



**University Senate  
PROPOSAL FORM**

<b>Name:</b>	Jamison Kantor
<b>Date:</b>	8/8/10
<b>Title of Proposal:</b>	Reform to policy III-6.00(A): UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND POLICIES CONCERNING ACADEMIC TRANSCRIPTS AND CALCULATION OF GRADE POINT AVERAGE
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<b>Constituency (faculty, staff, undergraduate, graduate):</b>	Graduate Student – Doctoral Candidate
<b>Description of issue/concern/policy in question:</b>	Fairness of flat-grade GPA calculations. Pernicious academic culture created by such calculations. See supporting material.
<b>Description of action/changes you would like to see implemented and why:</b>	Implementation of a more nuanced calculations (taking account of “+” and “-” reflected in 1/3 point increments). Would be more accurate and fair, and could promote a healthier academic environment. See supporting material.
<b>Suggestions for how your proposal could be put into practice:</b>	Simply revise the policy to calculate student’s grade accounting for 1/3 point increments. The calculation method is widely practiced. See supporting material.

<b>Additional Information:</b>	If possible, would love to discuss this issue at a University Senate hearing.
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***Please send your completed form and any supporting documents to [senate-admin@umd.edu](mailto:senate-admin@umd.edu) or University of Maryland Senate Office, 1100 Marie Mount Hall, College Park, MD 20742-7541. Thank you!***

Proposal to Reform Policy

III-6.00(A): UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND POLICIES CONCERNING ACADEMIC  
TRANSCRIPTS AND CALCULATION OF GRADE POINT AVERAGE

APPROVED BY THE PRESIDENT 1 AUGUST 1991; updated June 8, 2001. Effective Fall  
2001; amended April 14, 2010

I. Policy

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Credits completed with grades of A+, A, A!, B+, B, B!, C+, C, C!, D+, D, D! and F, but not P and S, shall be used in computation of the semester and cumulative GPA with values of 4.00 (A+,A,A-), 3.00 (B+,B,B-!), 2.00(C+,C,C-!), 1.00 (D+,D,D-!) and 0.00 respectively. A grade of XF shall be computed in the same manner as a grade of F. Marks of I, P, S, W and NGR will not be used in the computation of semester and cumulative GPA.

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The University of Maryland at College Park has implemented many transcript methods that fairly account for student performance in the classroom. For instance, the recent adoption of the “XF” grade has allowed faculty to firmly censure academic dishonesty, whereas a single-sanction policy can often be ruthless or discordant with the offense. The University has also given first-year students one opportunity to erase a bad grade from their transcripts. I would argue that this policy does less to encourage apathy, than it does to retain potentially good students who simply need a wake-up call to prioritize their studies. Both of these policies strike a delicate balance between fairly accounting for student lapses, and allowing these students an opportunity to learn from these lapses in-house.

However, the University’s flat-grading implemented on GPA calculations—where an “A+, A, and A-” gets “4.0,” a “B+, B, B-” gets “3.0,” and so on—is a transcript policy that is in serious need of revision.

To begin, the policy is clunky. It fails to account for major differences between “+” work and “-” work. And there are undeniable qualitative distinctions between “89” work “80” work. Oftentimes that difference is a mark of sustained effort and engagement. The student who begins with an 80 gains that 89 by focusing more deeply on the material, and by raising her effort throughout the semester. But short-term, the policy levels all students into a single evaluative category that erases growing competence in a subject. The opposite is also true. For instance, a student whose continued participation lapses in a discussion section results in a drop from an 87 to an 80, needs to be assigned an accurate measure of these lapses. It might be unsavory to say, but grades must also be coercive.

However, one could argue that long-term, the flat-grade policy produces negligible differences to a policy accounting for the “+” and “-”. Over time, the 90 with which I squeaked by makes up for the 89 that fell just short. Additionally, GPA’s are often recalculated by other post-graduate institutions, which use their own rules to measure candidate’s undergraduate performance. Thus,

short-term discrepancies seem to be mitigated by long-term results. We must only clearly inform our students of this fact to ensure them that their GPA is an accurate aggregate of their performance. And yet, these claims—the arithmetic defense of a flat-grading system—are easily countered by the pernicious academic culture created by such a system.

Flat-grading undoubtedly promotes a culture of “extrinsic rewards,” where students are more fixated on achieving a number (sometimes by any means necessary), than by internalizing course material. A flat-grading system encourages this fixation by giving students an all-or-nothing mentality: those on the cusp of a better grade will obsessively attempt to achieve it, those in the middle of a solid grade are perfectly content to rest there. Thus, grades begin to feel like peaks to be conquered or camped upon, not precise scales of evaluation. Beyond the detrimental extrinsic-focus it encourages in the student, flat grading undoubtedly leads to an increased practice of “grade-grubbing,” where students pressure instructors and faculty to bump grades without adequate reason. Mostly, this results in the growth of benign, irritating emails. The majority of teachers respond professionally and equitably to each one. *But some will not.* Rather than deal with the hassle of inordinate complaints, a less dedicated teacher will assign requested grades rather than earned ones. Even a *more* dedicated teacher could fall prey to the system, feeling that a student’s 88 is far more deserving of 4.0 full GPA points than the modest 3.0 an 88 confers. Finally, if the flat-grade system can be seen to encourage an all-or-nothing mentality in students, then we can be sure that it also encourages academic dishonesty. The less scrupulous student who knows that even a slight edge on their average (1%) remunerates a bigger grade is much more likely to plagiarize, cheat, and generally forego academic honor. I should note that I do not believe that the system *causes* academic dishonesty, it simply makes it more appealing.

For goals both short-term (fair evaluation) and long term (promoting a healthy academic culture), the University of Maryland needs to adopt a more nuanced system of grading. As in many institutions, grades should reflect student performance by adding or subtracting third points based on the “+” or “-”. An A- would no longer be 4.0, but a 3.66. But a B+ would no longer be a 3.0 but a 3.33. This system favorably replicates a sliding scale of assessment, and avoids the peak-and-plateau culture promoted by flat-grades. Of course, the system would offer better evaluative accuracy and fairness. But it could also result in happier teachers, less dishonesty, and students more attuned to the content of their education than the “rewards” associated with it.