

DATE: February 1, 2011

TO: Kate Ross, Secretary of Senate

FROM: Sam Black, Faculty Senator

RE: Questions regarding the grading policy in the Faculty of Health Sciences

Background

A document recently prepared by SFU Institutional Research and Planning in Summer 2009 (see attachment) identifies some important anomalies in the grades awarded to FHS students. Examples include:

A) Since its inception in 2006, 45.8% of undergraduate FHS students receive 'A' grades. That average rises to 47.3% in 2008/9. That is over twice the average for all other Faculties, and significantly higher than any other Faculty.

B) During that period FHS average undergraduate course grades are about 18% higher than the average for all other Faculties, and significantly higher than any other Faculty. That is approximately an average difference of a full letter grade per student per course.

Questions

The report notes that FHS's results may be distorted as a result of small sample sizes. The grade gap between FHS and all other Faculties was actually widening, however, in 2008/9 as student intake (and sample size) for FHS increased.

1) Do the figures for 2009/10 reveal that the grade gap between FHS and the University average for A's awarded to undergraduates and undergraduate course grades has narrowed or increased? By how much?

2) Are there mitigating considerations that might explain the grade gap? Is there evidence, for example, that FHS undergraduates are significantly more intelligent than other SFU undergraduates? Do they demonstrate similarly remarkable success in relation to students from other Faculties in non-FHS courses?

3) If the grade gap has not significantly narrowed in 2009/10, and there are no mitigating considerations is the VPA concerned about its possible implications for the wider University including:

a. Undermining the perceived value of an SFU degree and the University's reputation

b. Distorting student demand patterns for degrees

4) What will be done?



SFU

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND PLANNING

2008/09 Grades Report:
Historical Distribution of
Undergraduate and Graduate Course Grades
1999/00 to 2008/09

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Summer 2009

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I – Introduction

This report summarizes student course grades at Simon Fraser University over the ten year period from 1999/00 to 2008/09. Grade distributions are reported, and patterns over time are presented and discussed. The report is divided into four sections:

- The main section of the report provides definitions, and summarizes the findings.
- Appendix A provides information on undergraduate course grades. Grades are reported separately for lower division and upper division courses, first within the subject in which the course is taught, and then summarized at the Faculty and university levels.
- Appendix B provides information on undergraduate course grades at the Faculty level, while controlling for the approved Faculty of the students enrolled in the courses.
- Appendix C provides information on graduate course grades. Grades are reported within each subject, and then at the Faculty and university levels. In Appendices A through C, the data are displayed in both tabular and graphical formats.
- Appendix D lists the subjects in each Faculty.

This report is available on the Institutional Research and Planning web site at:
http://www.sfu.ca/irp/Students/grades_report/index.html

II – Definitions and Notes

To calculate the average course grades, each grade is assigned a numeric value, defined in Table 1. These values are weighted by the number of students who received each particular grade, to produce an overall average.

Table 1: Simon Fraser University's Grade Scale

A+ = 4.33	B+ = 3.33	C+ = 2.33	D = 1.00
A = 4.00	B = 3.00	C = 2.00	F = 0.00
A- = 3.67	B- = 2.67	C- = 1.67	N = 0.00

Note: At the graduate level, A+ grades have only been in use since Fall 2002

In order to simplify the tables in Appendices A-C of this report, the "+" and "-" grades have been collapsed. So for example, "A+", "A", and "A-" are all included in "A". The detailed grade distribution can be downloaded in an Excel spreadsheet at the following url:
http://www.sfu.ca/irp/Students/grades_report/index.html

Table 2 lists the grades that have no numerical equivalent, and are therefore omitted from the calculation of average grade. Although they are not included in the average, credit is granted for the following grades: "AE", "CC", "CR", and "P".

Table 2: Grades with No Numerical Equivalent

Grade	Definition
AE	aegrotat standing, compassionate pass
AU	audit
CC	course challenge
CF	course challenge failed
CN	did not complete challenge
CR	credit without grade
DE	deferred grade
FX	formal exchange
GN	grade not reported
IP	in progress
P	pass, ungraded
W	withdrawn
WD	withdrawal
WE	withdrawal under extenuating circumstances

Among undergraduate courses, "lower division" courses are those numbered from 001 to 299 inclusive. "Upper division" courses are numbered 300 to 499 inclusive.

Data reported on a yearly basis refers to fiscal year. For example, 2008/09 grades are the grades accumulated over the 2008 summer term (SFU term code: 1084), the 2008 fall term (SFU term code: 1087), and the 2009 spring term (SFU term code: 1091).

To protect student privacy, grade distributions based on five grades or fewer are not reported.

The tables in Appendices A-C of this report list subjects alphabetically by their four-letter abbreviation. Coop courses, work-terms, and practicums are excluded from this report. Where they could be identified, courses graded as Pass/Fail are also excluded.

III – Analysis

III.A – Undergraduate Course Grades

Table 7 in Appendix A reports undergraduate course grade distributions, separated by subject and division. Table 8 reports the distributions at the Faculty and university levels. The results are displayed in Figures 1-3 in Appendix A.

III.A.1 – Lower Division Course Grades (Courses Numbered 001-299 Inclusive)

FACULTY COMPARISONS (see Figure 1, Figure 2, Table 3, Table 8):

- Until 2006/07, the Faculty of Education (EDUC) had awarded the highest average lower division undergraduate course grades 7 years in a row, with an average awarded grade of 3.04 over the past decade.
- In 2006/07, the Faculty of Health Sciences (HSCI) began offering undergraduate courses. Since then, this Faculty has awarded the highest average lower division grades, with an average awarded grade of 3.22.
- In lower division courses, the Faculties of Science (SCI) and Business Administration (BUS) have consistently awarded lower average grades than all other Faculties.

Table 3: Average Undergraduate Course Grades Awarded and Percentage of “A” Grades Awarded, by Course Faculty – Lower Division

Course Faculty	Average Course Grades		% “A” Grades Awarded	
	2008/09	10-Year Average	2008/09	10-Year Average
Applied Sciences	2.77	2.77	27.0%	24.6%
Arts and Social Sciences	2.61	2.70	18.5%	19.5%
Business Administration	2.51	2.53	13.2%	13.5%
Education	3.16	3.04	41.3%	34.6%
Health Sciences	3.26	3.22*	47.3%	45.8%*
Science	2.43	2.49	19.4%	19.9%
University Total	2.62	2.66	20.9%	20.6%

* The Faculty of Health Sciences began offering undergraduate classes in the Fall 2006 term.

LONG-TERM COMPARISONS WITHIN FACULTIES (see Figure 3):

Comparing the average lower division grades awarded over the last ten years:

- **Applied Sciences (APSC):**
 - Courses in Interactive Arts & Technology (IAT), Engineering Science (ENSC), and Resource & Environmental Management (REM) have awarded considerably higher grades than other subjects.
 - Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM) courses have awarded grades considerably below the APSC average.
- **Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS):**
 - Courses in Sustainable Community Development (SCD) have awarded the highest average grades.
 - Economics (ECON) and Philosophy (PHIL) have awarded the lowest average lower division grades.
- **Science (SCI):**
 - The highest average lower division grades have been awarded in Environmental Science (EVSC) courses.
 - Mathematics (MATH) courses have awarded the lowest average grades.

CURRENT COMPARISONS AND TRENDS WITHIN FACULTIES (see Figure 3):***2008/09 Average Course Grades (see Figure 3):***

- **Applied Sciences (APSC):**
 - The highest average lower division grades awarded in 2008/09 were in Interactive Arts and Technology (IAT).
 - The lowest average grades were awarded in Computing Science (CMPT) and Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM).
- **Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS):**
 - The highest average grades awarded in 2008/09 were in Language Courses (LANG). It should be noted that the average grade for Language (LANG) is based on a small sample size (fewer than 50, see Table 7.)
 - The lowest average grades were awarded in Economics (ECON) and Philosophy (PHIL).
- **Education (EDUC):**
 - Grades awarded in Foundations of Academic Literacy (FAL) this year were higher than those awarded in Education classes (EDUC).
- **Science (SCI):**
 - The highest average grades in 2008/09 were awarded in Environmental Science (EVSC) and Physics (PHYS).
 - The lowest average grades were awarded in Biological Sciences (BISC), Mathematics (MATH), and Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM).

Large Changes in 2007/08 to 2008/09 Average Course Grades (see Table 7):

- The following subjects have seen large changes (of at least 0.25) in the average lower division grade awarded from last year to this year:
 - Increases: Language (LANG: 2.66 to 3.53), Cognitive Science (COGS: 2.06 to 2.71), Gender Studies (GDST: 2.81 to 3.29), and Latin American Development Studies (LAS: 2.38 to 2.71). Note that Language (LANG) awarded fewer than 50 lower division course grades this year, so some instability in the average grade is not unexpected.
 - Decreases: Sustainable Community Development (SCD: 3.71 to 3.21), Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM: 2.46 to 2.02), and Engineering Science (ENSC: 3.01 to 2.76).

III.A.2 – Upper Division Course Grades (Courses Numbered 300-499 Inclusive)

FACULTY COMPARISONS (see Figure 2, Table 4, Table 8):

- With the exception of 2006/07, the Faculty of Education (EDUC) awarded the highest average upper division course grades in each of the last ten years (average grade awarded: 3.41).
- The Faculty of Health Sciences (HSCI) awarded the highest upper division average grades in 2006/07, and the second highest grades each year since then (average grade awarded: 3.29.) It should be noted that HSCI has only been offering undergraduate courses for the past three years, and until this year, its averages were based on relatively small sample sizes (see Table 8.)
- Courses in the Faculty of Applied Sciences (APSC) have consistently awarded higher average upper division grades than courses in the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS), Business Administration (BUS), and Science (SCI).
- The Faculty of Science (SCI) has awarded the lowest average upper division course grades in eight of the last ten years.

Table 4: Average Undergraduate Course Grades Awarded and Percentage of "A" Grades Awarded, by Course Faculty – Upper Division

Course Faculty	Average Course Grades		% "A" Grades Awarded	
	2008/09	10-Year Average	2008/09	10-Year Average
Applied Sciences	3.08	3.10	38.6%	36.7%
Arts and Social Sciences	2.93	2.96	29.5%	29.6%
Business Administration	3.00	2.96	27.2%	25.6%
Education	3.46	3.41	57.0%	54.2%
Health Sciences	3.28	3.29*	46.1%	48.1%*
Science	2.88	2.89	31.2%	31.6%
University Total	3.01	3.01	33.1%	32.4%

* The Faculty of Health Sciences began offering undergraduate classes in the Fall 2006 term.

LONG-TERM COMPARISONS AND TRENDS WITHIN FACULTIES (see Figure 3):

Comparing the average upper division grades awarded over the last ten years:

- **Applied Sciences (APSC):**
 - Courses in Resource & Environmental Management (REM) have awarded the highest average grades.
 - Computing Science (CMPT) and Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM) courses have awarded the lowest average grades. Note that fewer than 50 upper division MACM grades have been assigned in courses from the Faculty of Applied Sciences¹.
- **Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS):**
 - The highest upper division grades awarded were in Contemporary Arts (FPA) and General Studies (GS).
 - Business Administration & Economics (BUEC) courses have awarded grades considerably below the Faculty average.
- **Science (SCI):**
 - The highest average grades have been awarded in Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue (DIAL), Management & Systems Science (MSSC), Marine Science (MASC), and Environmental Science (EVSC). Note that MSSC, MASC and EVSC usually award fewer than 50 upper division grades each year.
 - Mathematics (MATH), Statistics (STAT), and Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM) courses have awarded the lowest average upper division grades.

¹ In Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM), some courses are taught under the Faculty of Applied Sciences, and others are taught under the Faculty of Science.

CURRENT COMPARISONS AND TRENDS WITHIN FACULTIES:***2008/09 Average Course Grades (see Figure 3):***

- Applied Sciences (APSC):
 - The highest average upper division grades awarded in 2008/09 were in Interactive Arts and Technology (IAT) courses.
 - The lowest average course grades were awarded in Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM). Note that MACM assigned fewer than 50 course grades in Applied Sciences courses in 2008/09¹.
- Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS):
 - The highest average grades awarded in 2008/09 were in Explorations (EXPL). Note that only 13 upper division grades were awarded in Explorations this year.
 - The lowest average grades were awarded in Business Administration & Economics (BUEC).
- Faculty of Science (SCI):
 - The subjects awarding the highest average grades in 2008/09 were Management & Systems Science (MSSC), Marine Science (MASC) and Undergraduate Semester in Dialogue (DIAL). Note that MSSC and MASC awarded fewer than 50 grades in 2008/09 (see Table 7.)
 - The lowest average grades were awarded in Science (SCI), Mathematics (MATH), Mathematics & Computing Science (MACM), and Nuclear Science (NUSC: fewer than 50 grades awarded, see Table 7.)

Large Changes in 2007/08 to 2008/09 Average Course Grades (see Table 7):

- The following subjects have seen large changes (of at least 0.25) this year over last year's average upper division grade awarded:
 - Increases: Nuclear Science (NUSC: 1.88 to 2.49). Note that Nuclear Science awarded fewer than 50 grades in both 2007/08 and 2008/09 (see Table 7), so some instability in its average grade is not unexpected.
 - Decreases: Cognitive Science (COGS: 3.75 to 3.22), Resource & Environmental Management (REM: 3.49 to 3.16), and Marine Science (MASC: 4.05 to 3.78). Note that very few grades were awarded in Cognitive Science and in Marine Science (see Table 7.)

III.A.3 – General Observations (All Undergraduate Courses)

- In 2008/09, the average undergraduate grade awarded was 2.77. This is the lowest average undergraduate grade of any year in the past decade.
- The average undergraduate grade awarded over the past ten years is 2.81.
- Over the past ten years, upper division courses have consistently awarded higher grades than lower division courses in all Faculties.

III.B – Undergraduate Course Grades by Student Faculty

Table 9 in Appendix B summarizes the 2008/09 undergraduate course grade distributions within each Faculty, controlling for the approved Faculty of students enrolled in the courses. The results are displayed in Figure 4 in Appendix B.

By Faculty of Students:

- Students from the Faculty of Education (EDUC) were awarded the highest grades overall in 2008/09, with an average course grade of 3.54. These students most commonly took courses in the Faculty of Education (EDUC).
- Students from the Faculty of Business Administration (BUS) were awarded the second highest grades, with an average grade in 2008/09 of 2.94. These students most commonly took courses in the Faculties of Business Administration (BUS), and Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS).
- Students from the remaining four Faculties were awarded similar average grades, ranging from 2.69 to 2.81.

By Faculty of Courses:

- In courses offered by the Faculties of Applied Sciences (APSC) and Health Sciences (HSCI), students from the Faculty of Business Administration (BUS) received the highest average grades in 2008/09.
- In courses offered by the Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS), Education (EDUC), and Science (SCI), students from the Faculty of Education (EDUC) received the highest average grades in 2008/09. (Note that for courses in the Faculty of Science, the average for Education students is based on a much smaller sample than the average grades awarded to students from other Faculties.)
- In courses offered by the Faculty of Business Administration (BUS), students from the Faculty of Science (SCI) received the highest average grades in 2008/09, just 0.02 grade points ahead of students from Business Administration (BUS).
- In 2008/09, students in all Faculties received higher grades in Education (EDUC) and Health Sciences (HSCI) courses than in courses offered by the other four Faculties.

Table 5 displays the average course marks assigned to students from each of the Faculties over all courses taken, as well as the percentage of marks that are in the A- to A+ range.

Table 5: 2008/09 Average Undergraduate Course Grades Awarded and Percentage of "A" Grades Awarded, by Faculty of Student

Faculty of Student	Average Course Grades	% "A" Grades Awarded
Applied Sciences	2.78	28.7%
Arts and Social Sciences	2.71	22.4%
Business Administration	2.94	27.4%
Education	3.54	62.1%
Health Sciences	2.81	29.1%
Science	2.74	25.8%
All Undergraduate Students	2.77	25.8%

III.C – Graduate Course Grades

Table 10 in Appendix C reports graduate course grade distributions, separated by subject. Table 11 reports the distributions at the Faculty and university levels. The results are displayed in Figures 5-7 in Appendix C.

FACULTY COMPARISONS (see Figure 5, Figure 6, Table 6, Table 11):

- The Faculty of Education (EDUC) has awarded the highest average graduate level course grades in seven of the last ten years, with an average awarded grade of 3.85.
- Averaged over the last four years, since the Faculty of Health Sciences (HSCI) began offering graduate level courses, this Faculty has awarded the second highest average grades (average grade: 3.80). However, the average grade awarded in graduate level Health Sciences courses has declined every year.
- The Faculties of Applied Sciences (APSC) and Science (SCI) have awarded comparable graduate course grades over the last ten years, with average awarded grades of 3.78 and 3.77, respectively.
- The Faculty of Business Administration (BUS) has awarded the lowest average grades in each of the last ten years, with an average awarded grade of 3.47.
- The Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS) has consistently awarded the second lowest average grades over the last ten years (average grade: 3.71).

Table 6: Average Graduate Course Grades Awarded and Percentage of "A" Grades Awarded, by Course Faculty

Course Faculty	Average Course Grades		% "A" Grades Awarded	
	2008/09	10-Year Average	2008/09	10-Year Average
Applied Sciences	3.84	3.78	86.1%	82.7%
Arts and Social Sciences	3.69	3.71	78.3%	78.9%
Business Administration	3.47	3.47	50.2%	50.3%
Education	3.88	3.85	88.6%	88.2%
Health Sciences	3.76	3.80*	83.9%	83.5%*
Science	3.83	3.77	84.9%	80.3%
University Total	3.70	3.68	74.6%	72.2%

* The Faculty of Health Sciences began offering graduate classes in the Fall 2005 term.

LONG-TERM COMPARISONS AND TRENDS WITHIN FACULTIES (see Figure 7):

Comparing the average graduate course grades awarded over the last ten years:

- Applied Sciences (APSC):
 - Resource & Environmental Management (REM) and Communications (CMNS) have awarded the highest average grades.
 - Engineering Science (ENSC) has awarded the lowest average grades.
- Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS):
 - Criminology (CRIM), Psychology (PSYC), and Linguistics (LING) have awarded relatively high average grades over the past decade. Note that Linguistics (LING) awarded fewer than 50 upper division grades each year.
 - Economics (ECON) and Applied Legal Studies (ALS) have awarded relatively low average grades. Note that Applied Legal Studies (ALS) only began offering graduate level courses this year.
- Science (SCI):
 - Molecular Biology & Biochemistry (MBB) has awarded the highest average grades.
 - Physics (PHYS) has awarded the lowest average graduate course grades.

CURRENT COMPARISONS AND TRENDS WITHIN FACULTIES (see Figure 7):

2008/09 Average Course Grades (see Figure 7):

- Applied Sciences (APSC):
 - The highest average grades awarded in 2008/09 were in Resource & Environmental Management (REM) and Communications (CMNS).
 - Computing Science (CMPT) awarded the lowest graduate course grades this year.

- Arts and Social Sciences (ARTS):
 - The highest average grades were awarded in Psychology (PSYC), Archaeology (ARCH: fewer than 50 grades assigned), and Criminology (CRIM).
 - The lowest average grades were awarded in Applied Legal Studies (ALS) and International Leadership (MIL). Note that the average grade in MIL is based on a very small sample size (see Table 10.)
- Science (SCI):
 - The highest average grades in 2008/09 were awarded in Molecular Biology & Biochemistry (MBB), Biological Sciences (BISC), and Applied & Computational Mathematics (APMA: small sample size.)
 - The lowest average course grades were awarded in Actuarial Mathematics (ACMA). Note that average grades in ACMA courses are based on small sample sizes (see Table 10.)

Large changes in 2007/08 to 2008/09 Average Course Grades (see Table 10):

- The following subjects have seen large changes (of at least 0.25) in the average graduate grade awarded from last year to this year:
 - Increases: Archaeology (ARCH: 3.75 to 4.02). Note that this subject has awarded fewer than 50 lower division course grades in each year, so some instability in the average grade is not unexpected.
 - Decreases: International Leadership (MIL: 3.72 to 2.78), Actuarial Mathematics (ACMA: 3.81 to 3.40), French (FREN: 4.00 to 3.72), and Contemporary Arts (FPA: 3.93 to 3.67). Note that the average grades for all of these subjects are based on very small sample sizes (see Table 10), so a certain amount of instability is not unexpected.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS:

- In 2008/09, the average graduate grade awarded was 3.70. Although this is slightly lower than last year, the average graduate grade awarded at the university has been generally increasing since 2001/02.
- The average graduate grade awarded over the past ten years is 3.68.



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
THINKING OF THE WORLD

**FACULTY OF HEALTH SCIENCES
OFFICE OF THE DEAN**

MEMORANDUM

DATE: February 14, 2011

TO: Jon Driver, Vice President Academic
Mario Pinto, Vice President Research

FROM: John O'Neil, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences

RE: Grading Policy in FHS



I am responding to Senator Black's question regarding apparent grade inflation in FHS courses. Senator Black has identified an important issue that FHS has addressed with the development and ratification of the attached "FHS Grading Policy" document. It is useful to remember that FHS was created in late 2004 and although faculty had yet to be hired, programs were still to be designed and courses had yet to be developed, we began to admit students in fall 2005. FHS has met this challenge with extraordinary success. Five years later we exceed our enrollment targets with approximately 1200 students enrolled as FHS majors and our admission requirement from high school has risen from 75% to 88% this year. However this success has not come without growing pains. Nearly two thirds of our faculty members are pre-tenure in their first teaching experience. The field of population health is normally taught at the graduate level and our faculty have had to develop undergraduate courses for which there are few precedents in Canadian or US universities. In the context of these challenges it is not at all surprising that our faculty members have required some time to calibrate grading standards in their courses. However the trend is encouraging. The percentage of A's in lower division courses fell from 44.4% in 06/07 to 34.5% in 09/10. Similarly the average course grade fell over this same period from 3.29 to 3.04. Data on upper division courses is probably not useful because upper division courses in FHS are only now becoming fully enrolled.

Nonetheless, we fully appreciate Senator's Black's concerns and we continue to work with our faculty members to ensure that the guidelines outlined in the FHS Grading Policy document are implemented.

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FHS Grading Guidelines

Relationship of these Guidelines to SFU Policy

This document is based on SFU policy T 20.01. If these grading guidelines are determined to be inconsistent with this or other SFU policies, then SFU policy shall in all cases prevail.

Reason for these Guidelines:

Over the past four years the program chairs in FHS have had to deal with a number of grading issues, in some cases this has required (on consultation with the instructor) changing a large number of grades. Most of these issues appear to stem from differences in understanding as to the meaning of grades and relative levels of inexperience in regard to assessment tools. The problems are two-fold: a) providing grades that are scaled too high (i.e., too many A+'s, etc.); and b) not submitting grades in a timely manner.

At SFU Program Directors/Chairs and the Dean are charged with overseeing and grading practices and approving grades. Yet within the Faculty there are no clear procedures, guidelines or processes for doing so. It is the purpose of this document to produce clear and transparent guidelines and procedures for giving grades and managing conflicts over grades.

The purpose of this guideline to: a) to provide information to faculty (tenure-track, lecturers, sessionals, TAs, etc.) regarding grading guidelines and grade distributions; and b) to provide a clear process for and guidance to Program Directors and the Dean in managing grading issues.

Principles Governing these Guidelines:

Grades are very important to students. They provide information on how a student performed in a course, and provide a metric used by others to gauge a student's performance in relationship to other students. Marking and assessment schemes should convey to students detailed information about their performance, where they did well, and where they did not do as well.

Grading should ideally provide an accurate, reliable and fair way of representing performance in a course, and it must be understood to do so by students. Grade distributions should be consistent for the same course across terms, and generally consistent for courses offered at the same level across the Faculty. Students should have confidence that the instructor has been thorough and accurate in marking and recording at every stage of the evaluation process.

Grades are especially meaningful to those who evaluate student performance outside of the course and Faculty. Admissions committees, fellowship/scholarship committees, granting councils, financial aid offices, etc. must have the same level of confidence in grading that the student should have about accuracy, reliability, and fairness. Remember that a reputation for grading too high, which can spread very quickly within and across Universities, can have serious negative consequences for our students.

Marks and grades must be confidential.

While faculty autonomy in marking is an important standard, and will be respected in nearly all cases, in the end such autonomy must be balanced against the principles articulated here.

Course Requirements and Evaluation/Assessment Procedures:

As is noted in FHS' Syllabus Policy, and in SFU Policy T 20.01, instructors must be very clear about how they intend to assess student performance. At minimum, the following elements must be distributed to students prior to the beginning of a course:

- A statement of course objectives
- A linking of course objectives to relevant core competencies (primarily for MPH courses)
- A list of required readings and other course materials
- An indication of how and when students can have access to the instructor(s)
- Identification of all course requirements that will be assessed, and how this assessment will be undertaken
- The manner in which marks will be used to determine the final grade (may be distributional, a fixed scale, or a combination of the two)
- A qualitative statement describing the key differences between, A, B, C, and etc., for major assessments or coursework
- Reference to important SFU policies defining and addressing academic dishonesty and student misconduct

Instructor Responsibilities:

Instructors should ensure that students receive timely feedback on assignments submitted for marking. Assessments of work should be clear and meaningful to students: they should understand why they received a particular mark, and what they can do, or could have done, to improve it.

Instructors must comply with University and Faculty regulations regarding submission of final grades to the Graduate or Undergraduate Program Director. Generally-speaking, final grades must be submitted within 96 hours of the end of the final examination period. Because marks are needed for students who intend to graduate, for financial aid purposes, or, on the graduate level, for students hoping to compete for fellowship or scholarship awards, timely submission of grades is especially important.

Final grades should not be released to students before these grades have been approved by the relevant Program Director.

The Faculty of Health Sciences Grading System:

Consistent with SFU policy, FHS uses a letter grading system ranging in half-steps from A+ to C-, D, and F. ***No percentage grades are reported externally to a course.*** It is up to an instructor whether s/he chooses to release percentage marks to students during the course. We advise against it, unless the

instructor is very confident that the course marks will produce a distribution that is consistent with the guidelines provided below. Instead, ***we advise instructors to release interim marks as letter grades.***

Some Universities and Programs have chosen to implement policies mandating specific grading distributions. [For example, at York University the following rule applies: “no more than 65% of grades may be higher than C+, and usually not more than 10% of grades can be A’s”.] In FHS we prefer to provide ***guidelines or rules of thumb*** for the distribution of grades that are given in a particular class, taught at a particular level. These guidelines should not be interpreted as mandating the scaling of grades. In FHS we consider the question of whether or not to scale or curve grades to be the faculty member’s prerogative.

A Rule of thumb

In the Appendix we cite two widely used, and detailed, distributional schemes, one from the University of Washington and one from the University of Alberta (Table 1). In the far right column of the table we also list *actual* SFU grading distributions for 1998-2008 (for undergraduate students), and 2002-2008 (for graduate students). See http://www.sfu.ca/irp/Students/grades_report/index.html for the SFU Grading Report. These schemes are useful as a reference point when thinking about final grades, but since they show means from many courses rather than variability, they have limitations for applying to individual courses. In general, the more important figure is the median grade given in a class. In most public, comprehensive universities like SFU (i.e., who admit a more academically diverse range of students than would be the case in elite research/U.S. private institutions), students in lower division courses receive a median grade of B- or B; in upper division courses a median grade of B or B+; and in graduate courses a median grade of B+ or A-.

For undergraduate courses, the following **rule of thumb** accommodates diverse grade distributions but achieves the Faculty’s objective:

Lower division (100- and 200-level) undergraduate courses should, in general, have no more than 5% A+’s, and the median letter grade should be a B-/B. Upper division (300- and 400-level) undergraduate courses should in general have no more than 8% A+’s, and the median letter grade should be a B/B+, or it might be a bit higher (B+/A-) for some 4th year seminars.

Note that SFU tends to grade higher in graduate programs than many other institutions. This may be an artifact of SFU’s small graduate program, with relatively few professional programs. Many professional programs (e.g., Business) tend to use a wider grade distribution than do research programs. As we build our own research programs we’ll want to keep this in mind. A median grade of A-/A for courses at the Masters level is probably typical but for the MPH a median of B+/A- may be a better target.

As stated above, we do not intend this guideline to imply that instructors are required to implement a strict system of scaling or “curving.” We would expect that once instructors have taught a course a few

times and developed assignments, marking schemes, and rubrics appropriate to the level of the course and difficulty of material, they will naturally achieve a meaningful distribution of grades which is approximately consistent with the guideline. However, if an instructor is using a new assignment or marking scheme, s/he may wish to use a scaling system until the new scheme is adequately calibrated. *You should tell students in advance that you are doing this.*

In any case, we recommend that instructors think carefully before they provide an absolute grading scheme in their syllabi. An alternative is to use qualitative descriptors and a statement that grades will be distributed appropriate to the level of the course. For example, an instructor may sketch out what an A+, A, etc. grade would mean in their class with regard to specific assignments, in-class activities, etc. Qualitative descriptors can be found in the first column of Table 1 in the Appendix. An instructor may also wish to indicate that “In accordance with SFU practice, I expect that the median grade given in this class will be ____.”

Responsibilities of Program Directors:

At SFU it is the responsibility of Chairs/Program Directors to approve all grades before they are submitted to the Registrar. If a grading distribution deviates significantly from the distributions listed below, especially at the upper levels of the distribution, the Director may consult with an instructor to discuss the distribution before issuing an approval. This discussion will aim to produce an agreement between the Director and the instructor with regard to the distribution of grades. If this discussion does not produce an agreement, and in accordance with SFU policy T 20.01, the Director may refuse to issue an approval. In this case the matter goes to the Dean for deliberation and final decision.

At the end of the semester, if the grade distribution does not conform to these guidelines (see box on page 3), the instructor may wish to seek a resolution that may involve scaling or rescaling grades before submitting the grades for approval. An instructor may also make a case (to the Directors of Undergraduate or Graduate Studies who approves grades) for a different distribution if there is a really good reason for it.

Waiver of Grade Distribution Targets

Before the beginning of the semester (and prior to the publication of a course outline), instructors may apply in writing to the undergraduate or graduate studies committee (as appropriate) for a waiver of the grade distribution targets specified in this guideline for pedagogical or other reasons. The written application should state the rationale for the waiver and the proposed alternative grade distribution target for the course (if any). The committee will vote to approve or not such requests.

Appendix

Table 1: SFU Mean Grade Distributions with Peer Comparisons

		Percent of Class		
		U Alberta (UA Senate- Prescribed Policy)	U Washington (general guidelines; widely cited across the U.S.)	SFU Distribution (10 yrs avg for Undergrad; 6 yrs avg for Grad)
Median Grades		Lower division: B-/B Upper division: B to B+ Graduate: A- to B+	Lower division: B- Upper division: B Graduate: B+	Lower division: B-/B Upper division: B to B+ Graduate: A to A-
"No more than ___% A's" (i.e., A's and A+'s)		Lower division: 12% Upper division: 18% Graduate: 30%	Lower division: 8% Upper division: 12% Graduate: 17%	Lower division: 11% Upper division: 17% Graduate: 51%
Grade	Qualitative Descriptor (<i>this is an example only, drawn from the U Alberta and U Washington documents</i>)			
A+	Excellent. Superior performance in all elements of the course. A+ = work exemplifying the highest quality possible. Unquestionably prepared for subsequent courses in field.	Lower division: 5% Upper division: 7% Graduate: 15%	<i>[No A+ grades are given at UW]</i> Lower division: 8% Upper division: 12% Graduate: 17%	Lower division: 3% Upper division: 4% Graduate: 12%
A		Lower division: 7% Upper division: 11% Graduate: 15%		Lower division: 8% Upper division: 13% Graduate: 39%
A-	Superior performance in most aspects of the course. Unquestionably prepared for subsequent courses in field.	Lower division: 11% Upper division: 16% Graduate: 15%	Lower division: 10% Upper division: 14% Graduate: 21%	Lower division: 10% Upper division: 15% Graduate: 22%
B+	Good. High quality performance in all or most elements of the course. Very good chance of success in subsequent courses.	Lower division: 13% Upper division: 16% Graduate: 17%	Lower division: 12% Upper division: 16% Graduate: 25%	Lower division: 14% Upper division: 17% Graduate: 15%
B	High quality performance in some of the course; satisfactory in others. Good chance of success in subsequent courses.	Lower division: 15% Upper division: 17% Graduate: 16%	Lower division: 14% Upper division: 18% Graduate: 22%	Lower division: 15% Upper division: 17% Graduate: 8%
B-	Satisfactory performance in the course. Evidence of sufficient learning to succeed in subsequent courses. At the graduate level, this is typically the minimally acceptable grade.	Lower division: 14% Upper division: 13% Graduate: 10%	Lower division: 16% Upper division: 15% Graduate: 12%	Lower division: 13% Upper division: 12% Graduate: 2%
C+	Satisfactory performance in most of the course, with the remainder being somewhat substandard. Evidence of sufficient learning to succeed in subsequent courses, with effort. At the graduate level, this is an unacceptable (failing) level of performance.	Lower division: 11% Upper division: 8% Graduate: 7%	Lower division: 14% Upper division: 9% Graduate: 3%	Lower division: 12% Upper division: 8% Graduate: 1%
C	Evidence of some learning, but generally marginal performance. Marginal chance of success in subsequent courses. At the graduate level, this is an unacceptable (failing) level of	Lower division: 9% Upper division: 6% Graduate: 2%	Lower division: 9% Upper division: 7% Graduate: 0%	Lower division: 10% Upper division: 6% Graduate: 1%

	performance.			
C-	Poor. Minimal learning and substandard performance throughout the course. Doubtful chance of success in subsequent courses. At the graduate level, this is an unacceptable (failing) level of performance.	Lower division: 5% Upper division: 3% Graduate: 1%	Lower division: 5% Upper division: 3% Graduate: 0%	Lower division: 6% Upper division: 3% Graduate: 0%
D+	Poor. Minimal learning and low quality performance. Doubtful chance of success in subsequent courses. Grade not given at the graduate level.	Lower division: 4% Upper division: 2% Graduate: 0%	Lower division: 4% Upper division: 2% Graduate: 0%	[Grade not given]
D	Poor. Very minimal learning and very low quality performance in all aspects of the course. Highly doubtful chance of success in subsequent courses. Grade not given at the graduate level.	Lower division: 2% Upper division: 1% Graduate: 0%	Lower division: 2% Upper division: 1% Graduate: 0%	Lower division: 4% Upper division: 2% Graduate: 0%
D-	n/a	[Grade not given]	Lower division: 2% Upper division: 1% Graduate: 0%	[Grade not given]
F	Failure. Complete absence of evidence of learning. Totally unprepared for subsequent courses. At the graduate level, this grade would be assigned for incomplete work or academic dishonesty.	Lower division: 4% Upper division: 1% Graduate: 1%	Lower division: 4% Upper division: 1% Graduate: 0%	Lower division: 6% Upper division: 3% Graduate: 1%