, suggested project areas, and supported proposals are available at http://cte.umd.edu/grants/TAGrants/index.html. Applications are due on November 30, 2007.

If you have questions or need more information about these grants, or to find out about CTE’s University Teaching and Learning Program, please contact Henrike Lehnguth by phone at (301) 314-1283 or by email at lehnguth@umd.edu.
honor when they have been named by former students, but it isn’t until they hear those students speak that, often moved to tears, they really understand what they have meant to their students.

In addition to their recognition at the annual banquet, the Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars Program also gives a scholarship in the teacher’s name to an incoming student from their high school. “The most wonderful part for the teachers is that they’ve had a hand in the success of their student, and with the scholarship they have a hand in someone else coming up,” explains Kiely.

The University of Maryland faculty named by the scholars are usually not as hard to find as their K-12 counterparts. Many of the outstanding professors are named year after year by different Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars, who each found them to be an important influence as a teacher and mentor. This year two students from ARHU, Luisa Cole and Anne Powell, both named Michael Olmert, professor of English as the faculty member they’d like to honor.

The Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars Program, now in its fourth year, is named after diplomat and philanthropist Philip Merrill. The Merrill family attends the annual banquet each year. The program is an initiative of the president’s office, administered by Undergraduate Studies.

For more information about the program, including a full list of Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars and their statements about the teachers they selected, visit http://www.ugst.umd.edu/merrill.

If you plan to teach at the university level, you will need a statement of teaching philosophy and a teaching portfolio. Starting December 3, 2007 CTE will accept electronic applications (see CTE website at www.cte.umd.edu) to participate in one of two two-and-a-half-day teaching portfolio retreats. The first Graduate Teaching Assistant Portfolio Retreat will be held on Wednesday, January 16 through 18, 2008. The second Graduate Teaching Assistant Portfolio Retreat will be held on Wednesday, January 23 through 25, 2008. Each retreat is limited to 12 participants. Applicants are selected based on the completeness of and responses to this application as well as the order in which their applications are received.

For further information, please visit CTE’s website at www.cte.umd.edu or contact Graduate Programs Coordinator Henrike Lehnguth at lehnguth@umd.edu.
Work with a CTE Faculty Teaching Consultant

The Faculty Teaching Consultation Division is designed to help provide support for campus instructors who would like to improve their teaching. Teachers work one-on-one with a Faculty Teaching Consultant, based on their own goals. The requesting teacher determines the issues to be explored, and the consultant provides an outside perspective, peer support for a plan of action, and suggestions for additional resources.

Consultations can address any number of areas, including, among other issues, assessment, active learning, collaborative learning, lecturing, instructional technology, syllabus construction, rubrics for grading, and scholarship in teaching and learning.

Any faculty member who teaches for the University of Maryland at College Park can request a teaching consultation, and they are completely confidential. For more information, contact the Center for Teaching Excellence at 301-405-9356 or via email at cte@umd.edu.

Distinguished Scholar Teacher Lecture Series

“Frederick Douglass and Haiti: The Secret History”
Robert Levine, Dept of English
4:30 p.m. Thursday, November 8
1120 Susquehanna Hall

“Information Forensics: What Sherlock Holmes Would Do”
K.J. Ray Liu, Dept of Electrical and Computer Engineering
2 p.m. Friday, November 16
Jeong H. Kim Bldg.

“Human Language: You Know More Than You Think”
Paul Pietroski, Dept of Philosophy
4 p.m. Monday, December 3
2203 Art-Sociology Bldg.

University Teaching & Learning Program

Graduate students, boost your teaching, boost your CV – join the UTLP!

What is the UTLP? CTE’s University Teaching and Learning Program (UTLP) assists graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in professionalizing as college teachers by encouraging you to self-reflectively practise and document your teaching in writing.

You complete the program with a notation on your transcript and a teaching philosophy and portfolio in hand. Institutions of higher education nowadays require teaching portfolios and philosophies from applicants for academic jobs.

Please visit http://www.cte.umd.edu/UTLP for further information on UTLP and electronic application forms.
Notes for Spring Syllabi

Textbook orders for Spring 2008 are due November 1
Submit textbook orders via the University Book Center’s website at http://www.ubc.umd.edu
You may also fax your orders to the Book Center at 301-314-7858

UNIV798a Introduction to University Teaching Spring 2008

UNIV798 is a two-credit seminar style graduate course that meets once a week and is open to all graduate students. It covers the theoretical underpinning of how students learn, student development taxonomies, pedagogical approaches, course development and assessment. The course goal is to provide information and skills with respect to university teaching that every new faculty member should know and have. It is required of students in the CTE UTLP program but all graduate students interested in higher education teaching and learning are encouraged to sign up.

Faculty Handbook of Policies & Resources

• Can I reschedule a final exam? • What are the University’s guidelines for attendance policies?
• In what cases I am required to submit early warning grades? • What must be included in my course syllabi? • Do I need approval to sell my own textbook to students taking my course?

This guide offers a brief introduction to the University’s policies, procedures, and resources related to teaching, advising and mentoring. It is available at the following address:

http://www.faculty.umd.edu/teach/InstructionalGuide.htm

The Honor Pledge

The Student Honor Council encourages instructors to include the following information in course syllabi:

The University of Maryland, College Park has a nationally recognized Code of Academic Integrity, administered by the Student Honor Council. This Code sets standards for academic integrity at Maryland for all undergraduate and graduate students. As a student you are responsible for upholding these standards for this course. It is very important for you to be aware of the consequences of cheating, fabrication, facilitation, and plagiarism. For more information on the Code of Academic Integrity or the Student Honor Council, please visit http://www.shc.umd.edu.

To further exhibit your commitment to academic integrity, remember to sign the Honor Pledge on all examinations and assignments: “I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this examination (assignment).”
CTE has made available a valuable teaching resource for the campus community. Visit http://cte.umd.edu/PODresources.htm to review a number of brief essays published by the POD (Professional and Organizational Development) Network.

These POD packets address current, relevant topics in higher education teaching and learning. Each is composed of past “Essays on Teaching Excellence,” a POD Network publication series.

Written by expert scholar-practitioners, these thoughtful and succinct essays can be used as readings for faculty development workshops, seminars, individual consultations, and classes on college teaching.

EXAMPLES OF AVAILABLE PACKETS:

The Learning Process
Change, Renewal, and the Professoriate
Technology and Related Issues
Improvement of Teaching and Assessment
Alternatives to Traditional Teaching Methods and Learning Strategies
The Student/Teacher Relationship
Defining and Characterizing Teaching
Motivating Students
Cooperative/Collaborative Learning, Small Groups
Critical Thinking
Diversity Issues
Grading, Testing and Assessment
Introductory Courses/General Education

Subscribe to Teaching & Learning News ~ http://www.cte.umd.edu/TLNMailingList/

For more than fifteen years TLN has included articles, notes, and schedules to keep the campus informed about new technologies, available grants, fellowship notices, workshops and roundtables, distinguished lectures, assessment, learning outcomes, classroom management strategies, consultation programs, new conferences, established programs, award winners, grant recipients, University policies on teaching, and other valuable information for faculty and graduate teaching assistants. Most important, it always suggests ways to enhance teaching for better learning. Subscribing to the TLN listserv list takes about twenty seconds and means that you will receive approximately five emails a year, notifying you that a new issue of the only regular campus-wide publication on teaching and learning has arrived.
longitudinal information with little effort on their part since the survey is automatically administered and analyzed. As faculty accumulate feedback from a variety of courses they will be able to identify patterns within their own teaching, e.g. my courses are seen by students as very challenging, students perceive that I am not responsive to their concerns, students seem to be learning a lot or not. This should please all/most faculty. When is the last time that you got this type of useful information for free?

The survey has limitations, all surveys do, and certainly in it present form it will not obtain specific information that you may want or need for your course, e.g. did the group work assignment help students to learn the materials, was the use of clicker beneficial etc.? The University-wide survey is not meant to be the only form of student course feedback or assessment for an instructor, department, college or even the University. Multiple forms of feedback/assessment are needed in every course and program in order to obtain a realistic picture of what works, what doesn’t work, what students learned and what should stay as is and what needs to be changed. In my own courses I always give my own end of the course survey in addition to the one required by my college. I need student feedback on course specific aspects in order to reflect on how effective the course was for student learning and how effective my teaching practices were. Despite many years of teaching, I occasionally find surprises between my end of the semester impression of the course and those of the students. I would like to report that these are always pleasant surprises but that would be untrue, however even the less-than-pleasant surprises have been useful.

Instructor constructed end of the course evaluations are particularly useful in understanding how well a new pedagogy worked, how students perceived the nature of the course and for facilitating reflections on how one might/should alter course content or pedagogy to better meet the learning needs of all students. I strongly encourage all faculty to provide feedback on the University-wide survey and to develop and use their own end of the course surveys that ask students for specific information about the course that will be meaningful to them in addition to using the University-wide survey. Your survey can be as simple as one or two open-ended questions, a set of Likert-scale questions, or a combination. If you need help in designing your own end of the semester evaluation/feedback form stop by CTE, we are always happy to help find or build an instrument that meets your needs and ask the questions whose answers you want to know.

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