

## **Grading Process Task Force Annual Report to GMU Faculty Senate (2023-2024)**

### **April 2023**

**GPTF Members:** Seth Hudson (CVPA, co-chair), Elisabeth Epstein (COS, co-chair), Kenneth Strazzeri (CEC), John Leung (MK), Douglas Wilson (CEDH), Courtney Adams Wooten (CHSS), Elizabeth de Jonge (CPH), Alexandria Zylstra (CCB), Phil Martin (SCHAR), Alexandra Masterson (COS; representative of Academic Policies Committee), Zachary Adams (representative of GAPSA) Gabriel Curtis (representative of Student Senate), Laura W. Poms (representative of Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education), Pallavi Rai Gullo (representative of Associate Provost for Graduate Education), Breana Bayraktar (representative of Director of the Stearns Center), Doug McKenna (University Registrar)

The goal of this long-term project is 1) to consider the grading scheme used at George Mason University for graduate and undergraduate students and 2) to make a recommendation for future grading processes. The GPTF met approximately monthly, via Teams, and made progress on the first goal.

### **Initial findings on current use of Mason's grading scheme**

The GPTF found that clarification of how the current grade scheme is used is a necessary first step in assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of the current A+ to F grade scheme. It was noted in an early meeting of the Task Force that different academic units have differing uses of the grade scheme which might be reflected in different uses of certain letter grades.

To examine these impressions globally and quantifiability, Doug McKenna provided grade data (without student personal indicators) from all units between 2017-2023. Kenneth Strazzeri and Phil Martin analyzed this data and found meaningful differences between units with respect to the frequency of grades assigned, as well as similarities in the lack of use of some grades. Some grades were very rarely assigned or never assigned. For example, the grade of C- was only assigned to undergraduates in 1% of grades across campus. Comparing average grades at the college level, there is notable cross-college variation in average grades among undergraduates. The mean undergraduate grade on the 0-4 scale ranged from 2.92 (College of Science) to 3.60 (Health and Human Services). For graduates, there was less cross-college variation. The mean graduate grade ranged from 3.62 (Engineering and Computing) to 3.86 (College of Public Health). The compressed range of grades at the graduate level likely reflects in part the higher minimum passing

grade (B-) in many graduate programs. The most commonly-awarded grade was an A among both graduates (49%) and undergraduates (26%). Across nearly all colleges, the average undergraduate grades saw a notable rise in 2020 compared to other academic years. Post-2020, average grades University-wide returned to their pre-2020 levels.

To contextualize the use of the grade scheme by faculty, as well as both the communicative value of the scheme (both internally and externally), the GPTF formed a subcommittee to examine use of the current grade scheme through a qualitative lens. The data collection for the qualitative analysis will involve ‘listening sessions’ with faculty and current students. Members of the qualitative subcommittee have developed a plan for the listening session and developed a survey instrument that may also be used to gauge how faculty conceive of the communicative value of grades and current use of the existing scheme. This subcommittee also developed a Qualtrics form to gauge grading scales being used across courses at GMU.

### **Initial review of peer institutions**

The GPTF was charged to conduct a review of the grading schemes of peer institutions; 29 Cohort universities for George Mason University were chosen by SCHEV recommendations, in addition to those peer universities used by the George Mason COACHE Committee when analyzing faculty survey data (see Appendix 1). A majority (75-82%) of our cohorts assign letter grades of A, B, C, D, F including + and – schemas, however they do not assign A+ grades. An A letter is the highest grade used for a 4.0 GPA. Example: A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D+, D, D-, F. No cohort university assigns F- grades. 21-39% do not assign C- and D- grades, respectively. Alexandra Masterson and Doug McKenna contributed to this initial analysis of peer institutions.

### **Ongoing literature review**

The GPTF has initiated a literature review to better understand current research about grades and grading and the effects of grades and grading on students and instructors. We expect to use the literature to inform future recommendations as part of the final report.

### **Goals for the 2024-2025 academic year**

The GPTF plans on continuing our progress on both quantitative and qualitative analyses on how the current grade scheme is used. We plan on integrating student demographic

data into our grade analysis, as approval to obtain and use that data for this purpose was recently obtained by the Registrar's office. We will deploy the materials developed by the qualitative subcommittee to bring faculty perspectives into our assessment and to review grading scales in use across campus. We have recently formed a subcommittee to examine best practices and existing scholarship regarding grading schemes, and we anticipate that work will be highly informative as we formulate our recommendations about which grade scheme best fits the mission of George Mason University.

## **Appendix 1: Peer Institutions**

SCHEV Approved Peer Groups for George Mason University

Arizona State University at the Tempe Campus

Boston University

Florida State University

George Washington University

Michigan State University

New York University

North Carolina State University at Raleigh

Northeastern University

Rutgers University-New Brunswick/Piscataway

Stony Brook University

SUNY at Albany

Syracuse University

Temple University

University of Arizona

University of Connecticut

University of Florida

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

University of Kansas Main Campus  
University of Maryland-College Park  
University of Massachusetts-Amherst  
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities  
University of Nebraska at Lincoln  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill  
University of Southern California  
University of Washington-Seattle Campus

#### COACHE PEER GROUPS

North Carolina State University  
Texas Tech University  
University of Cincinnati  
Virginia Commonwealth University

## **Appendix 2: President and Provost Interactions with GPTF**

1. During the past calendar year has the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President (or their respective offices) announced initiatives or goals or acted upon issues that fall under the charge of your Committee? If so, was your Committee consulted by the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President in a timely manner before the announcement or action? If not, do you believe your Committee should have been consulted? Would it have been helpful to have had the input of your Committee from the outset?

- **No actions by these officials, nor their offices, have related to the work of the task force.**

2. Did your Committee seek information or input from the President, Provost, or Senior Vice President or members of their staffs? If so, did they respond adequately and in a timely manner?

- **No input was sought.**

3. Please suggest how you believe the President, Provost, Senior Vice President and/or their staffs might more effectively interact with your Committee in the future, if necessary.

- **No interactions are needed or requested at this time.**

4. Please relate any additional information you may have regarding interactions between your Committee and the President, Provost, Senior Vice President, or their staff.

- **The work of the GPTF does not require interactions with these individuals.**