Throughout the education system, the ethics of grading continues to be a highly controversial issue; however, grading is an integral component of nearly all educational institutions, including the University of Illinois. Even though there are numerous situations that ignite questions about the ethicality of the grading process, the University of Illinois will undoubtedly continue to utilize grades as a measurement to gauge a student’s skills and abilities. In order to explore all perspectives of this predicament, research on the many facets of grading was conducted along with numerous student surveys and interviews of University.

**The Purpose of Grades**

The process of assigning grades – or merely judgments of aptitude – has assuredly been in existence as long as formal education, but has likely evolved most rapidly over the past century and a half with the development of higher education. According to an article by Richard Boyd, the preferred method of grading during the colonial days was an oral examination that required the college student to exhibit a “level of intellectual rigor and moral rectitude appropriate to the college graduate.” Both Yale and Harvard were among the first higher education institutions in the early years of America to set in place grading policies for their students as a way to make a distinction between levels of mastery. While the system started at Yale as a basic four-tiered system, Harvard borrowed the Yale system and gradually made the scale more elaborate. Other higher education institutions also continued to adopt and adapt the grading scales of other institutions, which eventually developed into the 100-point scale and later the associated letter grades that is widely used today (Boyd 2006).

Coincidentally, the necessity for an assessment of a student’s ability in a particular area was the reason for the development of grading procedures and is still thought to be the main purpose of grading today as well. Although the main objective of grading continues to be assessment, what is the purpose of this assessment? For instance, are students given grades as an assessment of their abilities as an opportunity
for self-improvement in unsatisfactory areas or a suitable way for other parties to easily quantify the amount and quality of the knowledge a student has without direct interaction? Both of these are true and common purposes of grading. The original purpose of grading set forth in colonial times was an evaluation for the purpose of student improvement, which lead to greater learning and expansion of the mind – the true underlying reason for the existence of education. However, grades are more commonly now looked upon as a measure of student aptitude for outside sources and less for their self-improvement nature. An excellent definition and synopsis of the purpose of grading was established by the Faculty Council at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill:

“Grading is the process of a teacher’s arriving at and recording a summarizing, symbolic remark on the academic performance of his or her students. Grading should express neither approval nor disapproval of students as persons. ...the purpose of a grading system is to give the teacher a regular way to transmit to students, and to other persons who may be concerned with the intellectual development of students, value judgments made by the teacher.” (“Grade Inflation” 2000).

This description clearly states that grades are just as much for students as they are for anyone with a vested interest in the “intellectual development” of the student (“Grade Inflation” 2000). While the inherent purpose of grades was the recognition of opportunities for increased learning for the sake of education, grading for the purpose of judgment has evolved to be the standard today. This could be due in large part to the number of different individuals and bodies that rely on grades to make informed judgments regarding students. In a book written by Sally Brown and Peter Knight, they specifically state eight different bodies that use grades including students, employers, university management, government agencies, and financing bodies (p. 13). As the use and emphasis of grades has evolved, so too has the purpose of grades.

When discussing the purpose of grading procedures, there are two key elements that are intrinsically related to the goals and purposes of grading: reliability and validity. According to Susan Brookhart, grades must be both meaningful and accurate
to truly be able to convey the information contained in their measurements to the appropriate audiences (p. 23). In order for grades to be assessed as fairly as possible, grades must be both valid and reliable. Similarly, these key elements of reliability and validity are often the scrutinized factors when students feel as though an “unfair grade” was assessed.

Reliability refers to the degree of accuracy in the grading procedures. More precisely, the measure of reliability interprets the consistency of a grade regardless of time of assessment, judge of assessment, and form of assessment (Brookhart p. 28). For instance, a student who takes a test in the afternoon should receive the exact same score as if he or she were given the same test earlier that morning. The apparent argument with this concept is the fact that the student who takes the later exam will be given more time in order to prepare for the later exam or will have the unethical opportunity to consult a person who has already taken the test as to the content covered. Because it is nearly impossible for all students in a class to take a test at the exact same time, one could assume that grades are never reliable across time. However, the possible advantages of postponed assessment and converse disadvantages to early assessment will naturally act to neutralize each other over the course of a student’s academic career. Reliability across time typically refers to a greater frame of time, such as comparing two different semesters or across years when discussing the phenomenon of grade inflation.

While time of assessment is occasionally out of the realm of control of a professor due to space constraints, the remaining facets of consistent assessment pertaining to judge and form can be controlled directly by the professor. For example, in order for a grade to be reliable, it must be able to be assessed by different judges who come to the same conclusive assessment about the level of achievement. This can become a challenge to manage when multiple instructors teach the same class with objective grading procedures, but escalates to nearly impossible with multiple instructors teaching the same class that utilizes subjective grading. Clearly, any and all instructors can come to
the same conclusions when grading a purely objective test such as a multiple choice exam. But, when multiple instructors are faced with using a subjective form of assessment like that of an essay, it is extremely difficult to have all judges making their conclusions on the same criteria in the same manner. Closely linked to the judges of assessment is the form of assessment, which can also vary in accordance with the preference of the judge or instructor. For an assessment to be as reliable as possible, a student should receive the same grade whether they are faced with a multiple choice, true-false, essay, or oral examination. In order to maximize the components of judge and form consistency and essentially reliability, clear communication between instructors of the same class and also between instructor and students has to be utilized. Both parties must completely understand the expectations and goals of the course in addition to the material covered during the class so that assessments can be given in a reliable manner across both judge and assessment form (Brookhart 23-33).

The second key attribute of grades is validity, a measurement of the extent to which a grade is meaningful and fitting for its purpose. In order for a grade to be meaningful, it must be able to correctly assess the achievement of the student in regard to the objectives of the course. Just as communication is important to ensuring the reliability of grades, it is also a key component of maximizing validity. It is imperative that the student understand what the learning goals of the course are and how their performance will be graded against these goals. In addition to effective communication as to what is going to be learned, it is also important that the assessments are representative of these learning goals. Brookhart provides the glaring example of how invalid a French test would be for a chemistry class. Clearly the previously mentioned assessment would be low in validity, but validity also becomes an issue when different instructors teach different sections of a course with seemingly the same learning goals and also same assessments across sections. However, if the instructor feels that the learning goals set forth are not the essential elements to be learned in this class, the
students may suffer by being assessed on material that is not consistent with the content they learned and thus lacking validity (Brookhart 23-25).

In addition to grades being used as an assessment tool, there are numerous less obvious effects from the use of grades in higher education. An online article written by Robert Honigman entitled “The Grading System” mentions that grades act as a sort of reward system for students that undermine the learning institution. The article contests that students are motivated only to receive a grade because of the intrinsic value this judgment holds for their future and not for the possible knowledge that is suggested by this level of assessment. In addition, grading serves as indirect way of instilling discipline to students. Because students know that their performance will be judged, the student then has the choice to sufficiently prepare for the evaluation or not. This sense and establishment of personal discipline is rather crucial to the development of young adults because of the dangerous combination of newly-gained independence and the plethora of self-destructing distractions that exist within the college environment (Honigman 1997).

**Grading Procedures**

Grading procedures serve as ethical guidelines to help professors distribute grades fairly to students. Grades have become an essential part of communicating to students their academic progress and a “standard measurement and reporting of student outcomes — their knowledge, skills, achievement or performance” (Assessing Learning in Australian Universities); however, various methods have been adopted throughout the education system resulting in a lack of uniformity of grade allocation. Solutions to this discrepancy have been attempted, but the ethics of grading still remain to be a controversy.

Most grading curriculums are designed with the intention to minimize subjectivity, and judging by the criteria of Australian Universities, the most affective syllabus are well-developed in terms of clearly stating specific student outcomes.
expected from the course. By clearly defining the goals and standards, students have a clear concept of how to structure their study habits and in the long run are more likely to have a more successful learning experience. Professors are recommended to construct their syllabus in a way that will encourage the student to progress their learning in that specific subject. There are several important concepts that must be taken into consideration when forming a course outline: purpose and values must be clearly identifiable to both the students and faculty, assessments should be validly representing the learning objectives of the course, and distribution of grades that are a fair representation of the level of learning. (Assessing Learning in Australian Universities)

Even though there are core outlines of how grade distribution should be utilized, professors react to each course differently.

Under the utilitarian perspective, each professor has to determine what grading procedure is best for each course. These professors can be categorized into two components; they would be identified as either a consequential grader or a deontological grader. A consequential grader focuses primarily on producing the most learning or good for most students rather it is directly or indirectly. Graders of this sort strive to encourage positive student behavior that will result in better outcomes. Dartmouth College exercises this strategy to increase its students’ chances for better job opportunities and admission to graduate schools. “Where consequential concerns it self with outcomes, deontology deals with morally acceptable acts regardless of consequences, which are most often thought of in terms of duty.” (Blanke, 136)

Deontology encourages teachers to follow a strict path for grading once it has been established and not base grades on students’ ability to produce the most learning; if the student’s actions are right to the minimal amount, it is still considered to be correct. Most teachers practice this method of grading by creating syllabi or course outlines because these documents clearly states the factors that influence the course grade. This
allows little flexibility for the professors to adjust grades that are not based on the measurement of learning, dedication, and organizational skills.

Even though the two grading types, consequential and deontological, vary in definition, they both specify their grading style by utilizing one of the three evaluating methods: Act-utilitarianism, General-utilitarianism, and Rule-utilitarianism. Practicing act-utilitarianism, a professor evaluates each student’s work on its own rather than comparing it to others. When assessing student’s work, a teacher must consider what impact the grade will have on the student’s actions.

“Assigning an A doesn't reflect the quality of work, but may pump the student’s ego. A grade of C promotes neither good nor evil, but leaves the student stuck in the middle. Finally, giving an F creates good by weeding out students not ready for college, but it may do harm if the student needs encouragement to advance.” (Blanke, 136)

This method has proven to be beneficial to the greatest number of students; however, general-utilitarianism is also a sound grading system which theorizes that something right for an individual is right for everyone under the same circumstances. The issue with this method is that it does not allow for any exceptions to the rule including extraneous factors which can have a significant affect on grades. The rule-utilitarianism allows for more flexibility because grades based on this method are given according to the compliance of the identified rules which can vary from measure of improvement to the fulfillment of the curriculum. This method encourages an individual to establish rules with the highest effectiveness which produces the best outcome. The purpose of the three utilitarianism theories is to focus on producing enough positive to outweigh the negative in terms of student progress.

Regardless of which strategy they adapt to, “instructors generally follow one of two ethical routes when grading”. (Blanke, 136) A teacher either plans to evaluate students’ performance by following specific pre-determined rules and objectives which allow for very little flexibility in change of the policy, or tends to each individual’s needs and distributes grades that yield the best student outcomes. (Blanke, 136) It may be
perceived as unethical to alter grades to benefit the students. While still remaining a controversy, professors continuously debate if it is fair to round a hardworking student’s grade from an 89.3% to a 90%, the typical minimum for an A. According to Nyenty Arrey, assistant professor of chemistry at Capital University, no professor should alter the grade of a student, no matter how much effort he or she puts forth. Arrey asserts that syllabi are created to eliminate the subjectivity of personal judgment, thus allowing the student to question the ethicality of the professor’s decision to deviate from the syllabi. Arrey goes on to argue that grades should measure the student’s understanding of the course material not the amount of hours put forth in studying. By rounding up his or her grade, the professor is giving the student a false representation of what the student actually achieved in that specific course. This course of action leads the student into having a false sense of an accomplishment which can have a negative effect not only in college but also real life (Epstein, Inside Higher Ed).

Whereas some professors vehemently oppose the policy of awarding effort in the assessment of grades, there are just as many professors who believe that effort should be a contributing factor. Kim Kenville, assistant professor of aviation at the University of North Dakota, argues that there should be some sense of flexibility in grades. She argues that it is not fair for students who work ten hours on a project and receive a B as opposed to those who work only one hour and get an A. The student who received a B then questions his or her intelligence resulting in a discouraging attitude. (Epstein, Inside Higher Ed) To avoid such conflicts, University of Illinois has constructed a flexible policy that allows for professors to create a curriculum that reduces subjectivity and benefit the students individually.

To promote uniformity in a course with different sections, the University recommends the head instructor to distribute the same handouts, lecture notes, and objectives to all the sections. The grading scheme for all these sections should also always be the same, and if a change is to be made, it must be implemented throughout
the various sections. If the grading task is more subjective, the head instructor is obligated to display past work to illustrate the quality associated with each grade level, giving the grader a standard to measure against. The University guidelines also prevent students from being subjected to “double jeopardy” by not allowing professors to grade on attendance. Class attendance is encouraged by the University and not graded only because by missing class, students’ grades suffer twice by doing poorly on their tests and assessments and being deducted for absences. Students are not the only ones to benefit from this University policy; even though professors are given rules to restrict their grading method, each instructor has the liberty to allocate the weight of students’ grades however they feel most appropriate. (UIUC Center for Teaching Excellence) For instance, an instructor of Writing across Media class allocates his grades in terms of 25% weighted towards weekly responses and exercises related to the readings, 50% is attributed to three multimedia productions, 10% is attributed to reading and active participation, and 15% is attributed to the completion of all assignments. The only issue with this liberating strategy is that each professor has a different outlook on what is a fair grading scheme thus taking us back to questioning the uniformity of grades.

UIUC Students’ Perspectives and Expectations

When the University develops grading criteria, it is almost indispensable to take students’ outlooks into account. Unfortunately, grading schemes are decidedly written and maintained according to what the faculty believes would work. Therefore, our group was determined to survey a representative sample of the University’s student body encompassing various majors and different departments, so as to gather primary data about grading as well as its greater framework and eventually gain insights from those valuable opinions. We surveyed forty six students in total.

Unfair Grades

Out of forty one students that responded to our survey question regarding unfair grades, twenty five of them, or 61%, feel that they have received an unfair grade while
39% said that they have never received an unfair grade during their years at the University. Many of those who feel cheated protested about how one instructor graded his or her paper differently than the others. One student mentioned that he also feels devalued “if a teacher sets percentage cutoffs” and his or her grade is “0.1 percent off” the next higher grade (Senior Engineering, 2006). Surprisingly, we discovered that a large portion of students voiced their unhappiness due to their professors’ or instructors’ carelessness and false remarks, and that seemed to give us the impression that they purposely intended to mislead the students. A freshman majoring in Journalism indicted his or her Mathematics teacher for never having announced and established an attendance policy, but downgraded his or her final grade due to infrequent rate of coming to class. Moreover, another student in Business Administration complained that he or she received immediate positive feedback for a presentation, but ended up receiving a much lower grade than previously expected. The complicated issue of ethics is also brought to the forefront when a junior of Political Science and Pre-Law major indicated that he or she “failed (his or her) Physics 201 class” despite the fact that “the teacher guaranteed a final grade of a C.”

One of the most important grading objectives is to represent students’ abilities and efforts accurately and reliably, which is undoubtedly represented by the evidence of our student surveys’ results. The two main purposes of grades that almost all students mentioned were to motivate and reflect student performance and comprehension of the material. When asked about the accuracy of grades as a quality representation of their abilities and efforts, 40% said that grades are an accurate indication while 18% said they were not and 16% are unsure of their accuracy.

Deriving a clear conclusion from the numerical facts of the previous two questions is somewhat confusing because we assume that those who feel they have received an unfair grade should perhaps feel that grades are not a fair representative of their skills or abilities. The result is skewed due to the high portion, or 61%, of the
students claimed that they have received an unfair grade before. However, on the other hand, only 18% of them deemed grades’ failure in fulfilling one of the two main purposes of grades, that is, to reflect their performances.

Another aspect regarding grade subjectivity can be contributed to professors who grade the class on a curve or to classes divided into various sections which are evaluated by different teaching assistants. Our survey results show that 93% of students have experienced getting a final grade based on a curve which means that students’ final grades are highly dependent on the performance of the rest of the class. This alarming proportion illustrates how student assessment can vary depending on factors other than their own abilities. Similarly, the same subjectivity can be seen in the situation regarding sections with different teaching assistants. “Some teaching assistants are much easier graders than others when grading writing assignments,” stated a sophomore majoring in International Business. A staggering 72% of surveyed students voiced discontent with the subjectivity of the multiple TA situation. However, approximately 22% believed that it is acceptable to have different teaching assistants grade the work of students in the same class. An Engineering student noted the practical point that “it seems a little far fetched to have one person grading everything.” Similarly, many of those holding this opinion are conscious that this issue is inevitable at a large University, thus it ought to be tolerable. From this data, it is clear that although having a class with multiple teaching assistants is inevitable, subjectivity can be managed by strictly enforcing the same basic guidelines given by the course director.

**Grade Inflation**

The resounding majority of the polled students expressed a definite concern in regard to grade inflation, a concern also shared by many professors. According to Wikipedia, grade inflation occurs when the same level of performance in a class achieves a higher grade than it would have at an earlier point in time. From analyzing thirty seven responses to our question regarding grade inflation in the survey, the students
who expressed approval of grade inflation generally did not provide a quality explanation to support their beliefs in comparison to those who disapproved. A junior in the College of Liberal Arts voiced his or her concern regarding this matter and said that “(grade inflation) gives students false assumptions or markers of their abilities.” Furthermore, a senior in Computer Science reasoned that grade inflation is “bad for the entire system, job economy/market, and is unfair to the previous students (who took that same class).” Out of thirty seven responses that we received, there is a comparable distribution of agreement and disagreement to the notion of grade inflation—33% supporting versus 41% opposing. The remaining 16% believe that the benefits and problems that grade inflation may bring forth are relative and hard to be predetermined.

UIUC Teachers’ Perspectives

In surveying a sample of instructors from both the Engineering and English departments, our research obtained the perspectives on grading criteria from two very different departments. Traditionally, Engineering is viewed as an exact science, where solutions are cut and dry, right or wrong; on the contrary, the English is a subject that is forced to employ a more subjective form of grading. Students and faculty alike are constantly faced with the struggle of communicating clearly the definition of a “good” paper. Written work is infinitely variable, and yet in the end every report is inevitably reduced to a perfectly imprecise score. Although both departments appear to be polar opposites in their grading methods, in reality both sets of faculty are faced with difficult decisions regarding their grading procedures and each have to handle these issues in their own individual yet careful way.

The survey administered (attached as Appendix A) started with a question pertaining directly to all instructors regardless of department, and yielded a point that held intrinsically true for all faculty members surveyed. When asked about the main purpose for giving grades, most instructors immediately responded that grades are given exclusively for the benefit of the students. Instructors said they use grades to
communicate a student’s progress and are not concerned whether grades reflect on their abilities as instructors or how the student will be viewed because of the grade. While students may see grades as a means to communicate to the outside world (shown through survey responses), instructors give these grades as an internal reflection rather than one for others to view. This shows a very important chasm between the expectations of faculty and students in communicating grades.

This great divide between students and faculty is one of the primary sources in a problem of “perceived inequity” of grades. Rather than a true problem, this is a false feeling of unequal grading felt by students due to a misinterpretation of an instructor’s goals. While students are at no fault for being concerned and wanting the highest grades possible, it is important for students to recognize that instructor’s give low grades for no other reason than as an indication of needed improvement. If all students viewed grades as nothing more than a tool for communication and a vehicle for improvement, there would be much less stress and a brighter outlook toward classes and grades.

In discussing the purpose of grades, the Engineering faculty articulated the interesting point that grades are a relative indication of a student’s progress. The idea of normalizing grades against the performance of the other students dictates the grading policy frequently used in many engineering departments where grades are given based strictly on relative performance rather than predetermined grade cutoffs. This strategy serves to keep grades intrinsically fair. In response to the survey question on grading procedures, a member of the Engineering faculty and experienced course director stated that this strategy takes pressure off of instructors by allowing student performance to dictate the grades. It can be difficult to write a truly flawless exam, and sometimes instructors can write a question that is too difficult or unintentionally ambiguous. Because all of the students had the opportunity to see the same lectures and have the same textbooks, if a question seems unfamiliar and the vast majority answers incorrectly
then the class will not be punished. Another professor employing a similar strategy took the point further in stating this procedure ensures consistent grading occurs across semesters as well. Instructors might possibly ask enough unfamiliar questions that the current grades would be negatively skewed to the point where using past cutoff levels would be inappropriate. Instead, the instructors allow students to nestle themselves into what the class performance dictates as the developing cutoff levels. This is a strategy becoming more and more popular, especially when grading in highly competitive environments (Pros and Cons).

Although this may seem like an ideally simple and fair grading strategy, it is still imperfect and full of many loopholes. The main strength is actually also the greatest flaw associated with this method. By allowing student achievement to dictate cutoffs, students are blind to these cutoff levels, which are inevitably left to the discretion of the instructor. This raises several key issues that must be addressed if this form of grading policy is to be used. Often times, students have no idea where they stand mid-semester because the meaning of a 50% on a test may earn a high “B” if the average was a 45%, while to another instructor an average score simply means a “C.” Conversely, a score of 50% is considered failing in the classical cutoff system (Pros and Cons). Scoring relative to a class average creates a murky picture for students. If the main purpose of grades is to communicate a need for improvement, the relative grading method can quickly serve to confuse students rather than make a need for improvement apparent. It is essential for instructors to constantly post class averages and statistics so that students have at least a minimal idea of where they rank at any given time. Furthermore, a difficulty arises in trying to ensure that various instructors view these percentiles in the same way. While one instructor may view an average score as a “B,” another instructor will view it as a “C,” leading to a discrepancy that can make one course section appear easier than another. This certainly is not fair to the students.
In response to these issues, the Engineering faculty interviewed mentioned that this is an actively discussed issue and that the department takes great care to ensure uniformity across semesters and sections. The course director and department head make sure that the overall grade distribution from semester to semester remains the same for a given class. Students will endlessly debate, exactly where the cutoff is made, and inevitably there will always be the one student on the fence whose grade could have gone in either direction. By no means is this a perfect system, but with the proper care and precautions it may be used effectively.

Although the Engineering professors spoke extensively about holding meetings to ensure uniformity across sections and between semesters, a professor in the English department actually lamented about how classes can frequently vary from semester to semester, especially in various equal level classes. This is surprising because grading in English is intrinsically more subjective, and should warrant even more care, not less. In fact it was admitted that this very class, BTW 250, has had problems in the past where some teaching assistants held significantly easier sections than others. What is more troubling is that this same professor also stated that there is little effort being made to improve this disparity. He simply said that first year instructors are scrutinized by many of their supervisors and their procedures are closely watched, but the integrity and uniformity of grades are loosely monitored – if at all – after the first year. This disparity is rather troubling, especially to English majors who in light of this discussion may have a valid argument in feeling that they received an unfair score simply because, “he doesn’t like me.” Indeed, this is a very troubling issue and one that needs immediate attention.

Another pertinent issue is the appropriateness and extent to which effort should be rewarded in the grading process. No unanimous figure or guideline has ever been set, but the responses from this particular interview question yielded some very unique results. In every instance, effort was incorporated into the determination of grades at
least in some minimal quantity and usually in the form of homework. An Engineering faculty member responded to grading homework as serving a dual purpose. Not only does it serve to reward students who put a lot of time into the work and ensure that it is correct, but it also forces students to focus on work. According to this professor, assigning a grade to homework forces students to at least look at the material and ensures that some extra time is spent with the course on their mind – even if they do choose to copy or do a sloppy job. In this way, homework rewards the effort, but also serves as a reminder. In the overall perspective of grading, no class had homework as a significant percentage of the overall grade, but more as a small boost. Homework was the only tangible incorporation of effort mentioned, but there is also a more subtle reward which is much harder to quantify. Several of the instructors interviewed said they were willing to boost a student’s grade by a plus/minus if the student had shown consistent effort. This is an altruistic system, but can ultimately cause speculation of favoritism. If two students have the same point total at the end, just because one tried harder does not mean that his performance was any better. But it does reflect a better attitude, something that is important both in academia and in the real world. If nothing more, this discussion proves that grades are not an exact science, but also is a valuable lesson to those who did not try their best if effort does in fact serve as a minimal equalizer in the students’ benefit.

The discussion of effort did lead to the topic of plus/minus grading and here is where effort plays perhaps the most significant role. As an overall grading procedure, plus/minus grading has been proven to reduce overall GPA by less than .06 points (some source). Plus/minus grades are awarded in a majority of classes at the university (although not all), and is the procedure for every class that members of this group are a part of. A resounding argument in favor of the use of plus/minus grading is that it is a more precise system, and there should be a way to distinguish between a high-end grade and a low-end grade. On the other hand this creates a far greater
number of cutoffs that instructors need to be able to justify and decide between. (Talk about this briefly for a bit, and finish by saying overall these cutoffs don’t make for a huge difference compared to regular A vs. B, but important thing is uniformity throughout department).

As mentioned before, the instructors all seemed to stress the complexity of assigning “fair” grades, and the certain level of flexibility required to handle any delicate situation in an appropriate fashion. Most of the instructors mentioned that their grading policy is affected by whether or not a class is a requirement or an elective. There was strong sentiment that required classes serve the purpose of acting as a barometer of specific necessary skills. In required classes, the overall grade distribution will inevitably be wider because students who do not like the course – or are doing poorly – must take it or switch majors entirely. There will also be students who take the class only looking to pass because it is required. This is contrary to the situation of an elective class where students choose to take the class, and generally demonstrate a level of increased interest and/or skill in the specified topics. In such classes, overall grade distribution will naturally be higher. A highly acclaimed professor in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department also brought up the unique point that he rarely awards a “D” or “F” in electives, not because he grades easier, but because students have the option to drop these classes and it is the responsibility of the instructor to warn students early in the semester if their grades are low. He makes sure they are aware at an early stage that there are alternatives, and passing the class will require a greatly increased level of performance on their part. Often times, his students either drop the course or decide to make the commitment to improve. In either case, this causes a rise in the level of grades and limits the number of lower end grades in these types of elective classes. Thus, a high distribution of students earning an “A” or “B” in elective classes is not necessarily a form of charity from the professor or an indicator of grade inflation.
Another determining factor in the amount of care the universities can put into grading procedures is limited by the type of university that the faculty works for. At the University of Illinois, the mission statement lists the university as research one. This simply means that producing research material is the number one priority of the faculty and student performance is the second priority. There are many benefits for students at a research one university, but unfortunately improved grading and increased care for student performance is not one of them. This is a simple fact that students must realize when enrolling in a research one school. The faculty does not have as much time to read papers as carefully, nor does their job stress the importance of getting students to excel to their best level through careful evaluation. Research one means just what it says, research is the number one priority.

Works Cited


