Frequently Asked Questions on Plus/Minus Grading
Academic Excellence Committee, TCU Faculty Senate
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• Why adopt a plus/minus grading system?
Because it will more accurately reflect differing levels of student performance.
Faculty who keep grades on a 100-point scale or more have a distribution of scores at
the end of the semester that must be forced into five discrete categories: A, B, C, D, and F. With pluses and minuses those categories expand into twelve: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, D-, F.

• Why not move to a percentile grading system, where students are given actual number grades on their transcripts?
Because it is important to be consistent with the grading systems of most universities and colleges in this country.
The Academic Excellence Committee found no university in its survey of the top 120 U.S. News and World Report’s national universities that used a percentile system. But over 80% of those, and all those generally considered our peer institutions, have adopted a grading system that utilizes pluses or minuses or some form of graduated grades between the straight letter grades.

• Why is there no A+ and F+ in the proposed plus/minus grading scale?
Because an F means “failing” and one either fails or not. There’s no A+ because the plus/minus system is still a 4.0 system, and an “A” is 4 points.
It looks as if an A+ could be added simply by giving it a 4.33, in line with a B+’s being 3.33. But adding the A+ at a 4.33 means that the grading scale is no longer defined by a maximum score of 4.0 but 4.33. Hence the comparative value of other grades is reduced. For instance, a 4.0 on a 4.33 scale is equivalent to a 3.70 on a 4.0 scale. Translating to such a scale will reduce the value of our current grades and hurt our students competitively.

• Will a C- average now be acceptable for graduation?
No.
Currently, a student can’t graduate with less than a 2.0, which is a solid C average. A student with a 1.99, much less a 1.67—although both under our current system are technically C averages—is not eligible for graduation.

• Will the GPA requirements for scholarships and financial aid change?
No change is anticipated at this point.
Most universities that have adopted plus/minus grading do not change GPA requirements for scholarship and financial aid. Michael Scott, Director of Scholarships and Financial Aid, anticipates no changes will be needed to financial aid and scholarship GPA requirements. Furthermore, with plus/minus grading scholarship recipients can earn all B+s with no As or A-s, and still meet the scholarship requirement of a 3.25.

• Will the change to plus/minus grading affect an individual’s GPA?
It depends on the level of a student’s performance in his/her courses.
For instance, students who regularly perform at a B+ level will have slightly higher GPAs; those who perform at a B- level will have slightly lower GPAs; and those who
perform at the solid B level will have unchanged GPAs. Studies, both nationally and at TCU, have shown that the overall cumulative effect of adding pluses and minuses is slightly lower GPAs by 0.02-0.04 points.

- **Will the change affect a student’s ability to maintain a 4.0 GPA and hence penalize the highest performing students?**
  
  *Not if a student is genuinely a solid A student, but with the use of A- there will be fewer students with 4.0 cumulative GPAs.*

  Many students are concerned that they will be penalized and put at a competitive disadvantage by the increased difficulty of maintaining a 4.0 average. But many top notch universities whose students successfully matriculate at graduate and professional schools use plus/minus systems. In fact, a 4.0 average from an institution that gives pluses and minuses looks better than a 4.0 from one that doesn’t, since one knows that a student who has earned a 4.0 at a straight letter grade institution may actually have performed at A- levels in some classes. Thus not adopting a plus/minus system actually puts some of our top 4.0 students at a competitive disadvantage.

  Moreover, even earning all A-s results in a very impressive GPA. Look at it this way: If one had an A- in every class, one would graduate with a 3.67 GPA. If the same person had but earned an A in one of those classes, the average would rise to 3.7 (assuming a 124-hour degree). *A 3.7 average is Magna Cum Laude.*

- **Will pluses and minuses affect student motivation?**
  
  *We hope so.*

  Students often find themselves going into a final exam with little chance of changing their average. For instance, take a student who prior to the final exam in a class has an 85 average. The final exam counts 20% of the grade. She can’t make an A even if she makes a 100 on the final exam. Likewise, she’d have to fail the exam to make below a B. In this situation, there is little incentive to study for the exam.

  However the situation is different if pluses and minuses are added. Now she can earn a higher grade, a B+, by making a 94 on the final, or she can fall to a B- by making a 76. The final exam will now actually make a difference in her term grade.

- **Will faculty be required to use plus and minus grades?**
  
  *No.*

  Grading is the responsibility of the instructor of a course. At this point, we think that if an instructor determines that she will not give pluses and minuses but will continue to award only straight letter grades, she may do so if this is stipulated in the syllabus of the course.

- **Will the plus/minus system only go into effect for entering first-year students when it is introduced?**
  
  *No. It will go into effect for all students when adopted.*

  The Registrar reports that the software system we use precludes introducing plus/minus grading in graduated steps. Universities that have adopted such systems adopt them for all students at once. Because the plus/minus system is still a 4-point system, it is fully compatible with our current 4-point system.

For more information, see the Academic Excellence Committee website, [http://faculty.tcu.edu/grant/AcademicExcellence](http://faculty.tcu.edu/grant/AcademicExcellence)