Introduction

On any given day at the University of Illinois, an observant person on the Quad can easily hear a smattering of student discussions about receiving an “unfair” grade or being “cheated” on an exam. Although students often perceive grades as "unfair," there is no perfect method that ensures both that all students will be content with their grades and that grades are serving their intrinsic purpose. Students and instructors often have dissimilar views of the ultimate purpose of grading, which contributes greatly to student feelings of grade bias and unfair evaluation. As a result, instructors must select the method that is most appropriate for the material and students to ensure that grades are assessed as fairly as possible for the given situation. Because certain situations lead themselves to greater debate on the fairness of grades, the University and professors should do what they can to ensure quality grading practices, which unfortunately does not always occur. Ultimately, communication between the instructor and students about the course objectives, standards for each level of achievement, and the grading policies is the key to eliminating misunderstandings and subsequent feelings of unfair evaluation. In order to explore all perspectives of this predicament, we conducted research on several facets of grading along with numerous student surveys and interviews of University instructors.

The Purpose of Grades

The process of assigning grades – or merely judgments of aptitude – has long been a necessary part of formal education. According to an article by Richard Boyd, the preferred method of grading during the American colonial period 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). As the realm of higher education was evolving, educators were also forced to change their methods of evaluation in order to better fit these new conditions.

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. Although the main objective of grading continues to be assessment, what is the purpose of this assessment? Our group questions, “Are students given grades as an assessment of their abilities as an opportunity for self-improvement in unsatisfactory areas? Or have grades evolved into 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 America was an evaluation for the purpose of student improvement, which led to greater learning and expansion of the mind – the underlying philosophical reason for the existence of education. However, our group believes that grades are more commonly now looked upon as a measure of student aptitude for outside sources and less for their self-improvement purpose. 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, our group suggests that 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 importance placed on grades has evolved, so too has the purpose of grades.

In addition to grades being used as an assessment tool, there are numerous less obvious effects of 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 asserts 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 an indirect way of instilling discipline in students. Because students know that their performance will be judged, students then have 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).
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, we found that these key elements of reliability and validity are often the scrutinized factors when students feel as though an “unfair grade” was assessed.

Reliability

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 that we found 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 perfectly reliable across time. Reliability is typically a greater concern over a longer period of time, such as comparing two different semesters or across years like when discussing the phenomenon of grade inflation.

While our group realizes 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 and should 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 (Brookhart 28). 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. While we understand the difficulties involved with situations of this nature, reliability
can be accomplished with the appropriate communication and coordinating activities among
instructors.

Closely linked to the judge of assessment factor is the form of assessment factor, 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 in theory receive the same grade whether they are
faced with a multiple choice, true-false, essay, or oral examination (Brookhart 28). Just as
communication is used to enhance the other components of reliability, clear communication
between instructors of the same class and also between instructor and students has to be utilized
in order to maximize the component of form consistency and essentially reliability. Both
instructor and student 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.

Validity

The second key attribute of grading 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 (Brookhart 23-24). Just as communication is important to ensuring the reliability of grades, it is essential in 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 (p. 23). Clearly the previously mentioned assessment would be low in validity, but our group has experienced validity issues when different instructors teach different sections of a course with seemingly the same learning goals and assessments across sections. If an instructor feels that the learning goals set forth are not the essential elements to be learned in their class, their students may suffer by being assessed on material that is not consistent with the content they learned, thus lacking validity. In addition, our group recognizes that issues regarding validity can arise when students and instructors have conflicting views on the purpose of grades: a communication tool used for improvement versus an emphasized rating system used to judge aptitude and ability.

Effective communication was noted as an important tool in maximizing both the reliability and validity of grades. Unfortunately, we realize that effective communication is not always so simple to achieve in the real world of academia. There are a multitude of extraneous factors that can interfere with the lines of communication among instructors or between instructors and students and essentially complicate the process of grading. Because ideal conditions seldom occur in the dynamic world of higher education, misunderstandings and perceptions of unfair evaluation can occur.
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 2002); 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 controversial.

Under the utilitarian perspective, each professor has to determine what grading procedure is best for each course. Dartmouth University categorizes its professors as either consequential graders or deontological graders. A consequential grader focuses primarily on producing the most learning or good for the most students whether 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 itself 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 state 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.
Regardless of which strategy they adapt to, “instructors generally follow one of two ethical routes when grading” (Blanke, 136). It may be perceived as unethical to alter grades to benefit the students; 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 grading scales 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 2006).

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 discouraged attitude (Epstein 2006). While our group believes effort should be taken into account when grades are assessed, we feel that this should only represent a small percentage of the total grade. We understand that students inherently have different levels of ability and therefore some will inevitably need to put more time into their work than others.
Because of this fact, we believe that the greatest portion of the grade should be based on the finished product and with marginal consideration given to the amount of time or effort put in.

In order to prevent students from being disheartened by bad grades, a graduate student who is currently an instructor for a Business and Technical Writing course suggested that professors should not enable students by distributing false grades but give students a second chance without any penalty. Most grading curricula should be designed with the intention of minimizing subjectivity; one of the ways this can be done is by allowing students to rewrite their previous draft with a better understanding of the assignment objectives and with instructor feedback on the first draft. This course of action will also encourage the students to progress their learning in that specific subject. This is an ideal method for English courses to adapt to the students’ needs and making the achievement of course goals more feasible; however, 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 indispensable to take students’ outlooks into account. Unfortunately, grading schemes are decidedly written and maintained according to what the faculty believes will work. Therefore, our group decided to survey a representative sample of the University’s student body encompassing various majors and different departments in order to collect feedback from those directly affected by grading. In doing so, we were able to gather primary data about the grading that takes place at the University of Illinois, as well as gain insight from student opinions (See Appendix A). We surveyed a total of 46 students, including freshmen through seniors and representing a wide variety of programs of five different colleges.
Unfair Grades

Out of 41 students that responded to our survey question regarding unfair grades, 25 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. While this number represents a clear majority of students, our group actually thought that more students would have memories of receiving an “unfair” grade. Although we feel this lower than expected number is a testament to the effort of instructors to ensure fair grades, the overall percentage of unsatisfied students still leaves substantial room for improvement.

Many of those who feel “cheated” protested about how one instructor graded their work differently than the others. In another instance, a senior Engineering student mentioned that they feel devalued “if a teacher sets percentage cutoffs” and his or her grade is “0.1 percent off” the next higher grade (Personal Communication 4/18/06). Furthermore, a freshman majoring in Journalism was aggravated that their Mathematics instructor never announced or established an attendance policy, but later downgraded their final grade due to frequent absences. The complicated issue of ethics is also brought to the forefront when a junior of Political Science and Pre-Law major indicated that they “failed [his or her] Physics 201 class” despite the fact that “the teacher guaranteed a final grade of a ‘C’” (Personal Communication 4/18/06). We took great care not to over generalize or alter the statements made by students in anyway because the feedback that students provided represented their candid opinions. Not only are the examples stated above valid complaints, it is important to comment on the way students voiced their examples. In these instances the students’ wording gave the impression that the instructor intentionally slighted their grade with no justifiable reason. We do not suspect any malicious intent by the faculty, but rather the lack of proper communication and understanding served to
alienate the students and incite their displeasure. Nearly all of these examples could have been avoided or the severity reduced had the proper amount of communication and cooperation taken place between the faculty and students.

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 their efforts and reflect student performance for both internal and external sources. When asked about the accuracy of grades as a quality representation of their abilities and efforts, 51% said that grades were an accurate indication, while 22% said they were not accurate and 27% were unsure of their accuracy.

Deriving a clear conclusion from the numerical facts of the previous two questions is somewhat difficult because we assume that those who feel they have received an unfair grade at least would 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 22% of them deemed grades’ failure in reflecting their academic performances and efforts. Our group is aware of the inconsistency between their disclosures. For that reason, we are getting the idea of students’ natural desire to attain high grades, but at the same time accept the reality that they deserve the grades they are getting.

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, and subsequently reveals to us the importance of communication between instructors and students regarding the definition of fair grading distribution. 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 (Personal Communication 4/18/06). A staggering 72% of surveyed students voiced discontent with the subjectivity of the multiple teaching assistants grading coordination. 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” (Personal Communication 4/18/06). Similarly, many of those holding this opinion are conscious that this issue is inevitable at a large University, thus it ought to be tolerated. From this data, we believe 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 (Grade Inflation 2006). From analyzing 37 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 their 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]” (Personal Communication 4/18/06). Out of 37 responses that we received, there is a comparable distribution of agreement and disagreement to the phenomenon of grade inflation—38% supporting versus 40% opposing. The remaining 22% believe that the benefits and problems that grade inflation may bring forth are relative and hard to be predetermined.

As a group, we understand that inevitably grade inflation can produce negative consequences in the long run. Conversely, we cannot deny or blame the students’ natural desires for wanting to get the highest grade they are capable of or would like. In light of this, it is important for students to keep in mind the ultimate purpose of grades is to accurately reflect performance, and many students lost sight of this in their support for grade inflation.

**UIUC Teachers’ Perspectives**

By interviewing 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, 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 converted to a grade. 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 interviews administered (See Appendix B) started with a question pertaining directly to all instructors regardless of department, and yielded a point that held intrinsically true for all faculty members interviewed. 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 (Personal Communications 4/16-4/20/2006). While students may see grades as a means to communicate to the outside world, instructors give these grades as an internal reflection rather than one for others to view. This shows a very important difference between the perceptions of faculty and students about the purpose of 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 not at fault for being concerned and wanting the highest grades possible, it is important for students to recognize that instructors give low grades for no reason other 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 members 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 interview 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” (Personal Communication 4/18/06). This point can be extended to show how 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 2001).

All of this data indicates the growing trend toward grading on some form of curve. This seems to be a natural evolution in the grading procedure, and is consistent with the instructors’ goal of communicating relative performance. It is important to note that despite this, the main strength can also be the greatest flaw associated with this method. By allowing student achievement to dictate cutoffs, students are blind to these cutoff levels. 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 2001). Scoring relative to a class average creates a murky picture for students. A student
could conceivably be in multiple classes grading relatively on separate unique curves. This is inherently necessary, because “each class has its own unique goals and purposes,” (Personal Communication 4/16/2006). 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. This is not to say that the method is bad, but it is a perfect demonstration of the necessity of an instructor to clearly communicate and ensure that the goals of their grading procedure are understood by 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 (Personal Communication 4/19/06). 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 said that such communication does not occur within the Department and actually lamented that classes do frequently vary from semester to semester (Personal Communication 4/19/2006). This is surprising because one would argue grading in English is intrinsically more subjective, and should warrant more communication, not less. In fact, the same professor admitted that this very class, BTW 250, has had problems in the past where some teaching assistants held significantly easier sections than others. Even 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 (Personal
Communication 4/19/2006). This disparity is rather troubling, especially to students in English
classes 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.

In light of these situations, the University does make an attempt at instituting a system of
checks and balances, by allowing students to protest grades informally via ICES forms or more
formally through the Ombuds Office (Conflict Resolution 2006). Unfortunately, it is generally
agreed that the ICES forms are a very general form of feedback, and the results are only helpful
“after the fact.” Additionally, the Ombuds Office is relatively unknown, and we had no idea of
its presence until some significant research was done. As grading procedures become
exceedingly complex to accommodate the subtle differences between courses, it is important that
the University stresses a strong system of checks and balances of which students can be an active
participant.

Another pertinent issue is the appropriateness and extent to which effort should be
rewarded in the grading process. A unanimous figure or guideline has never 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 (Personal Communication 4/16/2006). In this way, homework rewards the effort, but also serves as a reminder. This sentiment was mimicked by a member of the English faculty stating, “Participation suggests engagement, and ensures a level of thinking about the course” (Personal Communication 4/20/2006). 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 that 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 their performance was any better. On the other hand, it does reflect a better attitude, something that is important both in academia and in the real world. Effort teaches 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.

Amidst this discussion, it is very important to note an interesting point acknowledged simultaneously by one of the Engineering and English professors in regard to the need to grade differently based on the class level and especially the department. The Engineering professor went even farther in stating that “intrinsically different science should employ different grading schemes” (Personal Communication 4/19/2006). It makes sense that a lower level course should be graded more stringently to “weed-out” students. In these courses grading heavily based on effort makes sense, because those who show topical interest are more likely to succeed.
Furthermore, different departments have unique goals and methods for grading students. Engineering and English are different sciences, and in turn should show differences in grading procedure. It may be possible for a lower level Engineering class to have preconceived grade cutoffs because these classes simply check for a fundamental understanding of a certain percentage of concepts. On the other hand, such a simple system may not work in any level of English because it can be hard to quantify performance before some initial work is demonstrated. The awareness of these differences and conscious effort to eliminate weaknesses is the important key for any department.

The discussion of effort did lead to the topic of plus/minus grading, the area 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 (Final Report 2005). Plus/minus grades are awarded in a majority of classes at the University and are used for all of the classes that members of this group are taking. 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. Despite this, there is a very minimal impact on overall grades over time. Instead, professors are able to have more precise control, and in turn this makes plus/minus grades a stronger system. The most important idea is that all courses within any given department prescribe to the same method, either a plus/minus or regular grading system. As long as this uniformity exists, the plus/minus system serves as an effective system.

As aforementioned, 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 tighter. 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 his grading methods are more lenient, but because students have the option to drop these classes. He stated it is “the responsibility of the instructor to warn students early in the semester if their grades are low” (Personal Communication 4/16/2006). 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.

**Conclusion**

When beginning our research on “unfair” grading here at the University of Illinois, our group had the strong inclination that an overwhelming majority of students were unhappy with the grading procedures of the University. After conducting our research and further investigating
this, we found that our inclination about the overall student sentiment was not as accurate as we had thought. While our research showed that 61% of students felt that they had received an “unfair” grade during academic career here at the University, we thought this would have been an even greater percentage. Similarly, our student surveys indicated that 51% of students believe that their grades are an accurate representation of their abilities. Both of these statistics indicate that there is a larger than expected fraction of satisfied students, and further serve as a testament to the efforts of the University to use effective and fair procedures. Furthermore, many students accept that the system is not perfect and problems are bound to occur. Nevertheless, there remains a significant portion of students who remain unsatisfied. Through our research we have come to conclude that in a majority of instances dissatisfaction is directly related to some form of miscommunication on either the student or instructor’s behalf. We believe that it is the responsibility of the instructors and department heads to thoroughly communicate the goals of each course and also consistent means of judging coursework. Conversely, the diligent student has the responsibility to question the instructor until the goals and grading methods are clearly understood. Although grading may appear to be only the instructor’s responsibility, our research has demonstrated that “fair” grading is a two way street where all parties affected are responsible to work together to attain the maximum result of fair grading.
Works Cited


Appendix A

Student Survey

Year:
College:
Major:

1) What do you think is a fair distribution of final class grades and why?

2) Have you ever had a professor who graded the class on a curve?

3) Is it fair to have different TA’s grade work of students in the same class? Why?

4) Have you ever received an unfair grade? If so, what was it and for what class? What made it seem unfair? Please be specific as possible.

5) Do you think your grades fairly represent your abilities and efforts? Why?

6) How can professors increase the uniformity of grades throughout different classes?

7) If student effort is incorporated into student grade, how? And how heavily? Do you agree and briefly explain why?

8) Do you prefer open-ended tests (written tests which allow for partial credit) or multiple choice tests?

9) Do you think grade inflation is beneficial to students or how might it affect students? “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”1

10) What do you think is the main purpose of grades?

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1 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grade_inflation
Appendix B

Interview Questions

Name:
Department:
Class:

1) What do you think is the main purpose of grades?

2) What do you think is a fair distribution of final class grades and why?

3) Do you engage in curving class grades? If so, how?

4) Could you tell me about your grading policy? Do you have a syllabus I can have? What are your actions toward keeping grades uniform across different discussion sections with different TAs and across semesters?

5) Does the department provide any guidelines for ensuring fair grades? How so?

6) How are final grades weighted?

7) If student effort is incorporated into student grade, how? And how heavily? What is the rationale for this?

8) How does grade inflation affect students?

9) Are your tests primarily essay format/short answer or multiple choice questions? If essay format/short answer, than how is partial credit uniformly assigned?

10) Do you feel as though the university’s grading criteria need improvement? If so, what might be some way to ensure uniformity amongst classes?