

Plus/Minus Grading: Solution or Problem?

Surprisingly, the debate over +/- grade systems seems to occur, largely, at the college and university level. Few middle and high schools seem to have taken on the issue, at least in any way that appears in the public literature.

Will Millhiser of the City University of New York (CUNY) asks a provocative set of questions about plus/minus grading. “What does it mean for a student to be an ‘A thinker’ in your discipline? What must students be able to demonstrate or do to live up to that standard? How would it be measured if there were no such thing as numerical grades? Bain (a workshop leader that Millhiser cites) suggests that we share with students our answers to these questions to help them understand what it takes to be a so-called A thinker. When I did Bain’s exercise, I learned that the definitions for A vs. B vs. C thinkers are not trivial, but doable. But consider this. Our plus/minus system has 11 grade categories whereas the A-B-C-D-F system has 5. It’s been 3 years, and acceptable definitions for each of the 11 brackets still elude me. What is it exactly that a C+ thinker can do that a C thinker cannot?”

In Favor

Other opinions suggest that it is the discriminating quality of plus/minus grading systems that make them useful. A report to the Faculty Senate at Western Illinois University stated that “The single most important argument in favor of a system of final grades that includes plus and minus grades is the increased accuracy of the grade as a reflection of student performance. As a justification for preferring a +/- system, faculty members responding to the WIU survey of attitudes commented on the unfairness of the present system for students who achieve an average of 89: their final grade of B is not distinguishable from the B that a student with an average of 81 receives.”

In addition, plus/minus systems are seen as an antidote to grade inflation, since a student barely earning an A would receive an A-, rather than an A. Proponents also suggest that it increases student motivation (to earn a “high A” rather than an A-). Finally, since many very prestigious universities use plus/minus systems (Harvard, Northwestern, UC Berkeley), it is seen as a way to discriminate among the performance of a very similar pool of students, such as those in AP and advanced courses.

Opposition

Those opposed to +/- systems say that it is unfair, particularly to students in the 3.5-4.0 range. Will it take more effort to earn the A that they might have earned earlier? Is an A still worth 4.0 points, or will it be adjusted to reflect the range shown in other grade categories (e.g., B- = 2.67, B = 3.0, B+ = 3.33)? Some schools have introduced the A+ grade that is worth 4.33 quality points for calculating final averages.

A second concern is the pressure put on teachers to award a “slightly higher” grade: “What can I do to turn my C- into a C+...or a B?” Since so few points separate the +/- categories, many critics see that such systems increase the amount of haggling over a couple of points on a test or a critical assignment. Historically, when asked to “reconsider” an assignment, teachers tend to grant the higher grade – especially if it is a matter of a point or two.

Finally, there is concern that when faculty have to deal with 11 or 13 categories of grades, they will find it much more difficult than working in the current 5 category system. However, there is little empirical evidence that this is a problem, so it is largely a matter of faculty consensus.

Issues

The Maderia City Schools (OH) conducted a major study of the policy implications for changing to the +/- system and concluded that about 50% of the schools in neighboring districts used such a system – particularly the more affluent and



Resources

Selected print and online resources about this topic are available on page 2.

higher achieving schools. Their report is worth reading for several reasons, but its most important conclusion was that schools needed to ascertain how colleges and other post-secondary institutions viewed “chromatic” or +/- scales, so that their students were not placed at a disadvantage for college admission.

A commentary from the Ames (IA) High School newspaper blog suggests that +/- systems might also create even more stress for students, especially in competitive environments. Huang writes that it may also have an effect on the rigor of courses selected by students: “The point of school is obvious – to learn. However, by implementing the new grading system, the administration is placing the emphasis of high school on the wrong focus – grades. Now students must make the hard decision between two options: taking easy classes for good grades and taking challenging ones for knowledge. Many students who are hesitant to take an AP class in the first place would likely just choose the first option and take the normal, easier version of the class to preserve their GPAs.”

The Bottom Line

The research and commentary offers no clear guidance on empirical reasons for shifting to a +/- grading system. It appears as if the benefits are determined largely by the intentions of the school in creating the system and the ways in which administrators and faculty implement it. Ultimately, grading systems rely on consensus among students, faculty, parents, colleges and/or employers about what the grades actually mean. If a change is planned, it appears as if all of these stakeholders should be involved in the discussion to assure that grades actually communicate with all of the people who need the information they provide.

References and Resources

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