

Case Western Reserve University  
**College of Arts and Sciences**

**Approval of Use of Plus-Minus Grading**

**Motion:** The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences recommends that the departments of the college shall have the option to report grades for graduate studies including designations of “plus” and “minus.” Departments may individually decide whether or not to participate in “plus-and-minus grading.” Should a department elect the “plus-minus” option, that option must be available to all graduate programs in the department.

Approved: A&S Executive Committee  
Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences  
Cyrus C. Taylor, Dean of the College

May 9, 2014  
October 31, 2014  
November 14, 2014

**DATE: 3/17/15**

**TO: CAS Executive Committee**

**FROM: CAS Graduate Committee**

**RE: Plus-Minus Grading Questions in Response to Faculty Senate**

The CAS faculty voted to approve graduate student plus-minus grading in those departments that wanted this option. In response, the Faculty Senate Graduate Committee discussed this issue and posed a series of questions (below) to the CAS Graduate Committee. John Protasiewicz asked that the CAS Graduate Committee forward their response to the CAS Executive Committee meeting prior to its next meeting (March 20, 2015).

The CAS Graduate Committee met on March 16 and is forwarding the responses and recommendations below to the CAS Executive Committee.

In addition to the recommendations below, the CAS Graduate Committee suggests that the CAS Executive Committee consider forwarding their decisions to all CAS departments. We recommend that all departments receive this information because additional departments to those that originally signaled their interest may be considering this option now that it is a possibility.

The following 6 items (in bold) were posed by the Faculty Senate Graduate Committee. The Graduate Committee responses follow each question.

**(1) Is the plus-minus grading option intended to apply to a department's COURSES without regard to the department in which the STUDENT is enrolled? Is the plus-minus grading option intended to apply to a department's STUDENTS without regard to the department from which the COURSE is offered? Or, is the plus-minus grading option intended to apply only to a department's students taking a department's courses? What about graduate level cross listed courses in the case where one dept. adopts plus/minus and the other dept. does not? What about students in dual programs that have course work double counted and internally transferred? For example, if the Biology department decides to opt-in to +/- grading, should ALL graduate students (Biology students or otherwise) taking BIOL 415 be eligible for +/- grades? Should all graduate Biology students be eligible for +/- grades for ALL graduate courses (Biology courses or otherwise)? Only graduate Biology students in graduate Biology courses? What about graduate level cross listed courses (e.g, if MATH opts in and PHIL opts out, what should happen with MATH/PHIL 406 student grades)?**

Graduate Committee Recommendation:

Grading (+/-) will follow the department designation.

1. Once a department determines that it will institute +/- grading for its graduate level courses, ALL graduate level courses in that Department will be graded on a +/- basis (Note: This is consistent with the CAS vote)

Hypothetical Illustration:

- a) History has voted for +/- grading; Anthropology has not. All courses in History but not in Anthropology will be graded on a +/- basis.
  - b) If a course is cross-listed in History and Anthropology, the instructor will grade all students on the +/- basis with the grades converted to the students' department's grading system, as consistent with how this is currently managed at MSASS, which has +/- grading.
  - c) If the course is in History and not cross-listed with Anthropology, but some Anthropology students register for the course, all students will be graded on a +/- basis. When grades are submitted, the History students' transcript will show +/- grades but the Anthropology students' transcript will be converted to a non +/- grade (because this is the grading scheme in Anthropology).
  - d) Dual History-Anthropology degree students will have +/- grading, or not, by the same rules as a)-c).
2. Courses offered at a 300/400 level will require separate grading for undergraduate and graduate students and this should be reflected in the syllabus and submitted as a change for the Bulletin.
  3. If the course is cross-listed with another department or outside program, +/- grading will apply to the departmental listings only for those departments that have voted for +/- grading.
  4. If the course is not cross-listed, +/- grading will apply to all students registered for the course regardless of their departmental home. The Registrar in recording the grades will convert to the grading scheme of the student's departmental home. (Note: This is consistent with MSASS' +/- grading.)
  5. The same will apply to students in dual programs

**(2) When are the changes intended to become effective?**

Graduate Committee Recommendation:

Fall, 2015 (or Fall 2016 if 2015 not possible so that the change begins with the academic year)

**(3) Will there be an approval process needed to enable a department to elect this option? Or would the department just contact the University Registrar to request it? What about discontinuing use of the option?**

Graduate Committee Recommendation:

Departments electing +/- grading will be required to submit this change to the Committee on Educational Programs (CEP) in order to make Bulletin changes for the department, programs, and courses. This process also applies if +/- grading is discontinued.

The usual process of programs and courses being reviewed by the FSCUE following the CEP will also be followed.

**(4) How will the changes be communicated to students? How will grading options for each course be shared with students?**

Graduate Committee Recommendation:

Departments electing +/- grading will be responsible for contacting all students in the department when a change occurs (to institute or to discontinue +/- grading). Departments will also be responsible for ensuring that all relevant Bulletin changes occur.

Note: Students who enter under one set of rules are entitled to continue under those rules until they complete their degrees or to a period during which they should be able to complete their degrees and are given advance notice of the change. This means that the instituting or discontinuing of +/- grading may be a lengthy process to accommodate existing students, and that departments electing +/- grading may have students being graded under both systems for a period of time.

**(5) We wondered in regard to communicating this policy to students about the impact on student GPA and instances where one student might earn a B+ and another student from a dept. not adopting the policy would earn a B in the same course.**

Graduate Committee Recommendation:

The grading policy for all courses is already required on the syllabus.

Appropriate language and explanations should be included in the Graduate Handbook, including how grades will be represented on the transcript.

The Graduate Committee recommends that the transformation of the grade retain the letter grade regardless of the +/- designation. Thus, a B+ and a B- both transform to a B, for example.

**(6) There were a few other technical questions, such as how to convey this information on the transcript key, that the committee noted but did not feel was within our scope to examine the policy in light of SGC perspective.**

Graduate Committee Recommendation:

CAS will work with the Registrar to work out these more technical questions.

Finally, the Graduate Committee recommends that the grade of A+ should be included in +/- grading. This will allow faculty to reward outstanding student work, and may help to ensure that the grading changes do not have an overall negative impact on graduate student grade point averages.

Date	School
3/1/2013	University of California-Santa Barbara
3/1/2013	California Institute of Technology
3/1/2013	Brown University
3/1/2013	Harvard University (College)
3/2/2013	University of Southern California
3/2/2013	Ohio State University-Columbus
3/2/2013	University of Oregon
3/2/2013	Brandeis University
3/3/2013	State University of New York-Stony Brook
3/3/2013	Iowa State University
3/3/2013	Pennsylvania State University
3/3/2013	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill
3/4/2013	Rutgers University
3/4/2013	University of Michigan-Ann Arbor
3/4/2013	University of Arizona
3/4/2013	University of Maryland-College Park
3/4/2013	University of Virginia
3/4/2013	Michigan State University
3/4/2013	Vanderbilt University
3/5/2013	Duke University
3/6/2013	University of Colorado-Boulder
3/11/2013	State University of New York-Buffalo

3/11/2013	University of Chicago
3/11/2013	University of Wisconsin-Madison
3/12/2013	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities
3/12/2013	Purdue University
3/12/2013	Boston University
3/12/2013	University of Missouri-Columbia
3/12/2013	University of Iowa
3/12/2013	Indiana University-Bloomington
3/12/2013	Northwestern University
3/12/2013	University of Florida

**For the school (e.g. School of Graduate Studies) at which you aggregate graduate student grades (i.e. there is a transcript page, GPA, etc.) do you allow different programs within the school to have their own grading systems?**

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

For our Grad Arts & Science and Business schools all have the same grading system, however for our Social Policy school PhD programs use an S/U system while Masters use the standard +/-

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

Same for all schools/programs in a career

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

No, same grading system for all programs within a school

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No, same grading system for all programs within a school

**Any helpful comments for me that can be passed along to the committee that is researching this issue?**

Good luck with the outcome.

Strongly advise against using distinct grading systems by program unless the courses are entirely distinct and populations will not mix. Our experience is that mixed courses with mixed grading systems lead to confusion and regular grade changes to make corrections for faculty who do not pay attention.

Minus grades and A + grade used only in our Law Schools and Graduate Business Schools. C+ and B+ grades used in all other Graduate Schools

90 percent of our graduate programs are on a 9.0 scale. A few are on a 4.0 scale. In the 9 point scale, an A+ is 9 points, A is 8 points. For the 4 point scale, an A+ and A both earn 4 quality points. We are discussing moving off the 9 point scale to a 4 point scale. How we will treat A+ and A grades has not been finalized.

Having one grading system for all schools and levels standardizes the grading process, avoids confusion, and lessens student complaints. Whatever decisions are made, make sure they are thoroughly vetted by all stakeholders and widely communicated to them.

We have a graduate career, an undergraduate career, a Medicine career, a Law career and a Graduate Business career

The institution is trying to move away from A+ grading except in the Law School where an A+ = 4.3.

The University of Chicago does not have a Graduate School so each graduate division is allowed to create their own policy as it relates to grading and other matters as well. Each graduate division is made up of similar disciplines (i.e. Humanities, Social Sciences, Physical Sciences, and Biological Sciences) and then there is a Divinity School. Our professional schools include Law, Med, Business, and Public Policy. So it is not really the case where each “department” can have their own grading policy but each “division” or “school” can do so.

We have a +/- grading system but only the Undergraduate level uses it.

I recommend that what ever is used that is is consistent across all courses. For example, we have issues at the undergraduate level with some sections of a course where +/- is used and other sections of the same course that do not use +/-.

C+ is considered failure

Each professional school is graded differently—grad and undergrad is the same

The available grades are based on the school/program of the student, not the class. In situations where a student's school does not offer +/- grading but the school of the class does the faculty awarding grades will not see +/- grades as an option.

Grading is a key function of any academic institution. while different disciplines may arrive at the grades differently the constant has to be the assigned grades to assure that those reviewing the work of one of our students can with some confidence judge how they did with respect to others at the institution. Having different grades for different programs is like having different speed limits for different makes of automobiles. Good Luck!

Please indicate whether or not your School of Graduate Studies (or equivalent) uses +/- grades.	If you have +/- grades in your School of Graduate Studies (or equivalent), do you have an A+ grade?
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
There are no +/- grades -- ONLY "whole" letter grades	
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
There are no +/- grades -- ONLY "whole" letter grades	
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
Our Graduate School grading basis is not A-F, but rather H,P,L, and F, with no +/- grades.	
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
There are no +/- grades -- ONLY "whole" letter grades	
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
There are no plus or minus grades - only numeric	
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No

Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
There are no +/- grades -- ONLY "whole" letter grades	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
There are no +/- grades -- ONLY "whole" letter grades	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
There are no +/- grades -- ONLY "whole" letter grades	
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	Yes
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No
Both +/- grades and "whole" letter grades are used	No

**If you have an A+ grade in your School of Graduate Studies (or equivalent), how many quality points are assigned for it?**

4.0

4.3, 4.33, 4.333 or similar

4.3, 4.33, 4.333 or similar

4.0

4.3, 4.33, 4.333 or similar

Most use a 9 point grade basis. 9 = A+, 8 = A; some use a 4.0 basis and have an A+ but earns only 4 quality points, same as an A.

4.0

4.0

4.0

We do not have
4.3, 4.33, 4.333 or similar
4.0

From the Survey background statement that was presented to respondents:

CWRU has a few schools that use +/- grading and several that do not. I had sent a survey about undergraduate grading in 2008. This survey concerns grading for students in \*graduate\* (i.e. not professional) programs. At CWRU, students in our School of Graduate Studies comprise those seeking Masters and PhD degrees from our College of Arts and Sciences and also from our Schools of Engineering, Medicine, Management and any other professional school that also has a PhD program. Within our School of Graduate Studies, there has been discussion about moving from a "whole grades only" to a +/- grading system. However, there has not been agreement among programs within the School of Graduate Studies regarding the potential shift.

This survey pertains to grading for the school at which you aggregate graduate student grades (i.e. there is a separate transcript page, cumulative GPA, etc.).

## **Graduate Studies Plus-Minus Grading Option for Departments of the College of Arts and Sciences Clarifying Questions**

The College of Arts and Sciences has recently approved the use of plus-minus grades. The language received by the Office of the University Registrar is as follows:

### **CAS Approval of Use of Plus-Minus Grading**

Motion: The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences recommends that the departments of the college shall have the option to report grades for graduate studies including designations of “plus” and “minus.” Departments may individually decide whether or not to participate in “plus-and-minus grading.” Should a department elect the “plus-minus” option, that option must be available to all graduate programs in the department.

Approved: A&S Executive Committee May 9, 2014  
Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences October 31, 2014  
Cyrus C. Taylor, Dean of the College November 14, 2014

### **Additional Background:**

Plus-minus grading is already in use in the schools of Law, Dental Medicine, and Applied Social Sciences. So, if an MBA student takes a Law course, and a grade of B+ is earned, a grade of B is recorded for the MBA student. And, if a Law student takes an MBA course, there is no option to award a plus-minus grade.

There is a standard conversion for the university between letter grades and GPA points: A = 4.0, A- = 3.666, B+ = 3.333, B = 3.0, B- = 2.666, etc.

Two additional documents are provided for reference: 1) “Transcript Key.xls”, the current version of CWRU’s transcript key and 2) “AAU Graduate School Grading.xls”, the results of a survey of other AAU graduate school grading practices. This survey was done in 2013 at the request of Daniel Cohen, Associate Professor of History & Director of Graduate Studies.

The Student Information System (SIS) is able to accommodate and apply multiple grading schemes across several dimensions. SIS grading set up needs to be performed and thoroughly tested prior to scheduling for the term in which the change is to take effect. The questions below are intended to elicit clarification of intent so that SIS can be set up accurately and as intended. The answers to the questions will also help determine whether or not potential modifications to SIS would be required and could impact how soon the options could become available.

### **Questions:**

**1. Is the plus-minus grading option intended to apply to a department’s COURSES without regard to the department in which the STUDENT is enrolled? Is the plus-minus grading option intended to apply to a department’s STUDENTS without regard to the department from which the COURSE is offered? Or, is the plus-minus grading option intended to apply only to a department’s students taking a department’s courses?**

#### **A. Hypothetical Scenario 1**

- The Anthropology department elects to participate in plus-minus grading for graduate students
  - The Psychology department elects NOT to participate in plus-minus grading for graduate students
  - An Anthropology graduate student registers for ANTH 402 and PSCL 409
  - A Psychology graduate student also registers for ANTH 402 and PSCL 409
1. Should the Anthropology student be able to receive a B+ in PSCL 409? Should the Psychology student be able to receive a B+ in ANTH 402?
  2. What if an undergraduate or MBA student is enrolled in ANTH 402?
  3. What if an Anthropology graduate student takes an undergraduate course? An MBA course?
  4. What if ANTH 402 is also offered as ANTH 302?
  5. What if an IGS student takes ANTH 402 and earns a B+? Since IGS students take courses that show on both the undergraduate and graduate record, would the B+ show on the graduate transcript and a B show on the undergraduate transcript?
  6. What about students in other dual programs that need to have credit internally transferred across schools?

7. Suppose Student X takes 3 courses having +/- grading and is allowed to keep the +/- grading on the transcript. This student receives a C-, and two B-'s for a GPA of 2.333, which is below "good standing" threshold for first-year graduate students. Student Y is also a first-year graduate student, takes the same set of three courses, and receives the same set of grades, but comes from a department that does not allow +/- grades on the transcript. One C and two B's would be recorded, for a term GPA of 2.666 which is above the "good standing" threshold. Is it fair that identical performance in the courses could lead to a different good-standing status?

B. *Hypothetical Scenario 2*

- *Topics in Evolutionary Biology* is a course that has multiple offerings as follows: ANTH 367/467, BIOL 368/468, EEPS 367/467, PHIL 367/467, PHOL 467. This course is "owned" by the Anthropology department.
  - The Anthropology department elects to participate in plus-minus grading for graduate students.
  - The Biology department elects NOT to participate in plus-minus grading for graduate students.
1. Since the department of Anthropology "owns" this course, does plus-minus grading apply to all cross-listed versions of the course? If not, and ...
  2. If Anthropology graduate student A registers for this course as ANTH 467 and earns a grade of C- and Anthropology graduate student B registers for this course as BIOL 468 and earn a grade if C-, should the BIOL 468 grade stand as C- or be truncated to C?
  3. If Anthropology graduate student Y has a GPA that is just below 2.0, and if the student petitions to retroactively change registration to BIOL 468 so that the C- can be truncated to C, what should be the result of the petition? Would students petition to use plus-minus grading in situations where it is not enabled by the department? Could departmental grading choices potentially impact student registration choices?
  4. How would a graduate student taking BIOL 468 feel if the same amount of work is done as a student who takes ANTH 467 but the student in ANTH 467 can have a higher GPA because of a plus grade and they cannot?
  5. How would an undergraduate student in ANTH 367 feel if a graduate student with the same level of performance can have a higher GPA because of a plus grade and they cannot?
2. **How should the university portray grading options on the transcript key? (see transcript key attachment)**  
The transcript key currently shows all possible grades and the schools that use those grades. If a department elects to use plus-minus grading, would it be important to show which departments elect the option so that a transcript reviewer understands what to expect as a potential grade? How does this impact a reviewer of CWRU transcripts?
  3. **When are the changes intended to become effective?** Summer and Fall 2015 courses become "live" on February 1, 2015. Spring 2016 courses become "live" on October 1, 2015. Depending on the answers to question 1, there would be a minimum lead time needed for building grading bases and rules for each scenario, thorough testing (and perhaps for transcript key changes as well). If modifications to SIS are required, additional time for writing technical specifications, coding requirements, testing and turnover would also need to be accommodated.
  4. **Will there be an approval process needed to enable a department to elect this option? Or would the department just contact the University Registrar to request it? What about discontinuing use of the option?**
  5. **How will the changes be communicated to students? How will grading options for each course be shared with students?**
  6. **For courses in which +/- grades are offered, is it the intention to have the transcript show A0, A-, B+, B0, B-, etc. to distinguish A, B, C grades in courses graded with whole letters from A0, B0, C0 for courses graded with +/- grades?**

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## MEMORANDUM

**To:** CAS Executive Committee

**From:** Department of History

**Date:** January 24, 2014

**Subject:** History Department Resolution in Support of the Plus/Minus Grading Proposal (fully incorporating the "CAS Graduate Committee Report on the Plus/Minus Grading Initiative," as supplemented by History Department rebuttals of the arguments in opposition)

### Background of the Plus/Minus Grading Proposal (as reprinted from the original CAS Graduate Committee Report):

Beginning in September 2011, the CAS Graduate Committee began considering a proposal to establish a plus/minus grading option for graduate programs in the College.

In April 2012, it formally requested that the CAS Executive Committee delegate the Graduate Committee to investigate the issue further, seek feedback from other bodies, and develop a proposal to bring back to the Executive Committee (see Document #1).

The Executive Committee approved this request at a meeting held on 13 September 2012 (see Document #2).

In the months that followed, members of the Graduate Committee solicited additional information and feedback from various University bodies and officials (see Documents #3-9).

Finding no consensus on the issue among the current members of the Graduate Committee, the Graduate Committee has decided to submit a report to the CAS Executive Committee that first summarizes arguments *in support* of the proposal and then summarizes arguments *in opposition* to the proposal. This Report and its Appended Documents have the unanimous endorsement of the five voting members of the Graduate Committee present at the meeting on February 13, 2013 (one voting member absent) as a summary of arguments for and against the proposal and as a compilation of related feedback and documentation.

Please note that, in response to feedback from Vice Provost and Dean of SGS Chuck Rozek, Vice Provost Don Feke, and Registrar Amy Hammett, supporters of the proposal on the Committee are now advocating that plus/minus grading be established as an *option* to be exercised (or not) at the *departmental* (rather than the individual *program*) level, so that all graduate programs based in a given department would have a uniform grading system.



COLLEGE OF  
ARTS AND SCIENCES

CASE WESTERN RESERVE  
UNIVERSITY

## **History Department Resolution in Support of the Plus/Minus Grading Option:**

At a meeting held on January 24, 2014, the History Department faculty unanimously endorsed the proposal to establish a plus/minus grading system as a departmental option for graduate programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. Our support is based both on the twelve arguments in favor of the proposal contained in the “CAS Graduate Committee Report on the Plus/Minus Grading Initiative,” dated February 20, 2013 (reproduced immediately below) and on our own rebuttals of the arguments against the proposal also contained in the “CAS Graduate Committee Report” (reproduced below, with our rebuttals interspersed).

### **Arguments in Support of the Plus/Minus Grading Option:**

**(1) Flexibility and Accuracy:** The current grading system, in effect, allows for only two acceptable grades at the graduate level (A & B) and therefore does not provide sufficient flexibility to accurately reflect the range of actual graduate student academic performance. The addition of “plus” and “minus” grades would allow faculty to recognize—and distinguish among—the several levels of graduate student achievement that fall between work that is truly outstanding and work that is merely adequate.

**(2) Leverage to Improve Performance:** The availability of “plus” and “minus” grades would provide faculty with greater leverage to encourage graduate students to improve their academic performance both within individual courses and over the duration of their graduate careers.

**(3) Transparency:** “Plus” and “minus” grades would provide greater transparency for graduate students, enabling them to better gauge their standing in the eyes of program faculty.

**(4) Equity:** Under the current grading system, it is very common in many graduate programs for a student who works extraordinarily hard and performs on a very high level to earn the very same grade (“A”) as students who work much less diligently and perform significantly less well. This is simply unfair to the more diligent or more accomplished graduate students.

**(5) “Best Practices”:** The overwhelming majority of American research universities employ plus/minus grading systems in both their undergraduate and graduate courses. For example, a telephone survey taken in January 2013 in conjunction with the Graduate Committee’s study of this issue found that graduate programs at Brandeis, Carnegie Mellon, Chicago, Emory, New York University, University of Rochester, Washington University (St. Louis), and Ohio State University all use plus/minus grading in their Colleges of Arts & Sciences (or equivalent) graduate programs. Likewise, a 2008 survey of AAU universities conducted by CWRU’s registrar, Amy Hammett, found that 34 of 40 (or 85% of) responding schools used plus/minus grading for their undergraduates (see Document #9). Registrar Hammett is currently conducting a similar survey of grading systems in graduate programs at AAU universities.

**(6) Reluctance to Assign the “B” Grade:** Given the preponderance of plus/minus grading in graduate programs at American research universities, faculty in some CWRU departments report that the flat “B” grade is widely interpreted in their disciplines as denoting marginal, or barely passable, work on the part of graduate students (“A”=excellent; “A-“=very good; “B+”=good; “B”=fair/passing). As a result, the flat “B” grade carries a stigma in their disciplines comparable to that carried by the “C” or even “D” grade among undergraduates. Hence, faculty members are very reluctant to assign a “B” grade to their graduate students, lest they significantly damage their professional prospects. This fear may help explain why between 90% and 100% of all letter grades assigned in many CAS graduate programs in AY 2011-12 were “A”s (see Documents #6 and 7)—a pattern that only further exacerbates the problems with the existing grading system outlined in arguments (1), (2), (3), and (4) above.

**(7) Damage to Program Credibility and Institutional Reputation:** The existing pattern of often awarding flat “A”s 90% or even 100% of the time in graduate courses will, over time, inevitably undercut the credibility of some CAS graduate programs (and perhaps the reputation of CWRU as a whole) as professors at other universities begin to notice that less-than-stellar graduate students at CWRU routinely receive flat “A”s in all or most of their courses.

**(8) Principle of Faculty Control of Pedagogy:** A core principle of university governance is that faculty should control pedagogic practices in their own courses and programs; grading is a core component of pedagogy. Since the faculty in different departments appear to disagree on the issue of plus/minus grading, the establishment of a departmental plus/minus *option* is the best policy to allow for the faculty in all departments across CAS to exercise control over their respective grading practices.

**(9) Broad Faculty Support:** The faculty of the History and Political Science departments have already registered their support for the plus/minus option in department meetings (in the case of the History Department, the vote was unanimous). Vice Provost Rozek reported in October 2012 that, when plus/minus grading was informally discussed at a meeting of the Faculty Senate Graduate Studies Committee, “many were in favor of the system” (see Document #5)

**(10) Technical and Administrative Feasibility:** Both Vice Provost Donald Feke and Registrar Amy Hammett confirm that the new SIS system introduced in 2008 can accommodate a plus/minus grading system. Plus/minus systems are already in use at the Schools of Applied Social Science, Dental Medicine, and Law. Registrar Hammett explains that plus/minus grading not only can—but *already does*—coexist with flat letter grading at CWRU, thanks to the flexibility of the new SIS system. When an undergraduate or a current CAS graduate student takes a course in a unit of the University with plus/minus grading (such as the Law School), the SIS system simply suppresses any “plus” or “minus” that might otherwise appear on his or her transcript (see Documents #8 and 9).

**(11) Advantages of Plus/Minus Option at *Departmental* Level:** Since some CAS departments house as many as half a dozen different graduate programs, the establishment of a plus/minus graduate grading option at the *departmental* (as opposed to *program*) level would minimize

potential administrative “challenges” or confusion over interpreting transcripts—such as the concerns expressed by Registrar Hammett (Documents #8 and 9). It would, in particular, minimize the likelihood of confusion in cases where students moved from one graduate program to another at CWRU (since most such movements are between programs housed in the same department, as when a students move from an MA program to a PhD program within the same discipline).

**(12) Possible Introduction of A+ Grade:** The introduction of the “A+” grade as a component of the plus/minus grading option might ameliorate the concern expressed by some graduate students that “plus” and “minus” grades would exert a net downward pull on GPAs. Some delegates to the Graduate Student Senate seemed to be more supportive of a plus/minus system if it could be accompanied by inclusion of the “A+” grade (see Document #4).

### **Arguments in Opposition to the Plus/Minus Grading Option:**

**(1) Current System is Working:** The current “flat” letter-grade system is working well and there is no need to change it.

**Rebuttal A:** The faculty in some departments and graduate programs may believe that the current graduate system is working satisfactorily; however, the faculty in other departments and graduate programs disagree. The advantage of this proposal to establish a plus/minus grading *option* is that those departments whose faculty members believe the current system is working well can leave it alone, while those whose faculty members believe that the existing system is not working well can change it. Please note, by contrast, that the current system (by systematically precluding plus and minus grades) does *not* allow for such flexibility or for such even-handed deference to the preferences of faculty across all A&S departments.

**Rebuttal B:** The suggestion that the current system is working well appears to be belied by the grade distributions summarized in Document #6 (appended to this report), which shows that over 80% of all course grades assigned in *most* A&S graduate programs are “A’s” and that between 90% and 100% of all course grades assigned in *several* A&S graduate programs are “A’s.” At CWRU the grade of “A” denotes “Excellent.” The label “excellent” is implicitly comparative in that the verb “excel” means to “surpass” or “outdo.” It is definitionally impossible for 80% or 90% or 100% of a group to “surpass” or “outdo” the bulk of their peers in that group for much the same reason that (alluding to Garrison Keillor’s famous quip) it is logically impossible for all of the children in Lake Wobegone to be “above average.” The current grading system is clearly *not* working as an accurate or effective gauge of graduate student performance in those programs whose faculty members routinely assign the grade of “A” to eighty or ninety or even one-hundred percent of the graduate students taking their courses.

**(2) Grades of Little Importance at the Graduate Level:** Graduate students are primarily motivated by factors other than grades, and grades are of little significance in determining the subsequent career success of graduate students (e.g. on the job market). Given those realities, the

finer distinctions in performance provided by “plus” and “minus” grades are superfluous and might prove distracting to students.

**Rebuttal A:** Faculty members who believe that graduate students are not significantly motivated by grades or that grades are of little significance in determining subsequent career success are free to decline to adopt the “plus/minus” option in their graduate programs; correspondingly, those faculty members who believe otherwise should be free to institute a “plus/minus” grading system in their programs. Different academic disciplines may, indeed, function quite differently, and the faculty in one discipline should defer to the expertise of faculty members in another discipline when the latter propose to make pedagogic decisions (e.g. in designing grading systems) *in their own disciplines*; the proposed “plus/minus” option allows faculty members across A&S departments to show such deference to their colleagues in other disciplines; the existing grading system does not.

**Rebuttal B:** Grades clearly *are* of significance in influencing the careers of graduate students, if for no other reason than that graduate students are placed on probation or “separated” from graduate programs at CWRU if their grade point average falls below a certain level. Further, the fact that 80%, 90%, or even 100% of all course grades assigned in many CWRU graduate programs are “A’s” provides indirect circumstantial evidence that grades are important in influencing “the subsequent career success of graduate students” in the following sense: at least in the History Department, faculty members will often confess (albeit in confidence) that they are reluctant to give any course grade lower than an “A” for fear of hurting a student’s standing in the program or damaging their subsequent career prospects. Our suspicion is that the overwhelming preponderance of “A’s” in many other A&S graduate programs reflects, at least in part, a similar reluctance to give course grades lower than “A” based on similar underlying assumptions concerning the potential impact of grades on subsequent graduate student careers. Finally, while many graduate students may indeed be “primarily motivated by factors other than grades,” our own experience in the History Department is that many of our graduate students are quite upset at the prospect of receiving a course grade of “B” (let alone an even lower grade)—and are highly motivated to do everything in their power to avoid receiving one.

**(3) Most CWRU Graduate Students Deserve “A”s:** Students should not be admitted to CWRU graduate programs unless they are highly self-motivated and fully capable of doing excellent coursework in their chosen fields. In fact, CWRU graduate students in most programs deserve the “A”s that they receive in the vast majority of their courses—and, hence, there is no need for finer distinctions further down the grading scale in order to leverage improved performance.

**Rebuttal:** While we agree that most of our graduate students are “highly self-motivated” and capable of doing good work in their chosen fields (or we would not have admitted them), we in the History Department have not found that *all* of our students perform *equally well* in our courses. For this reason, we support a plus/minus grading option to

enable us to register the several different levels of achievement reflected in the coursework of our students.

**(4) Lack of Broad Faculty Support:** Although there may be support for plus/minus grading in one or two departments, there is no broad enthusiastic support among faculty members across most departments of CAS. To the contrary, most faculty reactions to the proposal appear to range from lukewarm to indifferent. In the absence of a broader groundswell of support, such a major change should not be attempted and could not be successfully implemented.

**Rebuttal:** We are aware of at least three A&S departments that have formally endorsed the plus/minus grading option (History, Astronomy, and Political Science [Political Science's departmental support was registered in feedback to the A&S Graduate Committee last AY]) and are aware of only one that is officially opposed (Psychological Sciences). Anthropology's response indicates that it has no interest in instituting a plus/minus grading system for itself but has "no objection to it being optional if the technical issues can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction." Earth, Environmental, and Planetary Sciences expresses concern that "in some sense the plus/minus system gets implemented for our students even if we don't adopt the system." This concern is misplaced in that the SIS system can be automatically programmed to suppress the "plus" or the "minus" in a course grade based on the grading policy of the student's "home" program (overriding the grading policy of the unit or department in which a course is based) [as explained in "Argument in Support" #10, above].

**(5) Administrative Challenges:** Introduction of a plus/minus grading system in CAS would result in several administrative questions as to how grades would be handled when undergraduates or graduate students in schools not subject to plus/minus grading took graduate courses in CAS that were subject to plus/minus grades. Vice Provost Rozek notes that even supporters of plus/minus grading recognize "the challenges of cross registration between schools etc" (see Documents #5, 8, and 9).

**Rebuttal:** As affirmed in "Arguments in Support" #10 and #11, the administrative challenges can be satisfactorily handled by CWRU's existing SIS system. Especially given the very substantial capabilities of the SIS system, mere administrative convenience should not override the fundamental academic principle of faculty control over pedagogy (including grading). Implementing a plus/minus grading option does not require "thinking beyond the possible" but is already entirely feasible within the existing SIS system.

**(6) Particular Problems Posed by Plus/Minus Option:** Beyond the general complications of changing grading systems, any attempt to implement a plus/minus *option* on a program-by-program basis within CAS would pose additional challenges. As Vice Provost Feke puts it: "I think it might be confusing and complicated to try to implement +/- grades on a program-by-program basis. I believe the decision should be made at the school level. If +/- grades are an option across the board for all CAS graduate courses . . . and if a particular program decides not

to use +/- grading for its courses, those faculty members teaching in that program would have the option to assign only whole letter grades.” (Document #5).

**Rebuttal:** Although an across-the-board plus/minus grading system in all graduate courses in the College of A&S would obviously be *easier* to administer than a plus/minus option *by department*, it would violate the overriding principle of faculty control over pedagogy (in much the same way that the current system does, albeit with a different set of oxes being gored). Only a plus/minus *option* vindicates that overriding principle for the faculty in *all* departments—and the responses of Registrar Hammett (Appended Documents #8 and #9) confirm that it is technically feasible, despite some potential administrative complications. But if uniformity really *has* to be imposed across the College, a plus/minus system would be for more consistent with the principle of faculty control over pedagogy, since the faculty in any given department could simply decide, as a matter of departmental policy, not to give plus or minus grades in their own courses (even if they are made available by the SIS system); please note that *the reverse is not the case*.

**(7) Difficulties of Explaining System on Transcript:** Registrar Hammett points out that it might be challenging for students or others to interpret transcripts if a plus/minus option were introduced. In particular, she notes, it would be difficult to fit a listing of departments offering plus/minus grades onto the “Transcript Key” that appears on the back of every transcript (Documents #8 and 9).

**Rebuttal:** Surely the “Transcript Key” can be reconfigured to fit a list of departments offering the plus/minus option—especially if only a few departments choose to adopt it (as opponents of the proposal seem to assume will be the case).

**(8) Endangering Academic Standing of Some PhD Students:** Introduction of the “B-“ grade would pose a particular threat to the academic standing of some PhD students. As Vice Provost Rozek explains: “I am a bit concerned about the introduction of the B- grade which would be a passing grade but falls below the 3.0 GPA threshold for Ph.D students. An accumulation of B-grades would present a challenge for PhD students to raise their GPA” (Document #5).

**Rebuttal:** Our guess is that the downward impact of potential “B-“ grades would be largely offset by the upward impact of potential “B+” grades. But if it turned out that the introduction of plus/minus grading actually placed additional pressure on marginal or underperforming students to keep their GPA above the 3.0 threshold that would, in our judgment, be a very good thing, not a bad thing.

**(9) Generating Requests for Exceptions:** Conversely, Registrar Hammett expresses concern that students in programs without plus/minus grading who earned B+ grades in a department that offered such grades might “request consideration for grading exceptions if they were in a borderline situation with their GPA?” Would it be fair to other students if that student was granted an exception?” (Document #8)

**Rebuttal:** Such requests for exceptions could simply be denied as a matter of uniform College policy. Problem solved.

**(10) Downward Pressure on GPAs:** Several delegates to the Graduate Student Senate expressed concern that the introduction of “plus” and “minus” grades would inevitably tend to drag down graduate students’ GPAs (Document #4).

**Rebuttal:** If the faculty in some programs are seriously concerned about this objection, they are free to retain the current grading system. In the field of History (and in the admissions and hiring policies of most History graduate programs with which we are familiar), small differences in GPA have a negligible impact in determining admissions, fellowship, hiring, and other significant decisions. (By contrast, the presence of just a few flat “B” grades on an applicant’s transcript can have a significant impact on such decisions—since a flat “B” is widely perceived to be a damning grade at the graduate level, roughly equivalent to a “C” or “D” at the undergraduate level.) Finally, the History Department faculty are open to the possibility of introducing the grade of “A+” if it would assuage widespread concerns over the potential of a plus/minus system to exercise a downward bias on GPAs in disciplines where small distinctions in GPA may be of greater significance than they are in History.

**(11) Detrimental Student Distraction:** One delegate to the Graduate Student Senate expressed concern that the institution of a plus/minus grading system might have the detrimental effect of causing students to focus too heavily on their academic performance in the classroom at the expense of valuable extracurricular or professional-development activities.

**Rebuttal:** The History Department faculty believe that anything which leads graduate students to focus more intently on their academic performance in the classroom is a good thing, not something to be avoided. Under the proposed plus/minus option, faculty in other departments who prefer to prioritize extracurricular activities over academic performance are free to retain the existing grading system.

**(12) Need for Grading Consistency Among All CWRU Students:** Some faculty members would strongly support a plus/minus grading system if it could be implemented across-the-board at CWRU—among both undergraduates and graduate students—but, since there is too much opposition among undergraduates to allow for such a sweeping reform, they conclude that it would be neither advisable nor workable to establish it on a piecemeal basis (for some of the administrative reasons alluded to above).

**Rebuttal:** As already noted repeatedly above (and detailed in Appended Documents #8 and #9), the existing SIS system is sufficiently powerful and flexible to allow a plus/minus system to be introduced in some units or departments of the University without it being imposed across-the-board. Our graduate programs should not be held hostage by a regrettable undergraduate grading system. (Even many faculty opponents of the plus/minus grading option for graduate students deplore the existing undergraduate grading system.)

We hope that this History Department memorandum (fully incorporating the original CAS Graduate Committee Report and its Appended Documents) will prove useful to the Executive Committee as it weighs whether or not to proceed with the plus/minus grading proposal.

## CAS Graduate Committee Report on Plus/Minus Grading Option

### List of Appended Documents:

1. Memo from Corbin Covault, Chair, CAS Graduate Committee to CAS Executive Committee, 12 April 2012.
2. Email from Jill Korbin, CAS Associate Dean, 12 October 2012, conveying Executive Committee's response to Covault memo.
3. Memo from Michael Clune, Chair, CAS Graduate Committee to Chuck Rozek, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies, 5 October 2012. Nearly identical memo also sent to Graduate Student Senate.
4. Email from Daniel Cohen, Member, CAS Graduate Committee, 6 October 2012, reporting on meeting with Graduate Student Senate Assembly.
5. Email from Chuck Rozek, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies, 16 October 2012, replying to Clune memo, with accompanying email from Donald Feke, Vice Provost, 15 October 2012.
6. Compilation of data on letter grades in selected CAS graduate programs for AY 2011-12 (compiled by Daniel Cohen from raw data supplied by Registrar's Office; see next document).
7. Spreadsheet with raw data on CAS graduate program grades for AY 2011-12 supplied by Registrar's Office.
8. First exchange of emails between Daniel Cohen and Amy Hammett, University Registrar, 19 & 24 January 2013 (numbered questions by Cohen, replies by Hammett). "Transcript Key" attached.
9. Second exchange of email between Daniel Cohen and Amy Hammett, University Registrar, 25 & 28 January 2013 (numbered questions by Cohen, replies by Hammett).



CASE WESTERN RESERVE  
UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Graduate Committee

College of Arts and Sciences  
Case Western Reserve University  
10900 Euclid Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44106-7068

MEMORANDUM

To: Executive Committee, College of Arts and Sciences

From: Corbin Covault, Chair, Graduate Committee, College of Arts and Sciences

Date: April 12, 2012

Subject: Plus/ Minus Grading Initiative

During the 2011/2012 academic year, the Graduate Committee considered a proposal to establish an option for the plus/minus grading for graduate programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. The Dean also brought this to the attention of Chair Council. There appears to be adequate support for considering this proposal, and we are bringing this now to the Executive Committee for consideration. The Graduate Committee recommends that there are other bodies that need to be consulted: the Graduate Student Senate, graduate departments, School of Graduate Studies, the Faculty Senate, and the Office of the Registrar. Would the Executive Committee like to delegate to the Graduate Committee the task of consulting with the relevant bodies and further developing this proposal to bring back to the Executive Committee?

Document # 2



Daniel Cohen < dac37@case.edu >

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## Plus-Minus Grading Proposal Update

2 messages

Jill E. Korbin < jek7@case.edu >

Fri, Oct 12, 2012 at 6:02 PM

To: Chandel Smith < cms218@case.edu >

Cc: "Chiel, Hillel" < hjc@case.edu >, "Clune, Michael" < mwc33@case.edu >, "Cohen, Daniel" < dac37@case.edu >, "Connell, Arin" < amc76@case.edu >, "Melaku, Absera" < axm211@case.edu >, "Moore, Peter" < pwm10@case.edu >, "Somersalo, Erkki" < ejs49@case.edu >, Cynthia Stilwell < cynthia.stilwell@case.edu >, Cyrus Taylor < cct@cwru.edu >, Beverly Saylor < bzs@case.edu >

Dear Graduate Committee: (with copies to Beverly Saylor, Chair, Executive Committee, Cyrus Taylor and Cynthia Stilwell):

My apologies for not being at our meeting this past week. I have talked with Cynthia and let me clarify the process for the plus-minus grading proposal.

As copied below from the Executive Committee Meeting minutes of September 13, 2012, the Graduate Committee was given the go-ahead to consult and develop a proposal. Based on the feedback from the Graduate Student Senate Dan received at their meeting, and any further feedback we get from Chuck, the Graduate Committee may proceed with this work if it so decides and submit the proposal to the Executive Committee when ready.

The Graduate Committee does not have the authority to send a proposal directly to the Faculty Senate. Just in case there is any misunderstanding, I will write to Chuck Rozek to clarify that the proposal was sent to him for feedback and comment, but not as a formal proposal to proceed through the Faculty Senate process until it is sent forward from the Executive Committee of the College.

Chandel will keep this on the agenda for the next Graduate Committee meeting and the Graduate Committee can decide how they want to proceed with the proposal to submit to the Executive Committee. The Executive Committee delegated this work to the Graduate Committee and so does not need to hear from the Graduate Committee until the Graduate Committee submits its proposal for consideration.

Best, Jill

Copied:

*Executive Committee Minutes from September 13, 2012 Meeting:*

### *Plus/Minus Grading Initiative*

*During the 2011/2012 academic year, the Graduate Committee considered a proposal to establish an option for the plus/minus grading for graduate programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. The Dean also brought this to the attention of Chair Council. There appears to be adequate support for considering this proposal. The Graduate Committee suggested that there are other bodies that should be consulted: the Graduate Student Senate, graduate departments, School of Graduate Studies, the Faculty Senate, and the Office of the Registrar. The members of the Executive Committee approved the recommendation that the Graduate Committee consult with the relevant bodies and further develop this proposal to bring back to the Executive Committee.*

Jill E. Korbin, Ph.D.  
Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences  
Professor of Anthropology  
Director, Schubert Center for Child Studies  
Director, Childhood Studies Program

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CASE WESTERN RESERVE  
UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Graduate Committee

College of Arts and Sciences  
Case Western Reserve University  
10900 Euclid Avenue  
Cleveland, Ohio 44106-7068

MEMORANDUM

To: Chuck Rozek, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

From: Michael Clune, Chair, CAS Graduate Committee

Date: October 5, 2012

Subject: Plus Minus Grading Initiative

During the 2011-12 academic year, the Graduate Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences considered a proposal to establish an option for “plus/minus” grading for graduate programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. At the Committee’s request, the Dean also brought this proposal to the attention of the Chair’s Council; department chairs were, in turn, asked to discuss the matter with their faculty colleagues. Finding sufficient support for the proposal, the Graduate Committee brought it to the attention of the Executive Committee of the College of Arts and Sciences, requesting authorization to consult with other interested parties. Earlier this month, the Executive Committee approved the Graduate Committee’s request, and we are therefore bringing the proposal to your attention. Here is a brief statement of the proposal and its rationale:

The proposal is to allow individual graduate programs within the College of Arts and Sciences \*the option\* of adopting a grading system that includes “plus” and “minus” grades. Rationale: (1) The current grading system which, in effect, allows for only two passing grades at the graduate level (A & B) does not provide sufficient flexibility to accurately reflect the range of actual graduate student academic performance. The addition of “plus” and “minus” grades would allow faculty to recognize—and distinguish among—the several levels of student achievement that fall between work that is truly outstanding and work that is merely adequate. (2) The option of “plus” and “minus” grades would also provide faculty with greater leverage to encourage students to improve their academic performance both within individual courses and over the duration of their graduate careers. (3) “Plus” and “minus” grades provide greater transparency for students, enabling them to better gauge their standing in the eyes of program faculty. In writing recommendations for students and making decisions on fellowships, faculty members must often draw fine distinctions among students. A more flexible and precise grading system would help students to have a better sense of “where they stand” and better enable them to adjust their efforts and expectations accordingly. (4) Graduate student grades can impact various types of graduate, pre-doctoral, and post-doctoral fellowship applications (both internal and external), admission to other graduate programs or professional schools, and job applications. The roles played by grades in these several venues, however, vary considerably by discipline.

This proposal accounts for those disciplinary variations—and for different departmental “grading cultures”—by allowing each graduate program to either adopt the “plus” and “minus” option, or retain the current grading system, depending on the program faculty’s collective judgment as to which system better serves the interests of its graduate students.

The Graduate Committee would welcome your thoughts concerning this proposal and would be glad to send representatives of our committee to discuss this proposal with you in person.

Dear Colleagues,

I wanted to report back to you on my appearance before the GSS General Assembly last Wednesday, which was somewhat different than I had expected. It was a much larger group than I had anticipated (perhaps 40 or so?), many of whom represented graduate programs outside of the college of Arts & Sciences. Also, the attendees had not yet been given copies of the draft memo (due to an oversight by the presiding officer). Finally, I had assumed that my appearance at 4:50 would be the last item on the agenda, whereas it was actually slipped in near the beginning of the meeting and expected to last just 10 minutes--to be followed by many other pieces of business.

I made a quick decision to distribute copies of the draft memo (even though it had not yet then been formally approved by our committee), briefly summarized its contents as the copies were making their way around the large meeting room, and invited the delegates to ask questions and to make comments or suggestions. Please note that I had no way to distinguish among comments made by graduate students in the College of A&S and those outside it. (Of course, I could have asked speakers to identify themselves by program, but I didn't think of that at the time!) Most of the comments took the form of questions, though some of these seemed to have either negative (or, at least, apprehensive) or positive slants. I would generally divide the comments/questions into four categories:

(1) A few basically neutral questions dealt with procedural details or issues. For example, one woman asked whether the new grading system, if adopted as an option, would apply to students already in graduate programs or only to students who matriculated after the "option" was adopted by a particular program. I honestly hadn't thought about this before--and answered that I didn't know, but that I also thought other parties, such as the SGS or the registrar, might have a say on that sort of issue. At that point, I myself raised the somewhat similar technical issue of whether a student from a program which had NOT adopted plus/minus grades who took a course in a department which HAD would be subject to plus/minus grades. I speculated that this, too, might be an issue where the registrar would have the final say (depending, for example, on whether the "option" would be implemented by the registrar based on departmental course prefixes OR on the program affiliation of the individual students taking a given course).

(2) Several delegates asked questions or expressed concerns regarding the impact that the plus/minus option might have on grade-point averages. I tried to assuage this concern in various ways, but mostly by emphasizing my own experiences, both as a student and as a member of admissions, fellowship, and job search committees in History (where flat-B grades can damage applicants or candidates but where \*minor\* differences in grade point averages never play a significant role)--but, of course, as I repeatedly stressed throughout, I could not speak to practices in other disciplines. This, of course, is why the proposal is being made as an option for individual programs, rather than as an across-the-board plan.

(3) The concern over the possible impact of plus/minus grades on GPAs was somewhat offset by a few questions or comments--with a generally positive slant--pertaining to the possibility of instituting an A+ grade. Of course, such a grade would presumably counteract the downward bias in GPA anticipated by some of the students in the event that plus/minus grades were

allowed. Again, this was something to which I had not given a lot of thought--but, I said that, \*speaking for myself\*, if allowing for A+ grades assuaged concerns and facilitated the adoption of the plus/minus option, I would support it. But I also indicated that the registrar (or other parties) might raise objections. . . . I seem to recall that, at our last meeting, one of you seemed to assume that the plus/minus option might encompass the A+ grade, but I don't believe we discussed this beyond that passing mention.

(4) The last student to speak raised the concern that the institution of plus/minus grades might have the detrimental effect of causing students to obsess too heavily on their classroom academic performance (narrowly conceived) at the expense of such extracurricular graduate student activities as participation in the GSS. Since the discussion had already far exceeded the 10-minute slot that I had been given, I did not respond to this point in any meaningful way.

SO, BOTTOM LINE: There was concern over the possible impact of the plus/minus option on student GPAs which was somewhat offset by hopeful interest in the possibility of instituting the grade of A+. There were also a couple of technical or procedural questions which we still need to iron out. In short, there was neither strong instant opposition nor strong instant support for the proposed option.

Because GSS is a broad body that extends well beyond the College of A&S, my own sense is that any future efforts to gauge graduate student opinion should probably be directed through faculty members and/or department chairs or graduate directors--\*\*\*focusing on the views of students within individual programs\*\*\*. This might be especially useful, in my judgment, because the proposal itself (if adopted) is an option to be decided on and enacted (or not) by individual graduate programs. Indeed, it might be useful to somehow build the possibility of such consultations into future presentations, or redactions, of the proposal itself.

I am reporting on my appearance in such detail, in part, because I recently realized that I am going to be in transit to a professional conference in Germany on the day of our next meeting (Oct. 11). This is a commitment that I made many months ago, but I failed to make the connection to our committee's meeting schedule until several days ago. Because we just sent our memo on the matter to Chuck Rosek, I'm not certain that we will be able to do much with respect to the grading proposal at that meeting anyway, but just in case I wanted to provide you with this update. I apologize for not noticing this scheduling conflict sooner. I hope you will let me know if any of you have follow-up responses; in retrospect, I might have handled my appearance somewhat differently, but I had to make a snap judgment as to how to proceed and I didn't want to have to wait until the following month's meeting. . . .

-- Dan

Document #5



Chandel Smith &lt;cms218@case.edu&gt;

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**Plus Minus Grading Initiative**


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Jill E. Korbin &lt;jek7@case.edu&gt;

Tue, Oct 16, 2012 at 10:41 AM

To: Michael Clune &lt;mwc33@case.edu&gt;

Cc: Charles Rozek &lt;cer2@case.edu&gt;, chandel Smith &lt;cms218@case.edu&gt;

Yes Chuck, thanks very much. Again, this is not a proposal until it comes from the Executive Committee. And the Graduate Committee will keep all of this in mind. Best, Jill

On 10/16/2012 8:54 AM, Michael Clune wrote:

Thanks, Chuck. This is very helpful, and I'll bring your feedback to the committee. Your concern regarding GPA echoes what we heard from the graduate student organization. Best, Michael

On Tue, Oct 16, 2012 at 8:20 AM, Charles Rozek <cer2@case.edu> wrote:

Jill and Michael,

I consulted with Don Feke who is familiar with policies in the Registrar's Office on your initiative to consider a +/- grading system.

As he outlines below, there are several issues to consider. I agree with all of them. Additionally, I am a bit concerned about the introduction of the B- grade which would be a passing grade but falls below the 3.0 GPA threshold for Ph.D students. An accumulation of B- grades would present a challenge for Ph.D students to raise their GPA.

We had an informal discussion of the matter at our Faculty Senate Graduate Studies Committee meeting and many were in favor of the system but recognized the challenges of cross registration between schools etc. One faculty member from MSSAS recounted the somewhat contentious discussions in that school when the grading was adopted.

Whatever you finally propose, it would be good to consult with Amy Hammett regarding best practices and how the system could potentially be managed at CWRU.

Regards,

Chuck

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Donald Feke <dfl4@case.edu>

Date: Mon, Oct 15, 2012 at 10:16 AM

Subject: Re: Fwd: Plus Minus Grading Initiative

To: Charles Rozek <cer2@case.edu>

Chuck,

Yes, +/- grading is now used at CWRU in a couple of places - the Law School, MSASS, (and maybe Dental Medicine?). SIS can indeed accommodate +/- grading.

A couple of things popped into mind as I read the proposal. First, I think it might be confusing and complicated to try to implement +/- grades on a program-by-program basis. I believe the decision should be made at the school level. If +/- grades are an option across the board for all CAS graduate courses (course codes > 400) and if a particular program decides not to use +/- grading for its courses, those faculty members teaching in that program would have the option to assign only whole letter grades.

Would the option for +/- grading apply to the individual course, or to the program in which the student is studying? For example, suppose English wants to use +/- grading, but Political Science does not. If a PhD student in Political Science takes an English course and receives a B+, would that course be translated to a B on the student's transcript?

Another question is about undergraduates who take a graduate course. Suppose the student earns an A- in the graduate course. On the undergraduate transcript, that course would appear as an A. Would that A go into the undergraduate GPA calculation as having the quality points of a full A (4.0) even though a grad student receiving the same grade would get a smaller number of quality points (3.67) on her/his transcript?

I believe the process for approval would go through the Senate Graduate Studies Committee. (I believe the MSASS switch to +/- grading happened relatively recently, and all it took was Senate Grad Studies Committee approval and a report at the full Senate.)

Does this help?

Don

—  
Charles E. Rozek, Ph. D  
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs  
Case Western Reserve University  
216-368-4390

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Selected College of Arts & Sciences Graduate Program Grade Distributions, AY 2011-12 (calculated by D. A. Cohen; excludes CR/P/NP/F grades)

Program	A	B	C	D	F
EarlyMusicPerf. MA	100% (38)				
Music Education PhD	100% (7)				
English PhD	98% (49)	2% (1)			
Musicology PhD	94% (48)	6% (3)			
Theater Arts (MFA)	92% (106)	5% (6)	3% (3)		
Art Hsty & Museum St.	91% (51)	9% (5)			
Applied Mathematics	91% (40)	9% (4)			
Anthropology MA	90% (18)	10% (2)			
History MA	90% (9)	10% (1)			
History PhD	89% (49)	11% (6)			
Psychology PhD	89% (97)	11% (12)			
Anthropology PhD	87% (34)	10% (4)	3% (1)		
Music Education MA	86% (94)	14% (15)			
Physics PhD	83% (74)	16% (14)	1% (1)		
Physics MS	81% (21)	4% (1)	12% (3)	4% (1)	
English MA	80% (28)	20% (7)			
Biology PhD	78% (35)	22% (10)			
Sociology PhD	75% (43)	23% (13)	2% (1)		
Chemistry PhD	63% (77)	31% (38)	5% (6)	2% (2)	
Biology MS	58% (88)	32% (49)	9% (14)	1% (2)	
Chemistry MS	52% (43)	39% (32)	9% (7)		





Daniel Cohen &lt; dac37@case.edu &gt;

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**Attention: AMY S. HAMMETT, UNIVERSITY REGISTRAR (from College of Arts & Sciences Graduate Committee)**2 messages

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**Amy Hammett** < amy.hammett@case.edu >  
To: Daniel Cohen < dac37@case.edu >  
Cc: "Donald L. Feke" < dlf4@case.edu >

Thu, Jan 24, 2013 at 11:54 AM

Hello Professor Cohen,

Thank you for taking the time to provide detailed questions regarding potential grading scenarios. I am appreciative for the opportunity to provide information on this topic. Prior to the replacement of our student information system in 2008, it would have been extremely difficult to implement most, if not all, of the items suggested below. However, with the new system we have more flexibility. I will add comments under each question below.

Amy Hammett

On Sat, Jan 19, 2013 at 4:11 PM, Daniel Cohen < dac37@case.edu > wrote:  
Dear Registrar Hammett:

I am a member of the College of Arts & Sciences Graduate Committee, which has been considering a proposal to establish a system whereby individual graduate programs within the College would have the option of establishing a plus/minus grading system. I have been delegated by that Committee to draft a report on the issue. Earlier, in soliciting feedback on this proposal, we contacted Chuck Rosek (Dean of the School of Graduate Studies) who, in turn, consulted with Don Feke (Vice Provost). Don confirmed that "SIS can indeed accommodate +/- grading" (which, as he noted, is already in use at the Law School and at the MSASS), but he pointed out certain issues that would have to be resolved in order to implement it as an A&S graduate program \*option\*.

Chuck suggested that we should consult with you regarding how such a system could be implemented at Case. Here are several questions that

we would greatly appreciate your answering for us:

(1) Would it be possible for SIS (or the Registrar) to code all courses that carried the prefix of a particular department (e.g. HSTY for History) and that were above a certain number (e.g. greater than 399) to provide the full gamut of plus/minus grades (A, A-, B+, B, B-, etc.) on their grade rosters (in much the same way that some courses are currently coded to offer S/U, rather than letter grades)?

Yes this would be possible. Actually, we have courses coded as "graduate" level courses independently of their numbering scheme, so we could use this designation to make the distinction for showing the +/- grades on grade rosters. I would guess that a change would involve only those graduate courses that are currently graded A-F and that courses currently graded as P/NP or S/U would stay the same. Is that correct?

(2) If that was done and an UNDERGRADUATE took such a course, could the SIS system be coded so as to "suppress" a plus or the minus if such a grade were assigned? In other words, for example, if an undergraduate was given permission to take a graduate course and the professor gave that student a B+ or a B-, could the SIS system be coded to suppress the "+" or the "-" so that the grade would appear on his or her transcript as a flat "B."

Yes. SIS could be set up so that an undergraduate students taking a graduate level course would not receive +/- grades. Faculty would be able to assign +/- grades, but the system would convert them to their truncated versions before posting to the students final record. This (undergraduate students taking graduate level courses) could happen often. There would also be students in undergraduate/graduate dual degree programs such as Integrated Graduate Studies (IGS) and BSMS programs that would be impacted.

(3) Similarly, if a graduate student from a program that had NOT adopted the plus/minus option took a graduate course in a program that HAD adopted the plus/minus system, could you code the SIS grading system to suppress a "plus" or a "minus" in that student's course grade (as with the hypothetical undergraduate in question 2)?

Yes, this is theoretically possible. There would be some challenges in this approach (adopting +/- grading by program vs. adopting +/- grading by school). One of the challenges to the "by program" approach would be that transcript recipients would have a challenge in determining which grades are applicable for a given student. I have attached a current version of our transcript key so you can see what I mean. Not only would we have a challenge in fitting the grading explanation on the key, but we would also have a difficult time conveying expectations for any given student. Although each student's program is shown on the transcript, only the most current value is shown. Students sometimes move from one program to another, and if grading options change from program to program, it would not be clear to a reviewer which system was in place at the time the grades were issued.

(4) If the answers to any of the first three questions is "no," can you suggest another procedure that could achieve the same result—that is, another procedure within the SIS system that could differentiate among students who were in programs that had opted for plus/minus grading and those who (although taking a particular course offered by a "plus/minus" graduate program) were not themselves subject to plus/minus grades?

Again, it is possible in SIS. I would not advocate for different grading systems across programs. I do not think it is possible to provide enough clarity for transcript reviewers. Another challenge that could arise is with students requesting grading exceptions. If a student was in a program that had regular A-F grading (and perhaps received a B) and took a course in which a +/- grade was issued (perhaps B+), might the

student then want to request consideration for grading exceptions if they were in a borderline situation with their GPA? Would it be fair to other students if that student was granted an exception? What criteria could/would be put into place to ensure objectivity? I will also comment further below with regard to bench marking. Overall, it is more common for universities to have +/- grades across the board, or by school, than it would be to have +/- grades across some programs within a school. In fact, I have never heard of this -- did you happen to come across any as you were researching this?

(5) Are Case undergraduates ever given permission to take courses at MSASS or at the Law School (or at any other unit of CWRU that currently uses a plus/minus system) and, if so, how are they graded (that is, are they subject to plus/minus grades or not)?

Yes, although fairly rare, this has happened before. Undergraduate students receive a +/- grade from the instructor, but their official grade is converted to the truncated version of the grade. Grading follows the rules of the student's school vs. the course's school.

(6) In researching grading system for graduate programs at Case's peer institutions, I found that Carnegie Mellon, Emory, Brandeis, Washington Univ. (St. Louis), NYU, U. of Chicago, Rochester, and (in a separate category) Ohio State ALL used plus/minus grading in their graduate courses. (In other words, based on that limited sample, Case currently appears to be an outlier in this regard among private research universities.) Are you aware of any central database or institutional report or professional organization which might have comprehensive—or, at least, more extensive—information on the prevalence of different types of grading systems at American research universities?

I am not aware of a central database or report that would have this information. I have information on AAU schools with +/- grading for undergraduate students from a survey from 2008 (25 of 31 respondents said "yes" and 6 of 31 said "no".) I would be happy to poll other AAU schools to learn about +/- grading for graduate students if you would like. Based on transcript keys that I have seen, I am not aware of any universities that allow for separate grading systems across programs within a graduate school.

On behalf of the Graduate Committee, I would like to thank you very much for your answers to these questions—and for any other information or advice that you can provide us on this issue.

Sincerely,

Dan Cohen

Daniel A. Cohen

Associate Professor of History & Director of Graduate Studies

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**TRANSCRIPT KEY**

**GRADING SYSTEM**

As of Fall 2008 the following grading system is in use:

Grade	Meaning	Quality Points	Notes
A	Excellent	4.000	
A-		3.666	
B+		3.333	
B	Good	3.000	
B-		2.666	
C+		2.333	
C	Fair	2.000	
C-		1.666	
D+		1.333	
D	Passing	1.000	
D-		0.666	
F	Failure	0.000	
AD	Successful audit	n/a	
AE	Achieves or exceeds competencies	n/a	
AP	Advanced placement	n/a	
AS	Advanced subsidiary	n/a	
COM	Commendable	n/a	
CR	Earns credit, credit/no credit course	n/a	
H	Honors	n/a	
I	Incomplete	n/a	
IB	International baccalaureate	n/a	
M	Meets or exceeds expectations	n/a	
NC	No credit, credit/no credit course	n/a	
NG	Unsuccessful audit	n/a	
NOG	Non-graded course	n/a	
NP	No pass	n/a	
P	Pass	n/a	
PR	Proficiency	n/a	
R	In progress or extends > one term	n/a	
RPT	Repeated course (until Summer 2006)	n/a	
S	Satisfactory	n/a	
SA	Special audit or alumni/senior audit	n/a	
TR	Transfer	n/a	
U	Unsatisfactory	n/a	
W	Withdrawal from the class	n/a	
WD	Withdrawal from all classes	n/a	
WF	Withdrawn under Acad Regs 5 & 6	n/a	
1-69	Nonpassing grade	n/a	
70-100	Passing grade	n/a	

**Notes**

- Schools of Applied Social Science, Dental Medicine, Law only
- Schools of Dental Medicine, Law only
- Not applicable for Schools of Applied Social Science, Nursing
- Test credit or transfer credit only
- School of Medicine only
- Schools of Law (L.L.M.) and Medicine only
- School of Law only
- Master's/doctoral theses, EMBA seminar courses, Schools of Law, Medicine, School of Dental Medicine (M.S.D.) only
- Included in hours attempted, but not in hours earned or GPA
- School of Dental Medicine only; not included in GPA

**ACCREDITATION**

Case Western Reserve University is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. In addition, many of its programs are accredited by nationally recognized individual accrediting associations.

**RELEASE OF INFORMATION**

This educational record is subject to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, as amended. It is released on the condition that the recipient will not permit any other party to have access to such information without the written consent of the student.

**CALENDAR**

The normal academic calendar is expressed in semester hours and consists of two semesters (Fall and Spring). There is also an optional summer term.

**HISTORICAL GRADING SYSTEMS**

Grading systems in use prior to Fall 2008 and other grading systems in use for Case Western Reserve University schools, colleges and predecessors are described further at <http://www.case.edu/registrar/grades.html>.

**FIRST TIME FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

Effective Fall 1987, first time first year full-time undergraduate students are eligible during their first two semesters of enrollment to have courses with grades of F, NP or W suppressed from the transcript. Effective Fall 2006, only courses with a grade of W are eligible for transcript suppression.

**ACADEMIC HONORS, ACADEMIC PROBATION, DISMISSAL/SEPARATION AND OTHER DESIGNATIONS**

Each school within the University has specific academic policies for determining term honors, academic probation or academic dismissal/separation. Contact the University Registrar's office for further information.

**TRANSCRIPT AUTHENTICITY**

Official transcripts bear the printed University seal, the signature of the University Registrar and are printed on blue security paper.

**COURSE NUMBERING**

- 100 - 199 Elementary Courses
- 200 - 299 Intermediate Courses
- 300 - 399 Advanced Undergraduate Courses
- 400 & up Graduate Courses

The above numbering system does not apply to the schools of Dental Medicine, Law, Medicine (see below) and Nursing.

**SCHOOL OF MEDICINE**

**GRADING SYSTEM**

**University Track:** Core clerkship and clinical electives are graded H, COM, S, AE or U. Electives in years I and II are graded Pass/No Pass. Preclinical courses are graded M or U through June 2009. Beginning July 2009 preclinical courses are graded AE or U.

**College Track** (Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine): All courses graded M or U through June 2009. Beginning July 2009 all courses graded AE or U. Competencies are used to assess performance and are described further at: [http://www.case.edu/registrar/CCLCM\\_competencies.pdf](http://www.case.edu/registrar/CCLCM_competencies.pdf)

**Note:** Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) is not applicable to the School of Medicine.

**COURSE NUMBERING**

Series	Description
1000	1 <sup>st</sup> year level courses
2000	2 <sup>nd</sup> year level courses
3000	3 <sup>rd</sup> year level courses
4000	4 <sup>th</sup> year level courses
8000	Unlisted electives/Away elective
9000	Years I and II (preclinical, optional) electives
alpha suffix	Courses offered at area hospitals

For additional standards and accreditation information, please see: <http://www.case.edu/registrar/grades.html>.

**QUESTIONS**

Questions regarding transcripts may be directed to the University Registrar's Office, (216) 368-4310, [registrar@case.edu](mailto:registrar@case.edu). For grades not listed on this key see <http://www.case.edu/registrar/grades.html>. For general information see <http://www.case.edu/registrar>.



Daniel Cohen &lt; dac37@case.edu &gt;

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**Thanks! -- and Follow-Up**6 messages

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**Amy Hammett** < axh4@case.edu >  
To: Daniel Cohen < dac37@case.edu >  
Cc: "Donald L. Feke" < dlf4@case.edu >

Mon, Jan 28, 2013 at 10:07 PM

Hello Professor Cohen,

Please see my responses below.

Amy

On Fri, Jan 25, 2013 at 6:26 PM, Daniel Cohen < dac37@case.edu > wrote:

Dear Registrar Hammett,

I greatly appreciate your thoughtful and detailed responses to my several questions concerning plus/minus grading. It sounds as though the new system introduced in 2008 provides CWRU with tremendous technical flexibility in its grading policies—though, of course, it cannot eliminate all potential administrative challenges. From your replies, it seems clear that a plus/minus grading system for graduate students could coexist rather easily in the current SIS system with a flat letter grade system for undergraduates—and, indeed, that such a dual system occasionally already operates at CWRU today, with plus/minus grades simply truncated to flat letter grades when undergraduates take graduate courses in programs that have plus/minus grading (e.g. MSASS).

The main challenges thus appear to arise with respect to the possibility of instituting a plus/minus grading \*option\*, on a program by program basis, within the College of Arts and Sciences. On that issue, I have a few follow up questions to which I hope you will be able to respond. (As you may have already guessed, the Graduate Committee is looking so closely at the possibility of a plus/minus \*option\* because the faculty in different departments within the College have different views on the issue, with some departments supportive, others opposed, and still others undecided. The advantage of an option would be that it would allow the faculty in each program

to adopt the grading system most appropriate to its particular discipline and pedagogic goals—and would avoid a potentially divisive faculty fight within the College over which single system would prevail.) Here are the follow-up questions:

(1) Aren't there occasionally cases \*under the current system\* where graduate students in programs with flat letter grade systems take courses for credit in graduate schools with plus/minus grading? For example, my impression is that graduate students in the History Ph.D. program have occasionally in the past taken courses for credit in the Law School (and perhaps also in MSASS). In such cases, are any resulting plus/minus grades simply truncated into flat letter grades (as in the case of undergraduates taking such courses), or are they recorded with pluses and minuses and incorporated as such into the student's GPA, or are they handled in some third way? In other words (and more broadly), aren't some of the issues potentially raised by a graduate plus/minus option already being faced—and dealt with successfully (albeit on a smaller scale)—under the existing grading system? (I am currently looking into this question from the History side with respect to the past experiences of our own graduate students, but you may know the answer already based on your much broader familiarity with CWRU's many graduate programs and graduate schools).

Yes, this is already happening. Since grading follows the rules of the student's school, graduate students taking classes in the law school would be assigned +/- grades by the instructor, but the grade (and associated quality points) that is permanently recorded onto the student's record is the truncated version.

(2) Given the sheer number of graduate programs within the College of Arts & Sciences (about 40), I can see how the prospect of having to explain a "mixed" grading system on the "Transcript Key" could indeed be "challenging"! But what if plus/minus grading was offered only as a \*departmental\* option, in which each department would make a blanket decision as to whether or not all of its graduate programs would adopt plus/minus grading? For example, the Music Department would make a decision that would govern all six of the graduate programs that it sponsors (Musicology [PhD], Music Education [MA], Music Education [PhD], Music History [MA], Early Music Performance [DM], Early Music Performance [MA]). This would reduce the number of units potentially exercising the option from about 40 to about a dozen or so. And, since the flat grade system would remain CWRU's default grading system, only those departments adopting the plus/minus option would have to be noted on the "Transcript Key."

Here is one way this might be done. Currently the first note below the central column of the transcript key reads as follows:

1 – Schools of Applied Social Science, Dental Medicine, Law only

If, for example (and this is purely hypothetical), four departments in the College of Arts and Sciences adopted plus/minus grading, this note could simply be expanded to read:

1 – Schools of Applied Social Science, Dental Medicine, Law, and the graduate programs of the following departments in the College of Arts and Sciences only: Anthropology, Art History, History, Sociology

Perhaps initially, during a transition period lasting several years, it might be necessary to indicate on the key the year of inception of

the new grading policy (as I assume may have been the case when MSASS adopted plus/minus grading several years ago). In the above hypothetical scenario, the key might be adjusted to read:

1 – Schools of Applied Science, Dental Medicine, Law, and the graduate programs of the following departments in the College of Arts and Sciences only (starting years listed in parentheses): Anthropology (2015), Art History (2014), History (2014), Sociology (2016)

Would such language, or something similar to that, be feasible?

As is, the one page transcript key barely fits on one page. Adding any additional lines in the notes area (even if it is only a few departments) would necessitate some tough decisions about what could stay on the key vs. what would have to be edited off the key. The attachment I sent makes it look like more text could appear at the bottom of the document. This is actually not the case because there are special statements printed here related to security paper authenticity.

(3) Another challenge that you mention would be in dealing with potential confusion in interpreting the transcripts of graduate students who moved from one CWRU graduate program to another. Since most such moves take place between programs \*run by a single department\* (most often, from an MA to a PhD program), wouldn't the adoption of an option at the \*departmental\* (as opposed to individual program) level (as outlined in point #2 above) greatly reduce that potential problem? And in those relatively rare cases where a graduate student moved between programs in different departments (e.g. where an MA student in History switched to the MA program in Art History or to the PhD program in English), wouldn't such moves already—under the current system—have to be denoted in some clear way on the transcript that would minimize the potential for confusion with respect to grading systems?

It would be relatively rare and would be denoted that a program has changed. It is uncommon for a grading system to be different \*within\* a school, so I just wanted to point out potential points of confusion.

(4) I would be \*very\* grateful to see the results of the AAU survey from 2008 regarding undergraduate grading systems at 31 schools. Thank you for bringing it to my attention!

The survey I have was one that I sent to other AAU Registrars in 2008. Surveys aren't usually shared outside the group unless we let folks know ahead of time that their answers will be shared. Since I did not conduct the survey in that context, I am a little hesitant to share it all verbatim, but I will include some more detail below. I hope you understand. Would it be better if I did a new survey specifically about grading systems for graduate schools within AAU universities? I could let folks know that I wanted to share results so that there would be no issues with passing it along. The group is very responsive and I could probably get results within a week or so after sending.

Some details from the 2008 UGRD grading survey:

Schools with +/- grading for undergraduates: Brandeis, California Institute of Technology, Cornell, Duke, Emory, Harvard, Iowa State, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, Penn State, Princeton, Purdue, Rutgers, Stanford, Syracuse, Univ of TX Austin, UC Irvine, UC Santa Barbara, USC, Univ of Chicago, Univ of Colorado Boulder, Univ of FL, Univ of Illinois Urbana Champaign, Univ of Iowa, Univ of MD, Univ of MN, Univ of Missouri, Univ of Nebraska, Univ of Oregon, Univ of Pennsylvania, Univ of Pittsburgh, Univ of Rochester, UVA, Washington University. (Looks like I miscounted the first time, sorry about that!)

Schools that do not have +/- grading for undergraduates: Carnegie Mellon, CWRU, Michigan State Univ, Texas A&M, Univ of Arizona, Univ of Wisconsin-Madison.

(5) The Graduate Committee had originally considered the possibility of instituting an "A+" grade in conjunction with establishing a

plus/minus system as a way of mitigating the concern expressed by some students that plus/minus grades would exert a downward bias on GPAs. However, in looking into this matter, the schools located thus far that offer "A+" code it identically with "A" (as 4) on the GPA scale; if so, it is difficult to see how introducing "A+" would offset the feared downward bias. Are you aware of any alternative way of calculating "A+" grades? Or, at American universities, is it always converted to 4 (identical to "A") on the GPA scale?

From what I have seen, of the schools that have an A+ grade, some equate A+ to 4.333 and most equate it, along with the A grade, to 4.0. Schools that use 4.0 for both A+ and A usually do so that that they can maintain comparability with the previous grading system that did not have +/- options. So, for most schools, the A+ does not offset the downward bias, but it does introduce a way to show exceptional merit without creating the comparability issue.

Thanks again for your patience—and for your willingness to share your expertise on these somewhat complex issues.

Sincerely, Dan Cohen

Daniel A. Cohen  
Associate Professor of History & Director of Graduate Studies

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**Departmental Responses:  
Option of Adopting Plus/Minus Grading for Graduate Programs  
March 31, 2014**

*From XCom Minutes 6-14-13:*

*The college's Graduate Committee recently considered a proposal to establish a plus/minus grading option for graduate programs in the college. In February 2013 the committee submitted its report to this committee. A number of arguments in support of this proposal were presented, as were arguments in opposition to the proposal. While the Graduate Committee did not make a recommendation to the Executive Committee, it noted in its report feedback received from several university officials "...advocating that plus/minus grading be established as an option to be exercised (or not) at the departmental (rather than the individual program) level, so that all graduate programs based in a given department would have a uniform grading system." The members of the Executive Committee asked Mrs. Stilwell to send the information provided by the Graduate Committee to the departments in the college with a request that each department faculty consider whether it is supportive of adopting this option for its graduate programs. The departments will be asked to provide their evaluation to the Executive Committee by November 30, 2013.*

*From XCom Minutes 12-20-13:*

*The members discussed the very low response rate from the A&S departments and instructed Mrs. Stilwell to send the report from the Graduate Committee electronically to the Faculty of the College on January 6, 2014 with a request that it be carefully reviewed and discussed at a departmental faculty meeting. Departments will be asked to provide a reply by February 28, 2014.*

The following departmental responses have been received:

**Anthropology**

The Department of Anthropology has reviewed this issue and believes that nothing is to be gained by changing to a plus/minus grading system. We also have no objection to it being optional if the technical issues can be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

**Art History and Art**

Plus/Minus Grading Option for Graduate Students Discussion by Art History Faculty January 2014--The possibility of a plus-minus grading option for graduate students was greeted enthusiastically and a unanimous faculty vote supported this possibility. In the discussion it was suggested that the various points made against having such an option reflected differing disciplinary attitudes more than compelling pedagogical or administrative reasons. The fact that plus/minus (inflected) grading systems are common elsewhere in the humanities was noted: no one could think of a single other art history graduate program that did not have an inflected grading system. We would like to be able to make the kinds of distinctions in work that are reflected, for instance, in the range of B-, B, and B+ grades. It was also suggested that the lack of these options leads to grade inflation: if someone has an 88 or 89 average, they are frequently "bumped up" to an A because a straight B seems too harsh a grade. Finally it was pointed out that transcripts are required for most fellowships and postdoctoral positions, and there too, the reviewers will be far more used to seeing inflected grades. We also surveyed our graduate students, who support the option of an inflected system overwhelmingly. Our graduate students are almost all used to such a system from their undergraduate studies, and find the current system unhelpful. As they pointed out, their professors give them inflected grades during the semester, which the students find helpful in determining how successful their work is, yet the course grade may not reflect precisely their performance.

## **Astronomy**

Just a short note on the grad  $\pm$  grading option issue. We talked about this in an Astronomy faculty meeting, and the responses were all quite positive that we'd like an opportunity to give  $\pm$  grades to the grads (and to the undergrads as well, but that's a different issue). There were some concerns with exactly how  $\pm$  grades translated to a numerical score, but that these were technical or procedural questions that could be worked out. The ability to give more finely determined grade information seemed a significant advantage over the current system. So Astronomy is very strongly in favor of having the option.

## **Biology**

Here is the response from Biology taken from the minutes of the faculty meeting. The Committee on Graduate Affairs brought the following summary and recommendation to the meeting:

Biology Committee on Graduate Affairs: Robin Snyder:

There has been a proposal to have +/- grading for graduate students. Some university's permit +/- grading for graduate students and professors in some departments thought that their students were being disadvantaged when it came to apply for fellowships because their students would get an "A" when someone else would get an "A+". The proposal was to let each department decide if they wanted to go with a +/- system or a straight A,B,C etc. system. Graduate Affairs felt like this would be confusing especially since students often take courses from other departments which may have a +/- system when we don't. Our suggestion is that we DO NOT go for the +/-, but we are not going to block other departments from doing so. The majority of the faculty agreed that Biology is NOT in favor of the +/- grading system and that the grading should be consistent within the departments.

## **Chemistry**

The Chemistry Department discussed the proposal for plus/minus grading of graduate courses and voted unanimously against it. The Department saw no advantage over the current grading system.

## **Dance**

The Department of Dance is in favor of instituting plus/minus grading for graduate students.

## **Earth, Environmental, and Planetary Sciences**

The faculty in the Department of Earth, Environmental, and Planetary Sciences do not have strong feelings either way, but have voted to not establish plus/minus grading for graduate courses. They note that 1) the current system is working, so don't fix it; 2) there is little need for it, because grades simply aren't a significant motivator or a measure of achievement at the graduate level; 3) to our knowledge the School of Engineering, where our graduate students take a lot of their coursework, is not considering adopting a +/- system. We believe a potentially greater concern for our students is what other departments would choose to do. We may be a little anomalous in the larger fraction of courses outside the Department that our students take. Therefore, our students could be substantively subject to a grading system different from that in the Department when they take multiple classes in Anatomy, Biology, Math, Materials Science, Mech. Eng., Civil Eng., Chemistry, etc. So in some sense the plus/minus system gets implemented for our students even if we don't adopt the system. The question would be whether that difference could result in a bias that might play out in the expected grades and GPAs of our students for satisfactory progress toward a degree. Obviously this is mainly an issue for students flirting with the minimum requirements, but this does happen, and most often in their first year of graduate school. I don't think that this is an issue that we could solve *a priori* because it depends on the choices of other Departments as much as it depends upon our own, but it is one that we might find ourselves needing to \*react\* to in some fashion if our choice differed from a large fraction of the Departments that our graduate students often take courses in.

## **English**

The English Department would like to have the SIS question firmly resolved before this question is considered seriously. This was referring to the technical question about how the plus-minus grades would be handled in SIS, especially if it turns out that some departments adopt this policy and others don't.

## **History**

The History Department discussed and voted on this in September.... The History Department supports the initiative.”

## **Music**

Following up on the request we received from Cynthia, the Department of Music discussed the pros and cons of moving to a plus/minus grading system for graduate programs. Our straw poll ended 11-1 in favor of adopting that system. Those in favor noted that such a system allows greater nuance and also fairness in grading. (Frankly, I never did get a clear read on the dissenting person's position. I could ask that person for a clear explanation, if you need it.)

## **Physics**

The Physics faculty discussed the question of the adoption of +/- grades for our graduate courses in our last faculty meeting. We have been using +/- grades internally for the last 15 years in some of our courses, at the discretion of the individual instructors, and as a department find them useful for calibrating our students' progress, especially at the end of the first year of completion of the PhD program. Our consensus is that we do not find it essential to have the +/- system adopted officially, but have no objection to that proposal, especially if their adoption is left to the discretion of the individual instructor. We find that a student's GPA is not an important factor for future employers of our graduate students who complete the PhD program.

## **Political Science**

On Thursday, January 16, a meeting of faculty of the Department of Political Science adopted the following statement, in response to the request for responses to the proposed institution of +/- grading for graduate courses: "The Department of Political Science does not want to stand in the way of departments making their own pedagogical judgments. We are uncomfortable with the idea of having two different grading metrics for undergraduate and graduate students, when some of the latter are IGS students. We also would want to know more about how this would be processed on SIS and understood by students and faculty."

## **Psychological Sciences**

The Department of Psychological Sciences faculty have unanimously voted against the proposed change to allow plus/minus grading in graduate courses. The number of potential problems this change could create far outweigh the potential benefits.”

## **Sociology**

Sociology faculty have discussed this issue and I have also invited the views of our faculty on sabbatical. Overall, Sociology faculty are in support of the proposed change. This support is conditioned on the assumption that this can be done without creating undue logistical problems given that the change may be implemented at the department level and hence not apply to courses taken in other departments, to grad courses taken by undergrads, etc., etc. Support for the change is universal among our faculty, but it is the view of a strong majority.

## **Theater**

The Department of Theater faculty met today for a general meeting. We added the suggested change in grading for graduate programs to our agenda and had a thorough discussion of the proposal. In short, the faculty of the Department of Theater is unanimously in support of the change to a plus/minus system for graduate students. There was a consensus that it is a very useful tool for both incentivizing and warning in terms of student progress, and we didn't feel there was any clear down-side to the idea. One comment that was

particularly agreed upon enthusiastically was that it was objectively unfair for someone who is doing “80% work” to get the same quantitative GPA as someone doing “89% work” and that the current grading system does not permit that sort of nuanced assessment.



**TRANSCRIPT KEY**

**ACCREDITATION**

Case Western Reserve University is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. In addition, many of its programs are accredited by nationally recognized individual accrediting associations.

**RELEASE OF INFORMATION**

This educational record is subject to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974, as amended. It is released on the condition that the recipient will not permit any other party to have access to such information without the written consent of the student.

**CALENDAR**

The normal academic calendar is expressed in semester hours and consists of two semesters (Fall and Spring). There is also an optional summer term.

**HISTORICAL GRADING SYSTEMS**

Grading systems in use prior to Fall 2008 and other grading systems in use for Case Western Reserve University schools, colleges and predecessors are described further at <http://www.case.edu/registrar/grades.html>.

**FIRST TIME FIRST YEAR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS**

Effective Fall 1987, first time first year full-time undergraduate students are eligible during their first two semesters of enrollment to have courses with grades of F, NP or W suppressed from the transcript. Effective Fall 2006, only courses with a grade of W are eligible for transcript suppression.

**ACADEMIC HONORS, ACADEMIC PROBATION, DISMISSAL/SEPARATION AND OTHER DESIGNATIONS**

Each school within the University has specific academic policies for determining term honors, academic probation or academic dismissal/separation. Contact the University Registrar's office for further information.

**TRANSCRIPT AUTHENTICITY**

Official transcripts bear the printed University seal, the signature of the University Registrar and are printed on blue security paper.

**GRADING SYSTEM**

As of Fall 2008 the following grading system is in use:

Grade	Meaning	Quality Points	Notes
A	Excellent	4.000	
A-		3.666	1
B+		3.333	1
B	Good	3.000	
B-		2.666	1
C+		2.333	1
C	Fair	2.000	
C-		1.666	1
D+		1.333	2
D	Passing	1.000	3
D-		0.666	2
F	Failure	0.000	
AD	Successful audit	n/a	9
AE	Achieves or exceeds competencies	n/a	5
AP	Advanced placement	n/a	4
AS	Advanced subsidiary	n/a	4
COM	Commendable	n/a	5
CR	Earns credit, credit/no credit course	n/a	
H	Honors	n/a	6
I	Incomplete	n/a	
IB	International baccalaureate	n/a	4
M	Meets or exceeds expectations	n/a	5
NC	No credit, credit/no credit course	n/a	7
NG	Unsuccessful audit	n/a	9
NOG	Non-graded course	n/a	
NP	No pass	n/a	
P	Pass	n/a	
PR	Proficiency	n/a	
R	In progress or extends > one term	n/a	
RPT	Repeated course (until Summer 2006)	n/a	
S	Satisfactory	n/a	8
SA	Special audit or alumni/senior audit	n/a	9
TR	Transfer	n/a	4
U	Unsatisfactory	n/a	8
W	Withdrawal from the class	n/a	
WD	Withdrawal from all classes	n/a	
WF	Withdrawn under Acad Regs 5 & 6	n/a	
1 - 69	Nonpassing grade	n/a	10
70 - 100	Passing grade	n/a	10

**Notes**

- 1 - Schools of Applied Social Science, Dental Medicine, Law only
- 2 - Schools of Dental Medicine, Law only
- 3 - Not applicable for Schools of Applied Social Science, Nursing
- 4 - Test credit or transfer credit only
- 5 - School of Medicine only
- 6 - Schools of Law (LL.M.) and Medicine only
- 7 - School of Law only
- 8 - Master's/doctoral theses, EMBA seminar courses, Schools of Law, Medicine, School of Dental Medicine (M.S.D.) only
- 9 - Included in hours attempted, but not in hours earned or GPA
- 10 - School of Dental Medicine only; not included in GPA

**COURSE NUMBERING**

100 - 199	Elementary Courses
200 - 299	Intermediate Courses
300 - 399	Advanced Undergraduate Courses
400 & up	Graduate Courses

The above numbering system does not apply to the schools of Dental Medicine, Law, Medicine (see below) and Nursing.

**SCHOOL OF MEDICINE**

**GRADING SYSTEM**

**University Track:** Core clerkship and clinical electives are graded H, COM, S, AE or U. Electives in years I and II are graded Pass/No Pass. Preclinical courses are graded M or U though June 2009. Beginning July 2009 preclinical courses are graded AE or U.

**College Track** (Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine): All courses graded M or U through June 2009. Beginning July 2009 all courses graded AE or U. Competencies are used to assess performance and are described further at: [http://www.case.edu/registrar/CCLCM\\_competencies.pdf](http://www.case.edu/registrar/CCLCM_competencies.pdf)

Note: Cumulative Grade Point Average (GPA) is not applicable to the School of Medicine.

**COURSE NUMBERING**

Series	Description
1000	1 <sup>st</sup> year level courses
2000	2 <sup>nd</sup> year level courses
3000	3 <sup>rd</sup> year level courses
4000	4 <sup>th</sup> year level courses
8000	Unlisted electives/Away elective
9000	Years I and II (preclinical, optional) electives
alpha suffix	Courses offered at area hospitals

For additional standards and accreditation information, please see: <http://www.case.edu/registrar/grades.html>.

**QUESTIONS**

Questions regarding transcripts may be directed to the University Registrar's Office, (216) 368-4310, [registrar@case.edu](mailto:registrar@case.edu). For grades not listed on this key see <http://www.case.edu/registrar/grades.html>. For general information see <http://www.case.edu/registrar>.