

May 13, 2009

Chris Highley, Chair
Committee on Curriculum and Instruction
Arts and Sciences
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Dear Chris,

I would like to initiate a discussion and, I hope, a revision of one aspect of the ASC Syllabus Template. As you know, item 9 concerns “Grading information, including the percentages assigned to various requirements.” But there is a separate item, number 10: “A grading scale.” It is the requirement of a grading scale that I would like CCI to discuss and revise.

In courses where students have many small assignments or take multiple-choice or true/false exams, which are typically graded using numeric measurements, it is important for students to know how these numeric grades translate into the letter grades that the University uses in the evaluation of students in courses. This important information is typically transmitted in a grading scale that translates percentages of overall points into letter grades, either according to the OSU Standard Grading Scheme or the individual instructor’s variant scheme.

However, not all evaluation of student performance takes this form. In courses where the evaluation of students is based on essay exams and papers, the form of grading is often directly in the form of letter grades for assignments. These letter grades are, then, averaged (with appropriate weighting) to determine a letter grade for the entire course. (The interpretation of the letter grades is a matter of University Rules [3335-8-21].) Under this method of calculating a student’s overall grade, a grading scale relating percentages to letter grades is *entirely* otiose. Nevertheless, it is my understanding that syllabi have been sent back to have a grading scale added because the ASC Syllabus Template includes this.

(It is possible that students mistakenly believe that a grading scale communicates some useful information about the severity of the course grading. It does not. It is not as if there is an objective, *instructor-independent* percentage that each student achieves and, then, the instructor decides how to convert that number into a letter grade. Even where overall grades are not calculated by a weighted average of letter grades but, instead, by converting numeric evaluations to letter evaluations, the equivalency indicated in a grading scale does not indicate the severity of the course grading. An instructor can easily confine the ‘A’ range to 98-100% and construct assignments so that the entire class gets ‘A’s. Alternatively, an instructor can assign ‘A’s to students who receive numeric scores of 60% and up, and construct assignments so that no one receives an A. When the weighted average of letter grades method is used, the idea that grading scale indicates something about the severity of grading is even more patently absurd. The instructor converts the letter grades to numeric scores according to the scale, aggregates (in this case, simply weighting and adding) and then converts the numeric scores back into letter grades. This severity of the grading is determined entirely by the severity of the grading of the underlying assignment in both cases.)

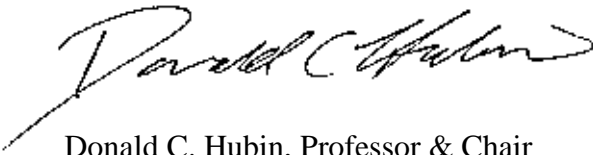
The method of evaluating student performance in courses using a weighted average of the letter grades that students received in the course has a long history—much longer, I would speculate, than the method of converting percentages to letter grades. I would be very surprised if there were any sound basis for believing that the weighted average of letter grades method is a less satisfactory method of assigning overall grades in a course. In light of this, I do not believe that ASC-CCI has any grounds for imposing on faculty an alternative method of evaluation. We should, consequently, modify the ASC Syllabus Template.

In light of the clearly worthwhile goal of giving students useful information concerning how their final grade will be calculated, while not imposing an arbitrary grading scheme on faculty, I would propose the following.

- Delete Item 10, “Grading scale”
- Modify Item 9 to say: “Grading information, indicating percentages assigned to various assignments and a grading scale if the course bases student grades on a percentage of points earned.”

I hope this (minor) issue can be discussed and acted on at a CCI meeting in the near future.

Sincerely,



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cc: Kathleen Hallihan, Director, ASC Curriculum and Assessment Office
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