REPORT OF THE SENATE ACADEMIC QUALITY COMMITTEE ON
POTENTIAL REVISIONS TO THE GRADING SYSTEM

MARCH 18, 2008

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Academic Quality Committee revisited the issue of plus/minus grading this year. After consulting with faculty, students, and administrators, the Committee unanimously recommends implementing a full-range plus/minus grading system with significant revisions to last year's proposal. The Committee further recommends:
-- the new grading system be implemented in the Fall 2010 semester
-- the new system be implemented wholesale without an opt-in or a rolling option
-- all students, graduate and undergraduate, be subject to its implementation

The Committee also recommends that consultations between the University Senate and interested parties (including but not limited to the Administration, the Student Government Association, Departments and Programs, and the Registrar's office) continue during the implementation period so that any unforeseen problems can be worked out. To that end, the Committee recommends that the Senate establish a special Ad Hoc Committee on Plus/Minus Grading Implementation to oversee the transition to and implementation of the new grading system that will include members of the Senate (at least one of whom has graduate teaching status). The Senate requests that the Student Government Association, the Registrar's office, the Graduate Studies office and the Provost's office appoint representatives to this committee.

II. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The University Senate voted in March 2007 by a vote of 36 to 23 to implement a new plus/minus grading system. This vote followed years of earlier study and data collection (a plus/minus proposal was originally introduced in the Senate in October 2003) including a three-semester pilot program during which plus/minus grades were assigned by faculty but did not appear on student transcripts or affect student's G.P.A.s. All of this data is currently posted on the University Senate website: (http://www.wku.edu/senate/documents.htm).
Following the vote, Dr. Burch concluded last April in her remarks before the Senate and in an email letter to the faculty that based on the plus/minus proposal that had passed the Senate, "there does not seem to be, at this point in time, a sufficient and sound basis on which to change the grading system." She also called, however, for "further discussions that may have the effect of enhancing the quality of the WKU learning experience for all students" and stated that "the most desirable situation would be for the grading system used – whatever it may be – to be viewed overall as one that fairly reflects student performance, and is a positive and valuable tool for achieving higher levels of student learning." In an effort to pursue this goal, the University Senate voted in September 2007 to charge the newly appointed members of the Academic Quality Committee with the task of reviewing the issue and deciding whether to continue to pursue creating a plus/minus grading system and if so, what form it should take.

III. COMMITTEE RESEARCH, GRADING OPTIONS CONSIDERED, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. DATA COLLECTION AND RESEARCH

The 2007-2008 Academic Quality Committee has worked diligently over the past year to carefully study this issue. It has also worked hard to make this year's review and decision process a constructive and fruitful one and to maximize input from all interested parties, including faculty, students, administrators, and staff. To that end, the Committee has initiated two separate non-scientific "surveys" (one open to faculty, the other to students and staff) to gather campus concerns and suggestions about possible changes to the grading system. A very large number of faculty, students, and staff responded with detailed comments on all sides of the issue and these results are posted to the University Senate website (http://www.wku.edu/senate/documents.htm). The Committee has also met twice with the Student Government Association to hear and respond to student questions and comments as well as with Registrar Freida Eggleton, Graduate Studies Dean Richard Bowker, and the Provost/VPAA. The Committee also reviewed all data previously compiled by the earlier Senate Academic Quality Committee and by the University and investigated alternative grading systems in Kentucky and other colleges and universities. These efforts have given the Committee a clearer sense of the arguments for and against changing the current grading system and the logistical issues that need to be addressed for a new grading system to be implemented successfully.

B. RATIONALE AND GOALS FOR IMPLEMENTING A PLUS/MINUS GRADING SYSTEM

Having reviewed all this information, the Committee unanimously concluded that some form of a plus/minus grading system was indeed desirable for the following reasons:

1. Plus/minus grading is a useful tool that can increase student motivation and academic performance. Plus/minus grading can motivate students to work harder and perform better in the classroom by offering incremental incentives for continual effort and incremental disincentives for diminished effort. A significant body of scientific research supports this belief.

2. Plus/minus grading will promote academic quality and grading fairness. Because a plus/minus grading system allows faculty members to measure student performance more precisely, many WKU faculty believe plus/minus is fairer than the current grading system since it allows for more accurate representation of student achievement. Many faculty members also believe that assigning plusses and minuses will serve to differentiate more accurately and clearly among students who achieve at different levels.

3. The faculty favors plus/minus grading. A survey of the faculty in Spring 2005 and Fall 2006 conducted by the University Senate indicated that a majority were in favor of plus/minus grading. Of the 115 survey respondents in Spring 2005, 59.4% favored the system over the current five-point system; 73% agreed with the statement that it was a "good grading system." The second identical survey in Fall 2006 did not contradict the results of the first survey (Further explanation of this survey as well as the survey results are on the University Senate website: http://www.wku.edu/senate/documents.htm). Subsequent non-scientific opinion sampling by the

Academic Quality Committee in the fall of 2007 and spring of 2008 indicate that the majority of the faculty continues to support plus/minus grading in the same proportions. There is clearly a sizable minority of the faculty that opposes its implementation (and a larger portion of the faculty that are apparently indifferent and did not participate in either survey) but it is unrealistic to expect the faculty to reach consensus on this issue and the Committee and Senate should reflect the will of the majority.

C. GRADING OPTIONS CONSIDERED

After careful study, the Committee narrowed the range of possible plus/minus grading systems to the following:

Option 1: (Last Year's Proposal)
Scale: A (4.0)/A- (3.7)/ B+ (3.3)/ B (3.0)/ B- (2.7)/ C+ (2.3)/ C (2.0)/ C- (1.7)/ D (1.0)/ F (0.0)
Implementation: Start in Fall 2008 on rolling basis for incoming classes; "opt-in" options for current students

Option 2 (Full range from A+ to F; no reduction in G.P.A. for a C-) [**Recommended Option**]
Scale: A+ (4.3)/A (4.0)/A- (3.7)/B+ (3.3)/B (3.0)/B- (2.7)/C+ (2.3)/C (2.0)/C- (2.0)/ D+ (1.3)/ D (1.0)/D- (.7)/F (0.0)
Implementation: Start in Fall 2010 semester; apply to all students beginning when implemented; grades earned under the earlier grading system would remain unchanged; new grading system would be the same for undergraduates and graduate students

Option 3 (Plusses only)
Scale: A+ (4.3)/A (4.0)/B+ (3.3)/B (3.0)/C+ (2.3) /C (2.0) /D+ (1.3)/ D (1.0) /F (0.0)
Implementation: same as Option 2 above

Option 4 (Univ. of Wisconsin system)
Scale: A (4.0); A/B (3.5); B (3.0); B/C (2.5); C (2.0); D (1.0); F (0.0)
Implementation: same as Option 2 above

D. RECOMMENDATIONS

After careful deliberation, the Committee voted unanimously to recommend **Option 2** listed above. In addition to implementing a full range plus/minus grading system from "A+" to "F" with no reduction in grade points for a "C-", the Committee further recommends:
-- the new grading system be implemented in the Fall 2010 semester
-- the new system be implemented wholesale without an opt-in or a rolling option
-- all students, graduate and undergraduate, be subject to its implementation

The Committee also recommends that consultations between the University Senate and interested parties (including but not limited to the Administration, the Student Government Association, Departments and Programs, and the Registrar's office) continue during the implementation period so that any unforeseen problems can be worked out. To that end, the Committee recommends that the Senate establish a special Ad Hoc Committee on Plus/Minus

Grading Implementation to oversee the transition to and implementation of the new grading system that will include members of the Senate (at least one of whom has graduate teaching status). The Senate requests that the Student Government Association, the Registrar's office, the Graduate Studies office and the Provost's office appoint representatives to the committee.

IV. RATIONALE FOR IMPLEMENTING FULL-RANGE PLUS/MINUS GRADING SYSTEM (OPTION 2)

1. The proposed system can best achieve the stated academic goals. The proposed system will provide the most complete range of grading options to faculty, promote academic quality and grading fairness, and offer the most effective motivation for students to perform at a higher level in the classroom. The proposed system will provide students with realistic opportunities for improving their performance and their grades by offering grade incentives for incremental improvement.

2. The proposed system is structured more logically than other grading systems considered. This system avoids the unusually wide gaps between grade ranges and/or unfamiliar grade notations of alternative systems. By treating the entire grade range from A to F similarly, it promotes fairness and equity across the scale.

3. The proposed system minimizes the negative consequences for WKU's strong and struggling students. By including a grade of "A+" with higher associated grade points, the proposed system offers honors and high performing students the best chance to maintain their high G.P.A.s. By including a "C-" grade but making its associated grade points the same as those of a "C", struggling students at the bottom of the "C" grade range will not lose eligibility for aid or risk academic probation or not being able to continue in their academic program or discipline.

4. The proposed system is widely used and/or recognized in academia and the workplace. The large majority of the top-ranked schools in our 2008 *US News and World Report* category (13 of 16, or 15 of 16 if one excludes Embry Riddle Aeronautical University and The Citadel) use plus/minus grading systems that closely mirror the proposed grading system below.

5. The proposed system minimizes administrative hassles. After consulting with students and administration officials, the Committee has concluded that it would be unfair to implement a grading system on a rolling basis or with an opt-in option for students, since the result would be that students across campus, and even within each classroom, would be evaluated using different grading systems. The Registrar has also explained to the Committee that a rolling or opt-in implementation is technically unfeasible. By recommending a complete rather than a rolling or opt-in implementation, the same grading system for undergraduate and graduate students, and an implementation date at least two years in the future, therefore, the proposed system responds to student and administrative concerns and provides adequate time for the University and student body to prepare for the new system. Although the implementation of any new grading system will require some administrative and departmental adjustments, the design of the proposed system will not require a wholesale reworking of academic and administrative guidelines.

6. The proposed system will not affect current faculty prerogatives regarding determining appropriate grades. As is currently the case, faculty under the new system will retain control

over determining what grades students have earned and what constitutes each grade across the grading scale. The proposed system in no way will match letter grades to a single universal number grade scale and faculty will retain the right to determine what grades are appropriate for their particular classroom and discipline.

7. The proposed system will enhance the value of a WKU degree. By encouraging greater academic quality in the classroom by allowing for greater rigor and measurement accuracy, the proposed system will, over time, make a WKU degree carry more weight in the eyes of graduate schools and employers in the region and beyond. The system will therefore further WKU's often-cited mission of becoming a leading regional university with international reach.

V. CONCLUSIONS

For all the above reasons, the Committee believes that the proposed system best responds to the clear desire of a majority of the faculty for a fair and more equitable grading system that encourages higher levels of student effort and achievement while also responding to legitimate concerns about implementation and negative consequences. The Committee therefore urges support for the attached resolution.

RESOLUTION ON IMPLEMENTING A NEW PLUS/MINUS GRADING SYSTEM

Whereas plus/minus grading is a useful tool that can increase student motivation and academic performance by offering incremental incentives for continual effort and incremental disincentives for diminished effort,

Whereas plus/minus grading will promote academic quality and grading fairness by allowing for more accurate representation of student achievement and differentiation between students achieving academically at different levels,

Whereas a majority of faculty is in favor of plus/minus grading and it is unrealistic to expect the faculty to reach total consensus on this issue and the Senate should reflect the will of the majority,

Whereas the proposed system will not affect current faculty prerogatives regarding grading and faculty will retain the right to determine what grades are appropriate for their particular classroom and discipline,

Whereas the full range plus/minus grading system outlined below is structured more logically than other possible plus/minus grading systems and minimizes the negative consequences for WKU's strong and struggling students by including a grade of "A+" with higher associated grade points and a "C-" grade with the same associated grade points as those of a grade of "C",

Whereas the grading system and implementation plan outlined below respond to student and administrative concerns and provide adequate time for the University and student body to prepare for the new system without requiring a wholesale reworking of academic and administrative guidelines,

Therefore, the University Senate resolves that a new grading system be established as follows:

1. A full range plus/minus grading scale will be implemented with the following options and associated grade points:
A+ (4.3)/A (4.0)/A- (3.7)/B+ (3.3)/B (3.0)/B- (2.7)/C+ (2.3)/C (2.0)/C- (2.0)/ D+ (1.3)/ D (1.0)/D- (.7)/F (0.0);
2. The new grading system will be implemented at the beginning of the Fall 2010 semester based on a wholesale implementation at that time without the option for current or former students to opt-in prior to that date;
3. The new grading system will apply to all students at WKU, undergraduate and graduate alike.

Furthermore, the University Senate commits to ongoing consultations with other interested parties at WKU (including but not limited to the Administration, the Student Government Association, Departments and Programs, the Graduate Studies office, and the Registrar's office) during the implementation period so that any unforeseen problems can be worked out.

To that end, the Senate hereby resolves to establish a special Ad Hoc Committee on Plus/Minus Grading Implementation to oversee the transition to and implementation of the new grading system that will include members of the Senate (at least one of whom has graduate teaching status). The Senate requests that the Student Government Association, the Registrar's office, the Graduate Studies office and the Provost's office appoint representatives to the committee.