

Report of the Senate Academic Standards, Regulations, and Admissions Committee on a Proposal to Increase the Content of Student Transcripts October 27, 2006

Charge (S-0411): Consider and make recommendations regarding the proposal to increase the information content of student transcripts. Respond to Senate Executive Committee by October 2006.

This charge resulted from a proposal by Profs. Joseph Potenza and Gregory Herzog to increase the information content of student transcripts by adding, for each course in which a student receives a letter grade: (1) the mean numerical grade of all students in the course and (2) the number of students who received letter grades. (The full text of the proposal is included as an appendix to this report.) Although the charge was given to ASRAC in early 2005, it was not considered by the Committee for a year due to more pressing charges; namely, consideration of the draft university copyright policy and consideration of the recommendations of the New Brunswick Task Force on Undergraduate Education. The proposal was discussed at three successive ASRAC meetings: on March 24, 2006 in Newark, on April 28, 2006 in New Brunswick, and on September 29, 2006 in New Brunswick. Prof. Herzog attended the meeting of 28 April to make the case for the proposal and answer questions from the Committee.

During the preliminary discussion on 24 March, a tentative consensus was reached that the members present were willing to recommend that the proposed information be added to transcripts provided each student would have the option of having the information on his or her transcript, but would not be required to do so. Later, however, several members expressed fears that making addition of the information optional would not work well, because some employers or professional schools receiving Rutgers transcripts with the added information from some students or graduates might well then demand them from all Rutgers students and graduates. Furthermore, the Committee learned that the New Brunswick Faculty Council, which considered a similar proposal, had voted, in effect, against recommending that the mean grade and number of students be added to student transcripts whether on an optional or a mandatory basis. Throughout the Committee discussions, there was little or no support voiced for making inclusion of the extra information mandatory. At the meeting of 29 September, the Committee members present voted unanimously not to recommend that the Potenza-Herzog proposal be adopted.

The chief reason for the Committee's decision was the belief that a convincing case had not been made for why the additional information on transcripts is needed; i.e., for the existence of a substantial problem the proposal would address. Other factors in the decision were the following:

- The Committee does not agree with the claim that addition of the proposed information would "help Rutgers undergraduates by giving them more complete feedback regarding their performance." Indeed, some members believe that the proposal seems directed more toward highlighting differences in grading standards among faculty members/departments than toward helping students better assess their performance.

- The Committee also does not agree that inclusion of the additional information would substantially help external readers to recognize outstanding student performance. Indeed, several members of the committee who regularly evaluate undergraduate transcripts for admissions purposes agreed that the additional information would be of little or no use to them or other sophisticated readers of transcripts. On the other hand, the Committee felt that unsophisticated readers might easily draw erroneous conclusions from a transcript with mean course grade and class size but no other explanatory material added.
- Students on the Committee were unanimous in their belief that while some students (i.e., those who get relatively strong grades in large courses where the average grade is low) might be helped by addition of the mean grade and class size to the transcript, strong students who take a large number of small upper level courses, honors courses, etc. could be harmed by the addition.
- Giving the mean grade of only those students who get a letter grade in a course could be quite misleading in non-required courses where most students who are not doing well withdraw and do not receive a letter grade.

APPENDIX: A Proposal to Increase the Information Content of Student Transcripts

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We believe that the grades on a student's transcript should provide concise and meaningful information about the student's achievements. Discussions taking place over the last two years suggest that the current grading scheme is not completely satisfactory. To increase the durability of any agreed-upon grading scheme, and to improve the information content of student transcripts, we propose that, beginning with courses taken in the Fall 2005 semester, the Registrar be instructed to modify the transcript of every student as follows.

For each course in which a student receives a letter grade, the transcript will add to the information that is now presented, 1) the mean numerical grade of all students; and 2) the number of students who received letter grades. A typical entry on a transcript might then take the form:

Index code	Course title	Student grade	Course mean	Number of students
01:160:127	Impact of Chemistry	B+ (3.5)	3.1	73

In this example the transcript shows that the student received an above-average grade in a medium-sized class. The letter grade is shown because this is current practice. For ease of interpretation, we would prefer that numerical student grades be added as has been done parenthetically in our example. If the transcript were to be presented without the conversion, then a chart converting letters to numbers would be required. Standard deviations of the mean or a percentile corresponding to the student's grade could also be given, but here we run the risk of overkill.

Our proposal would add substantive, useful information to the transcript at virtually no administrative cost. It would help Rutgers undergraduates by giving them more complete feedback regarding their performance, and by making it easier for external readers to recognize outstanding performance, particularly in courses or disciplines where average grades are low. Implementation of this proposal would be relatively easy because all the information required is already available electronically to the registrar.

Although aggregated grades have been stable at Rutgers, New Brunswick for some years (see attached table), we believe that our proposal would help mitigate any future grade inflation or deflation. As a final note, we believe that the proposed method for recording grades will express to the larger public Rutgers' commitment to fair and informative student assessment.

Aggregated Mean Undergraduate Student Grades at Rutgers, New Brunswick for the Fall 1993, 1998, and 2003 Semesters*.				
Fall Year	Course Level	Mean	N	Std. Deviation
1993	100 level	3.264	5,297	0.936987
	200 level	3.133	7,111	0.937706
	300 level	3.040	5,637	1.004200
	Total	3.142	18,045	0.962675
1998	100 level	3.126	6,853	1.018335
	200 level	3.184	7,021	0.976654
	300 level	3.131	5,730	0.976115
	Total	3.148	19,604	0.991576
2003	100 level	3.285	4,945	0.958908
	200 level	3.166	6,623	1.000746
	300 level	3.142	7,566	0.996955
	Total	3.187	19,134	0.990278
Total	100 level	3.215	17,095	0.979242
	200 level	3.161	20,755	0.971529
	300 level	3.108	18,933	0.993815
	Total	3.159	56,783	0.982227
*Data provided by the Office of Institutional Research.				