

Marks Guidelines and Review Processes

Tricampus Deans Committee
for the Arts and Science Divisions, University of Toronto

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Discussions on undergraduate grading practices, marks distributions, and grade review practices have been underway in the Tricampus Deans Committee for more than two years. Many sources have informed our discussion, including grade data within and across the three arts and science divisions, data concerning applications to our medical school, informal discussion with our law school, and a comparative report on grading policies and practices at a number of Canadian and US institutions prepared at our request by the Office of Teaching Advancement (OTA). Our discussions have led us to believe that changes to our marks distribution guidelines and to our marks review processes could help us better achieve our goals of fair, consistent and thoughtful grading practices that better fit with the high caliber of the students admitted to our divisions.

First, there is consensus that we need to be much clearer that our expectations about marks distributions in the guidelines are not requirements. Rather, they are intended to serve as a guide for faculty members so that we can maintain overall consistency and fairness in grading. The guidelines are aimed at courses with more than 30 students at the 100- to 300-level (FAS and UTM) and A- or B-level (UTSC). Currently, many instructors interpret the guidelines as imposing on such courses a requirement on distributions that the instructor must meet in any but highly exceptional circumstances (which they must justify with a memo). In this context, it is interesting to note that OTA's investigations revealed only two other universities in Canada (out of 15; UBC [Faculty of Arts] and Alberta), and none in the US (out of 9), that have (publically accessible, at least) institutional/divisional marks distribution guidelines. The language in the documents from both UBC and Alberta states that these distributions are provided to encourage consistency and thoughtfulness in grading; neither discusses a need for justifying marks outside the given range. Our policy, and our accompanying practice of requiring a written explanation of marks outside the stated expectations, is therefore highly unusual.

Second, we recognize that our current guidelines concerning the extremes of the scale (number of As and number of Fs) do not acknowledge the high caliber and ability of our students. The expected percentage of As is too low, and the tolerated maximum percentage of Fs is too high. We considered Alberta's expectation of ~20% As in first year courses and ~25% As in second year courses, with percentages rising a further 5-7 percentage points in each of years three and four, to be a reasonable expectation for our courses. However, our currently stated expectation of 5% to 25% As does not reflect this assessment, since it flags anything higher than 25%, but considers only 5% or 10% As to

be unworthy of attention. Moreover, in FAS and UTM, the expectation applies to 300-level courses and not just those in first and second year. We further agree that an expected maximum of 20% Fs is too high, as a course failure rate of more than 10% is surely a cause for concern.

Third, we agreed that while some simple changes to our published marks distributions guidelines would be helpful, they would be unlikely to have a very profound effect in ensuring consistency and fairness in grading. In addition, procedures and practices are needed that will encourage the academic leadership in each unit to explicitly monitor grading practices within a unit, discuss general trends over time, and identify consistent outliers. Individual courses have variation in any given year. Rather than expecting individual instructors to conform to particular ranges in each and every course, effective oversight can instead focus on how well the intended practice is matching results over the population of courses. This can be achieved by monitoring grading patterns over time within a single course, and over comparable courses in a unit, to determine whether there are courses or instructors that are consistently outside the norm of unit or divisional practice.

Finally, we recognized that the divisions would benefit from improved mentoring of faculty and also from written best practices to guide colleagues in grading. Some of these best practices will include better advice to students on how to interpret their marks and how to use their marks to help inform their academic choices.

The following practices are intended to respond to the issues raised above.

Course Marks Guidelines and Review Process

In order for grades to serve their purpose as an effective assessment of student learning, they must be assigned in a manner that is thoughtful and fair, and that reflects consistent standards across the division. A shared interpretation of grading standards is reflected to some degree in similar distributions of marks across comparable courses. While some variation in the distribution of marks across individual courses is inevitable, experience shows that marks generally fall into reasonably consistent ranges. A review process that monitors those ranges across courses within a unit, and within a course over time, can help to ensure consistency in grade interpretation across instructors and courses within an academic unit, and across the division as a whole. The goals of the following guidelines and monitoring processes are (1) to encourage instructors to consider explicitly whether the marks they assign are serving their purpose as fair and consistent assessments of student learning, (2) to encourage academic unit heads to take a thoughtful and intentional approach to marks approval, and (3) to provide unit heads with the information to support a marks review process that will inform the unit's long-term practice.

Guidelines

Review and monitoring of grade distributions is most effective if we are explicit about our expectations for those distributions. Such expectations can inform faculty as they

fine-tune their assessment mechanisms to support a grading standard that reflects both the quality of our degrees and the high caliber of our students. We are particularly concerned with the number of As and number of Fs. For a larger first- or second-year course, the proportion of As in any given offering of the course might reasonably vary from 15% to 35%. Courses with marks consistently at the lower or upper end of this range should be reviewed to determine whether changes are needed to the course content, prerequisites, or assessment mechanisms. At the other end of the scale, the proportion of Fs in a first- or second-year course should generally not exceed 10%.

These guidelines can help instructors gauge the fairness and consistency of their proposed marks in a course. Instructors proposing a percentage of As outside the range of 15-35% in first- and second-year courses should review the marks to ensure that the assessments used in the course were fair and consistent with disciplinary practice. Similarly, instructors proposing a percentage of Fs greater than 10% should consider those grades carefully. An individual instructor should reflect on whether the assessments have been scaled appropriately. A unit head seeing a consistently higher percentage of Fs in a course over time might conclude that the course has inappropriate prerequisites or requires some restructuring, or that additional student supports need to be put into place.

Since courses with fewer than 40 students, as well as courses in upper years, show much greater variation due to individual factors, detailed expectations of distributions of grades are less useful. However, we can state some general guidelines on third- and fourth-year courses. Specifically, we expect student marks in upper year courses to shift towards the higher end of the scale (with more As and many fewer failures) as students adjust to university-level work and as they pursue courses in their chosen areas of interest. Distributions with 30-40% As (or even more) would not be unusual in 300- and 400-level courses (FAS and UTM) and C- and D-level courses (UTSC), while even 5-10% Fs at these levels would be worthy of attention.

Monitoring Process

To assist faculty members and unit heads maintain consistent and fair grades over time, we are adopting the following monitoring mechanism. In each division the Dean's Office will maintain a database of the grade distributions of all courses, going back at least five years. At the beginning of the academic year, each academic unit will receive these tables for all of its courses. Each table will include the historical or expected distribution for each course; it should also be possible to view the data organized by instructor. The unit's undergraduate committee, curriculum committee or some other group, chaired by the unit head or his/her designate, will annually review the marks distributions for all its courses. The committee will give explicit consideration to courses whose marks distributions consistently fall at the extremes or outside of the expectations stated above. The committee will also review the overall distribution of marks to assess whether patterns across comparable courses, and across instructors, are appropriate and consistent over time. If the committee decides that there are anomalies in the distributions, then the chair will discuss these with the relevant instructors.

The marks tables and the annual marks review will also serve as important sources of information to unit heads when they approve the final grades in a course each term. We will further support this activity by instituting processes to flag courses whose marks distributions fall outside the expected ranges, as these should receive appropriate attention from the unit head. Units may also flag other situations as worthy of particular scrutiny. Unit heads may pursue explanations from individual instructors in cases that seem to warrant inquiry. We will not require a letter justifying marks outside the expected distributions, but will explain to instructors the expectations and the monitoring mechanism in order to raise awareness and to encourage best practices.

In addition to the overall impact on fairness and consistency of grading, the marks review process can potentially lead to a number of improvements in pedagogical practice, such as the adjustment of course prerequisites and content, addition of targeted student supports in courses, and communication of best practices in grading. A best practices document can be a key element in new faculty orientation and ongoing faculty mentoring in the area of teaching, as well as in training of TAs through the Teaching Assistants' Training Program (TATP). The marks review process can also inform our student advising procedures and support mechanisms by identifying courses where students consistently struggle despite appropriate prerequisite structures.

Marking culture in an institution, or even an individual academic unit, is one of the most difficult, most intangible elements for a new faculty member to grasp. We believe that relevant information, explicitly-written best practices, better guidelines, and a more useful approval process will help everyone achieve fairness and consistency in marking over time.