




Review and Assessment of Grade Schemes used at George Mason University

Grading Process Task Force Final Report

February 2026



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The Grading Process Task Force convened in Fall 2023. The goals of this long-term project included the following: Goal 1) to assess the advantages and disadvantages of the grade scheme currently used at George Mason University for graduate and undergraduate students, Goal 2) to conduct a review of the grade schemes of peer institutions and the existing scholarship on the use of grade schemes, and Goal 3) to make a recommendation about which grade scheme best fits the mission of George Mason University.

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Executive Summary

Charge and Goals: The Grading Process Task Force was charged by the Faculty Senate to consider the grading scheme used at George Mason University for its undergraduate and graduate students and make a recommendation for our future grading processes. The task force assessed the advantages and disadvantages of the current A+ to F structure, including faculty perspectives and actual use of grades, conducted a review of peer institutions, best practices, and existing scholarship on grade schemes, and made recommendations on changes to the grading scheme to support the institution's mission.

Key Findings:

1. Analysis of the 1,801,024 final grades reported to the Registrar between 2017 and 2023 showed that the grade of C- was only assigned to undergraduates in 1% of grades across campus. Survey of instructional faculty were at odds with this measure, as 70% of 443 Mason faculty survey respondents reported that their department or program uses the C- grade. Only 17% reported that the C- is not used in their unit and 13% were unsure. Together, these observations raise the possibility that confusion exists on the use and purpose of the undergraduate C- grade.
2. Analysis of actual use of grades between 2017 and 2023 showed that the A grade was the most common grade among both graduates (49%) and undergraduates (26%). A- or higher was recorded in 73% of graduate grades and 48% of undergraduate grades. The high use of A grades is in keeping with national trends; A has been the most frequent grade assigned in US colleges and universities since at least 2009. Our examination of final grades at Mason showed significant cross-college variation in grade use at the undergraduate level. The mean undergraduate grade on the 0-4 scale ranged from 2.92 (College of Science) to 3.60 (Health and Human Services). This variation was not evident in graduate grades. Cross college grade variation is likewise in keeping with national trends.
3. Review of grade schemes from our peer institutions showed that most peers utilize a plus-minus grade scheme, with some variations at the undergraduate level with respect to the listing of A+, D+ and D- grades on grade schema. This suggests that addition or removal of a plus or minus grade at the extremes of the undergraduate grade scheme would not greatly impact the communicative value of undergraduate grades. Graduate grade schemes at our peer institutions showed more variation and caveats to trend interpretation. A Survey of Mason faculty suggested very little support in removing all plus and minus grades, but more openness to removal of A+ and/or C- undergraduate grades.
4. We observed that the special-circumstances grade scheme optionally available during the COVID-impacted terms was utilized more often by undergraduate students with lower average grades and that the terms where this scheme was available corresponded to a university-wide increase in average undergraduate grades. Average undergraduate grades generally returned to their pre-2020 levels by 2023. This pattern in average grades, and the eventual discontinuation of the COVID-era special circumstances grades, was in

keeping with national trends. Faculty and advisor survey respondents, while generally supportive of emergency use of special circumstance grades, are mostly opposed to its use during non-emergency situations.

Conclusions:

Our analysis of Mason's current A+-F grade scheme, and the special circumstances alternative grade scheme used during COVID-impacted terms, included a review of the actual use of grades between 2017-2023 ([see Goal 1 in report](#)), a review of use of grade schemes nationally and by our peer institutions ([see Goal 2 in report](#)), and the attitudes of our faculty and advisors on the grade schemes and potential changes to the schemes ([see Goal 3 in report](#)). We found that, while Mason's regular grade scheme and COVID-era optional scheme is generally in keeping with our peers and national trends, there seems to be significant confusion about and variation with the use and purpose of the undergraduate C- grade. Some of the confusion may be due to lack of clarity at the local academic unit level about how this grade should be assigned. We recommend that Mason take steps to address the lack of clarity around the use of the undergraduate C- grade and to ensure clear communication for all stakeholders with respect to how all grades are used.

Action items ([see Conclusions and Recommendations in report](#)):

Recommendation 1: Each local academic unit should have clearly stated policies with respect to 'use' of plus and minus grades, in particular the A+ and C- grades. Unit-specific grading policies should be used uniformly by faculty across the unit, particularly those teaching sections of the same course. Unit rationale and potential implications should be communicated to students in plain terms in course and program materials, even if those are already stated in the University Catalog.

Recommendation 2: Unit-specific grade policies should be stated clearly and located uniformly in the course catalog entry for each degree or program.

Recommendation 3: Mason should consider removal of the C- grade from the undergraduate grade scheme.

Recommendation 4: Create a task force for specific consideration of graduate grades.

Recommendation 5: Communicate all four existing options for undergraduate grading scales already included in AP.3.1.1 (Undergraduate Regular, Undergraduate Special (ABC/NC), Undergraduate Special, and Satisfactory/No Credit) to local academic units for consideration.

Recommendation 6: Offer a standardized grading policy training for faculty.

Goal 1: Assessment of Mason’s use of current ‘A+ to F’ grade scheme

The university-wide system for undergraduate and graduate grading is given in Table 1 and Table 2, below. These grade reporting schemes must serve the needs of all the diverse programs and courses at the University. Assessment of student performance in any given course necessarily varies by discipline and even between courses in the same discipline. The GPTF interprets our charge to concern the uses and impacts of the university-wide grade reporting scheme, rather than the methodology of how student performance is assessed in any particular discipline or course.

Table 1: Undergraduate Grade Scheme as listed in GMU Catalog (AP.3.1)¹

Grade	Quality Points	Undergraduate Courses
A+	4.00	Passing
A	4.00	Passing
A-	3.67	Passing
B+	3.33	Passing
B	3.00	Passing
B-	2.67	Passing
C+	2.33	Passing
C	2.00	Passing
C-	1.67	Passing
D	1.00	Passing
F	0.00	Failing

- Undergraduate grading scales are indicated on each specific course and indicate possible grades which may be earned within each (see AP.3.1.1):
 - Undergraduate Regular: allows for all grades listed in Table 1 as well as IN, AB
 - Undergraduate Special (ABC/NC): only allows for A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, NC, IP
 - Undergraduate Special: allows for all grades listed in Table 1 as well as AB, IN, IP
 - Satisfactory/No Credit: allows for S, NC, AB, IN, IP

Table 2: Graduate Grading Scheme as listed in GMU Catalog (AP.3.2)¹

Grade	Quality Points	Graduate Courses
A+	4.00	Satisfactory/Passing
A	4.00	Satisfactory/Passing
A-	3.67	Satisfactory/Passing
B+	3.33	Satisfactory/Passing
B	3.00	Satisfactory/Passing
B-	2.67	Satisfactory ² /Passing
C	2.00	Unsatisfactory/Passing
F	0.00	Unsatisfactory/Failing

- Grading scales are indicated on each specific course and indicate possible grades which may be earned within each (see AP.3.2.1):
 - Graduate Regular: allows for all grades listed in Table 2 as well as IN, AB

- Graduate Special: allows for all grades listed in Table 2 as well as IN, AB, S, NC, IP
 - Satisfactory/No Credit: allows for S, NC, AB, IN, IP
2. Although a B- is a satisfactory grade for a graduate course, students must maintain a 3.00 average in their degree program and present a 3.00 GPA on the courses listed on the graduation application.

Table 3: Alternative Grade Scheme optionally used during COVID-impacted terms^{1,2}

Grade	Description	Equivalence to regular scheme grades
XS	Extraordinary Circumstances – Satisfactory	The student earns credit in the course by meeting a minimum grade threshold; at the undergraduate level that would be a C or higher, at the graduate level it would be a B- or higher.
XP	Extraordinary Circumstances – Pass	The student earns credit in the course but has not met a minimum grade threshold to apply the course to requirements with a minimum grade requirement; at the undergraduate level this would be a C- or D, at the graduate level it would be a C.
XN	Extraordinary Circumstances – No Credit	The student does not earn credit in the course.
XW	Extraordinary Circumstances- Withdrawal	Students may withdrawal from any class they are enrolled in up to the last day of classes. These withdrawals do not count toward the maximum of three courses during the undergraduate career.

1. Mason allowed students to choose alternate grading for the Spring 2020, Fall 2020, and Spring 2021 terms due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In Spring 2020, students had an opt-in deadline before final grades were posted; in subsequent terms, students could see their final grades before determining whether to opt into alternative X-grades.
2. The alternative grading mode carried no quality points, and student GPA was not affected by any of these grades.

It was noted in an early meeting of the Task Force that some academic units have differing policies with respect to the use of some grades listed in the official grade schemes (Tables 1 and 2), and that these differences might be reflected in different uses of certain letter grades. The GPTF reasoned that clarification of how the current grade scheme is utilized at Mason is a necessary first step in assessing the advantages and disadvantages of the current A+ to F grade scheme and the alternate grade scheme that was optionally available to students during the terms (semesters) most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 3).

To examine these impressions globally and quantifiability, we examined grade data from all units between 2017-2023. Analysis of this data showed meaningful differences between units with respect to the frequency of grades assigned, as well as similarities in the lack of use of some grades. **Detailed findings are given in [Appendix 1](#) of this report.**

Our analysis generated the following observations:

- On a University-wide basis, 48% of undergraduate grades and 73% of graduate grades were A- or higher.
- The **most commonly awarded grade was an A** among both graduates (49%) and undergraduates (26%).
- Some grades were very rarely assigned or never assigned. **Notably, 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).
- 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 may reflect in part the higher minimum passing grade (B-) in many graduate programs.
- 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; however, this measure does display cross-college variation.
- 15.2% of students, overall, elected to use the optional special-circumstances grade scale (Table 3) in the 2020 terms.
- Analysis of the uptake of alternative grades among students suggests that the average **grades of students who chose to take an alternative grade (e.g. XS, XP) during the terms this was available are generally lower (3.08) than the average grades of student who did not opt to take an alternative grade (3.34).** This finding supports the notion that the 2020 rise in average undergraduate grades plausibly reflected a selection effect whereby students with a lower expected grade were more likely to opt in to the alternative grade scheme.

Comments on Goal 1 Findings

At the undergraduate level, the C- grade is disproportionately **less** used compared with other undergraduate grades. Members of the GPTF noted that some units have policies or traditions that direct faculty to not award C- grades, although it is not clear if/where such

policies are directly communicated to students or other stakeholders except on syllabi for individual courses. Many programs specifically disallow the C- grade for successful completion of core coursework, but this information does not appear to be presented consistently in the catalog. The combination of explicit and implicit policies and expectations around the use of the C- grade may explain its low rate of use. The low and variable use of the C- grade raises the question of the utility or purpose of having this grade on the undergraduate grading scale.

In contrast to the use of undergraduate grades, no single graduate grade stood out as being less used than the other grades. However, graduate grades in general were higher than undergraduate grades (93% passing with B or higher, including “S” grades, compared with 84% passing with C- or greater at the undergraduate level). The graduate B- grade was used in 2% of the grades we examined, compared to the 3% use of the undergraduate D grade during the same time period.

We note that the high rate of A grades is in keeping with national trends, as is the increase in average GPA during the COVID-impacted terms (see Goal 2 for discussion of scholarship on these topics) (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). The notable cross-college variation, likewise in keeping with national trends, may reflect discipline-specific differences in appropriate assessment. This is a reminder that the university grade scheme must be able to be used by all disciplines at the university, despite their significant differences.

Goal 2: Review of grade scheme use by peer institutions and in existing scholarship

There are numerous qualitative studies that investigate how different assessment methodologies impact factors such as student motivation, behaviors, and satisfaction, but less scholarship is available on the actual use of particular grade schemes themselves (Royce Sadler, 2012) (Kleinman, 2018). The literature that we have been able to identify on use of grade schemes show that most colleges and universities utilize some variation of the A-F grade scheme, with many institutions moving toward utilization of the plus/minus variation of this scheme (Kleinman, 2018) (Schneider, 2014). The use of the plus/minus grade scheme seems to have only a modest (if any) impact on student GPA compared to whole-letter grade scales (Barnes & Buring, 2012). Adoption of plus/minus grade schemes has nevertheless been increasingly adopted by institutions; reasons for adoption include increased differentiation of student performance and efforts to combat grade inflation (Wetzler, 2019). Since at least 2009, the A letter grade has become the most common grade for American colleges and universities (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). Debate persists about the cause of these increases and degree to which this increase is a problem (Tamir, 2025) (Jephcote, Medland, & Lygo-Baker, 2021). Proposals to combat this trend have been difficult to implement due, in part, to concerns on disadvantaging alumni when grades are reported externally for the purposes of graduate/professional training or career paths (Tamir, 2025) (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012).

The GPTF was charged with conducting a review of the grade schemes of peer institutions. 28 peer universities for George Mason University were identified for this analysis (SCHEV recommendations in addition to universities identified by the George Mason COACHE Committee). **See [Appendix 2](#) for list of peer institutions and detailed findings.**

With respect to undergraduate grades, we found that a majority (82%) of our peers assign letter grades of A, B, C, D, F including plus and minus schemas, however, of those that use plus and minus grades, most (74%) do not assign A+ grades. Nearly all (96%) of our peers that use plus and minus grades include the C- grade in their grade scales. Additionally, most of the institutions that have plus and minus grades also list D+ (87%) and a D- (70%) on their undergraduate grade schemes. These numbers only reflect the grades listed as official grade designations by the Registrar's office for each institution; data on actual usage of the undergraduate letter grades in these schemes is not readily available to individuals outside of the respective institutions. The GPTF did not file FOIA or other requests to obtain that data.

Graduate grading policies and schemes at our peer institutions were, generally, more difficult to locate on public websites. University websites and policy documents cautioned the reader that grade use policies may have substantial variation between different programs at the same institution (see [Appendix 2](#)). Therefore, one limitation of this analysis is that it only considers the university-wide policies of our peers, and not grading policy variation at the program level. Most of our peers (89%) utilize plus and minus graduate grades. Of those, almost all (96%) of those accept B- for course credit, with the majority (62.5%) of those requiring a 3.0 average minimum to remain in good standing. 76% of peer institutions using plus and minus graduate grades also have minus grades below B- listed on their graduate grade schemes.

Comments on Goal 2 findings

The undergraduate grade scheme used at Mason is largely in line with our peer institutions and national trends in higher education. The lack of A+ at most of our peer institutions may be because the A grade is almost always set to 4.0 quality points, as it is at Mason (see Table 1), but most do not have quality points >4.0 (an important exception being law schools, including the Antonin Scalia Law School). Some variation is evident in the grade schemes of our peer institutions, suggesting that moderate changes to the grade schemes (e.g., removal or addition of certain plus or minus grades) could be undertaken with minimal disruption to the utility of external reporting of grades.

Graduate grade schemes at our peer institutions have more variation than the undergraduate schemes in terms of what is the minimum passing grade for a course (most requiring a B or B-, but 25% accepting a C grade) with additional variation in minimum overall GPA requirements to remain in good standing. Although the exact minimum grade varied between institutions, a higher grade was required to earn credit in graduate courses compared to undergraduate expectations. Mason is therefore in keeping with our institutional peers in at least this respect.

Our review of peer institution grades was limited to what is published on their publicly available websites. We found explicit statements regarding program-specific variations in graduate grade policy at 29% of our peer institutions (see [Appendix 2](#)). Documentation of such variation was not evident for undergraduate grades at any of our peer institutions. However, there may be institutional customs or norms that modify the actual use of published undergraduate grades (as we found in Goal 1) or even with the use of graduate grades, but such variation at peer institutions is beyond the scope of this report.

Many institutions used some kind of special-circumstances grade scheme (both undergraduate and graduate) during COVID-impacted terms and most if not all these instruments have been discontinued (Kuperman, Geva, Taler, & Thériault, 2026). It is difficult to fully assess the past use of special COVID-era grade schemes at our peer institutions since, as is true for Mason, official references to these schemes have been removed from many public-facing university websites.

Goal 3: Consideration of potential grade scheme changes at Mason

The GPTF considered faculty perspectives on four potential changes to our grade scheme:

- Removing the A+ grade from Mason's undergraduate and/or graduate regular grading scales, while maintaining all other +/- grades
- Removing the C- grade from Mason's undergraduate regular grading scale, while maintaining all other +/- grades
- Removing all existing +/- grades from the undergraduate and/or graduate regular grading scales
- Codifying the alternative grade scheme used during the COVID-19 pandemic for use in non-emergency situations for undergraduate and/or graduate students

Consideration of these potential changes were informed by use of grade schemes at peer institutions, the actual usage of our current A+ to F grade scale at Mason, the actual usage of the COVID-19 emergency alternative grade scheme, and the perspectives of faculty, advisors, and other stakeholders on these potential changes.

Overview of faculty perspectives on Mason's current grade scheme

Based on the Task Force's analysis of quantitative data and review of grading scales at Mason and other institutions, the GPTF developed a survey instrument that was used to gauge how faculty and academic advisors conceive of the communicative value of grades and current use of the existing scheme, as well as faculty/advisor perceptions of the alternative grade scheme used during the COVID 19 pandemic. Two surveys (one for all faculty, another targeted to advisors) were launched in late fall 2024 and received 582 faculty responses and 135 advisor responses. **Explanation of the survey design**

methodology can be found in [Appendix 3](#). Respondent faculty were affiliated with a wide range of schools and colleges. Most respondents were either tenure stream faculty (41%) or term faculty (38%), with additional representation from adjunct faculty (16%) and administrative or library faculty (5%). Faculty and advisors were presented with a series of multiple-choice questions regarding use of the grade scale, followed by the option to elaborate on their reasoning or describe local practices via open-ended prompts.

Breakdown of faculty and advisor responses to multiple choice questions are shown in [Appendix 4](#). Thematic analysis of comments from faculty survey respondents is given in [Appendix 5](#) and analysis of advisor survey respondents is given in [Appendix 6](#).

443 faculty respondents identified as regularly teaching undergraduate students. Of these, 70% reported that their department or program uses the C- grade. Only 17% reported that the C- is not used in their unit and 13% were unsure. Faculty were split on removing the C- grade from Mason's undergraduate grade scheme (53% against, 47% favor) and on removing the A+ grade from Mason's undergraduate grade scheme (same split). 65% of faculty respondents were against removing all plus/minus grades from the undergraduate scale, while 35% were open to this idea (responding yes or maybe).

Similarly, faculty respondents who identified as regularly teaching graduate students (n=273) were evenly split on removing the A+ grade from Mason's graduate regular grading scale (51% in favor). 78% of these faculty respondents were opposed to removing all the existing plus/minus grades from the graduate regular grading scale.

Mason's use of an alternative grade scheme during the COVID-19 pandemic

Mason allowed students to choose alternate grading for the spring 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021 terms due to the COVID-19 pandemic (see Table 3). In Spring 2020, students had an opt-in deadline before final grades were posted; in subsequent terms, students could see their final grades before determining whether to opt into alternative X-grades: XS (Satisfactory=C or above for undergraduates; B- or above for graduates); XP (Passing=C- or D for undergrads; C for grads); XN (No Credit); XW (Withdrawal). Evaluation of this alternative grade scheme was part of the charge to the GPTF.

Across nearly all colleges, average undergraduate grades saw a notable rise in 2020 compared to other academic years. Post-2020, average grades University-wide generally returned to their pre-2020 levels, although this measure showed some variation by college (see Figure A1-3 and Table A1-6 in [Appendix 1](#)). Analysis of the uptake of alternative grades among students suggests that the average grades of students who chose to take an alternative grade (e.g. XS, XP) during the terms this was available are generally lower than the average grades of students who did not opt to take an alternative grade (see Goal 1). This finding suggests that the 2020 rise in average undergraduate grades plausibly reflected a selection effect whereby students with a lower expected grade were more likely to opt in to the alternative grade scheme.

72% of respondent faculty (n=390) were generally supportive of using this grade scheme for undergraduates in a campus-wide emergency situation (51% when students opt-in before final grades are available; 21% if students opt-in after final grades are available). 12% of faculty respondents indicated that the alternative grade scheme needs revision while 17% were opposed to the alternative option being used in emergency situations. The

responses from faculty teaching graduate students (n=257) were nearly identical (69% supportive of the alternative scheme in some contexts, 21% opposed, 11% calling for revisions to the alternative scheme).

However, in non-emergency situations, faculty are generally not supportive of using this alternative grade scheme. For undergraduates, 70% of respondent faculty (n=394) rejected the use of this alternative grade scheme. 22% supported some use of the alternative scheme, depending on when students opt-in, and 8% indicated that the scheme needs revision before it is used. For graduate students, 73% of respondent faculty (n=258) were against offering this alternative option. 21% supported its use in some contexts, and 6% called for revisions to the scheme. Interestingly, advisors (who may also be faculty), were even more opposed to making this alternative grade scheme an option during non-emergency situations: at both graduate and undergraduate levels, 85-86% of advisors opposed while only 7% favored the alternative grade option in at least some contexts.

Comments on Goal 3 findings

Significant disparity exists between faculty who say that the C- grade is used by their unit (70%) and the actual usage of the C- grade in undergraduate grade reporting (1%). Confusion among the faculty on use of this grade is also apparent from the survey, where 13% of respondent faculty indicated they are unsure of their unit's policy on the C- grade. These patterns suggest that increased clarity on the purpose and use of the C- grade would be appropriate. Faculty in general are less opposed to small changes to our undergraduate grade scheme (removal of C- or A+ grades) compared to more dramatic changes (removal of all plus/minus grades or use of the COVID-era grades during non-emergency circumstances).

The lack of clarity on use of the C- undergraduate grade, and the disparity between reported and actual use of this grade, raises significant concerns with regards to issues of fairness and consistency. This is particularly a concern if sections of the same course award different final grades for the same work output (e.g., a 71% being a C- in some sections while the same 71% is a C in a different section of the same course). Raising similar concerns, some faculty reported employing other variations of use of the grade scheme (not using plus/minus at all, for example; see [Appendix 5](#)). While such usage is likely appropriate in certain disciplines or courses, it might also lead to GPA differences between students that reflect differences in instructor's idiosyncratic grade scheme use, rather than differences in learning/assessment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Our analysis of Mason's current A-F grade scheme, and the special circumstances alternative grade scheme used during COVID-impacted terms, included a review of the actual use of grades between 2017-2023 (Goal 1), a review of use of grade schemes nationally and by our peer institutions (Goal 2), and the attitudes of our faculty and advisors on the grade schemes and potential changes to the schemes (Goal 3).

We found that, while Mason's regular grade scheme and COVID-era scheme is generally in keeping with our peers and national trends, there seems to be significant confusion about the use and purpose of the undergraduate C- grade. Some of the confusion may be due to lack of clarity on the local academic unit level about how this grade should be assigned. We recommend that Mason take steps to address the lack of clarity around the use of the C- grade and to ensure clear communication for all stakeholders with respect to how all grades are used. Specific recommendations follow.

***Recommendation 1:* Each local academic unit should have clearly stated policies with respect to 'use' of plus/minus grades, in particular the A+ and C- grades. Unit-specific grading policies should be used uniformly by faculty across the unit, particularly those teaching sections of the same course. Unit rationale and potential implications should be communicated to students in plain terms in course and program materials, even if those are already stated in the University Catalog.**

Rationale and discussion: In light of survey results, and echoed in GPTF discussions, both the A+ and C- often have special status beyond a simple performance-based assessment. These unit-level policies should be discussed, codified, and published for sharing with students, faculty, and the university community. Examples of variations in use of A+ and C- grades include:

- A+ available for use at instructors' discretion for later reference
- A+ used by unit to identify students for scholarships, assistantships, or other opportunities
- A+ not assigned, as it 'looks bad' on grad school applications in certain disciplines
- C- not assigned to maintain standards and rigor in the local academic unit
- C- used by local academic unit to minimize GPA impact as students in major must retake the course
- +/- grades assigned per instructor discretion

- +/- grades assigned, or not, across sections of a course or unit wide

Put simply, any factor in, or aspect of, grade reporting outside of a student performance-based calculation should be discussed and codified in writing.

Once established, unit-specific grading policies should be used uniformly by faculty across the unit, particularly those teaching sections of the same course. Additionally, we recommend these policies be made readily available to students and other stakeholders via unit websites, stated clearly in the catalog, and repeated in individual course materials. If no unit-wide grading policies exist, individual faculty should be encouraged to state any 'use' of grades beyond a basic measure of student performance.

GPTF further recommends including unit rationale and potential implications in plain terms, even if those are already stated in the University Catalog (e.g. a C- grade in a course within your major will need to be retaken if you intend to stay in the major; a C- factors into GPA as 1.667, below the 2.0 GPA line for academic action; etc.). While the A+ is no different than an A in terms of student GPA, without the potential ramifications associated with academic action, its continued use still warrants discussion.

Recommendation 2: Unit-specific grade policies should be stated clearly and located uniformly in the course catalog entry for each degree or program.

Rationale and discussion: A robust textual analysis of the catalog was beyond the scope of the task force; however, perusing a small sample of program descriptions revealed that any unit-specific policies regarding the use of certain grades were not located in a uniform manner, and the language varied across policies (e.g. "A minimum grade of C is required for credit" v. "Students earning a C- or lower must retake the course for credit"). Sharing standard language across colleges and programs, while still allowing unit-determined policies, would promote clarity. Acknowledging the importance of faculty autonomy, GPTF also recommends that multi-section courses with different instructors coordinate and determine shared practices to be applied across sections, to the extent possible. Beyond basic fairness to students, a uniform approach to grading across sections would also provide clarity to the benefit of advisors, and even faculty, forced to respond to grade appeals citing inconsistent grading between instructors teaching different sections of the same course, or even instructors of different courses in the same program.

Recommendation 3: Mason should consider removal of the C- grade from the undergraduate grade scheme.

Rationale and discussion: Quantitative data revealed how rarely the C- grade is assigned; survey data demonstrated how the grade is ‘used’ in varied ways across the university. What a C- grade communicates is unclear. This sentiment is echoed by participants in both Faculty and Advisor surveys. In common parlance, a C grade is ‘passing,’ which raises confusion for both students and faculty (e.g., does C- indicate a ‘low passing grade’ or ‘not a passing grade’?). In instances when a C- does not fulfill degree requirements for the major, faculty may respond by awarding inflated, generous C grades or assigning a punitive D grade to students who fail to meet unit standards. Both scenarios lead to inaccurate reporting that has, sometimes dire, effect on GPA that potentially impacts students’ funding (scholarships), academic standing, among other consequences. Removing the possibility of a C- removes this potential confusion. This recommendation is supported by the Undergraduate Council (see [Appendix 7](#)).

Recommendation 4: Create a task force for specific consideration of graduate grades.

Note: Prior to the publication of this report, and at the request of Graduate Council, Faculty Senate has charged a Graduate Grading Process Task Force to examine the graduate grade scheme. All data collected by GPTF regarding graduate grading will be shared and GPTF co-chairs will consult as needed.

Rationale and discussion: Much of this report focuses on the use of the undergraduate grade scheme. The graduate grade scheme must satisfy a set of needs and deal with issues that are distinct from the concerns for undergraduate students. The GPTF recommends the convening of a separate task force dedicated to a specific review of the graduate grade scheme and scales. The Graduate Council is supportive of this proposal (see [Appendix 7](#)).

***Recommendation 5:* Communicate all four existing options for undergraduate grading scales already included in AP.3.1.1 (Undergraduate Regular, Undergraduate Special (ABC/NC), Undergraduate Special, and Satisfactory/No Credit) to local academic units for consideration.**

Rationale and discussion: Survey data indicates an assumption that the Undergraduate Regular scale is the only one available. We recommend that LAUs review extant course grading options (Table 1) to see how/if their pedagogical goals may be better served by one of the four undergraduate grading scales in Mason's Catalog. Informed consideration of Mason's existing options in the undergraduate grading scales may ameliorate concerns that some faculty have expressed with grades at Mason, even if no substantial changes to the grading scheme are made.

***Recommendation 6:* Offer a standardized grading policy training for faculty.**

Rationale and discussion: Faculty survey data show disparity in assumptions and/or understanding regarding use of grades at Mason. This indicates a need for faculty education and training in the undergraduate grade scheme (i.e., uses of the C- grade; that A+ is not worth more quality points than A). In addition, refreshing faculty understanding of grading policies will assist individual units with curriculum development and establishing and revising unit-level policies.

Appendix 1: Mason Grade Utilization Analysis (Fall 2017 through Summer 2023)

This analysis was conducted using anonymized student final grades provided by George Mason University’s Office of the University Registrar. The grades cover all terms between Fall 2017 and Summer 2023. In total, we analyzed 1,801,024 final grades. We analyzed the grades both as letters and on a 0-4 scale.

Final Grades (All Units)

Table A1-1: Final Grades, Fall 2017 to Summer 2023 (proportion)

	Graduate	Undergraduate
A+	0.11	0.10
A	0.49	0.26
A-	0.13	0.12
B+	0.06	0.09
B	0.06	0.12
B-	0.02	0.05
C+	n/a	0.04
C	0.01	0.06
C-	n/a	0.01
D	n/a	0.03
F	0.01	0.06
AB	0.00	0.00
AU	0.00	0.00
IN	0.00	0.00
IP	0.01	0.00
IX	0.00	0.00
NC	0.00	0.00
NR	0.00	0.00
S	0.08	0.02
SP	0.00	0.00
W	0.00	0.00
XN	0.00	0.01
XP	0.00	0.01
XS	0.00	0.02
XW	0.00	0.00

Figure A1-1: Final Grades, 2017-2023 (Graduate)

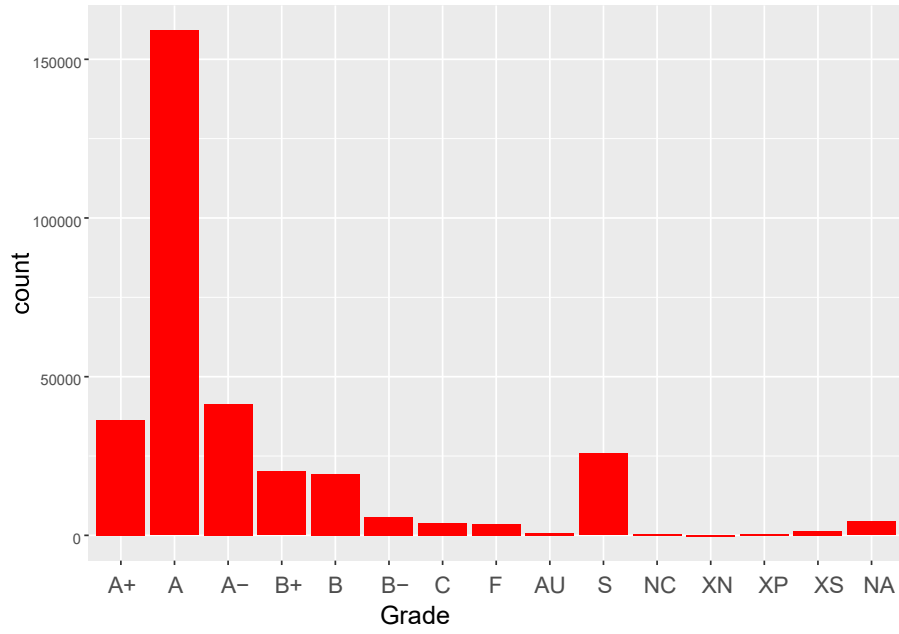
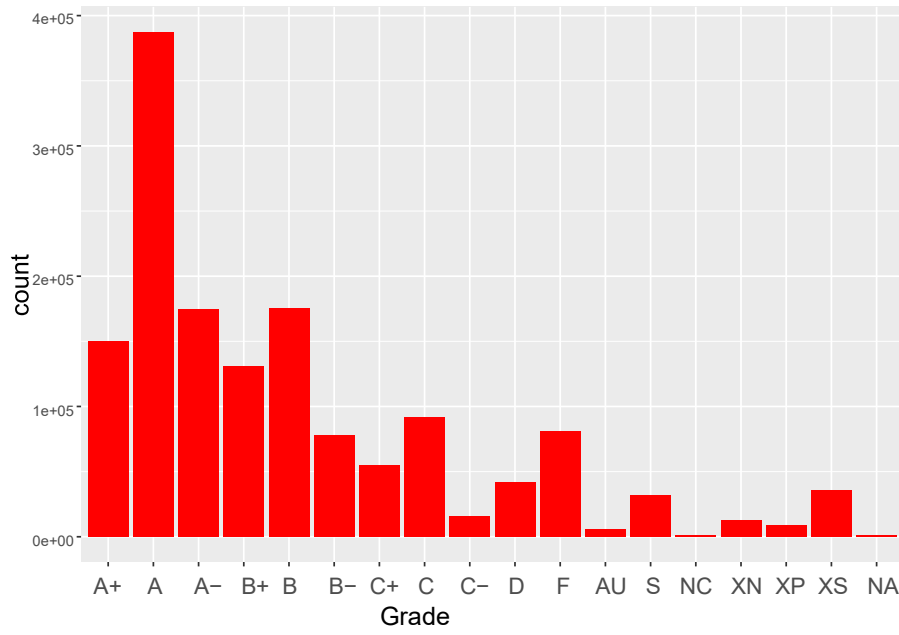


Figure A2-2: Final Grades, 2017-2023 (Undergraduate)



Final Grades By College

Table A1-2: Undergraduate Grades by College (0-4 scale) 2017-2023

COLLEGE	mean grade	var grade	sd grade
1 Carter Peace & Conflict Res	3.48	1.01	1.00
2 Coll Visual & Performing Arts	3.50	0.93	0.97
3 College of Public Health	3.56	0.85	0.92
4 College of Science	2.92	1.45	1.21
5 Education & Human Development	3.37	0.99	1.00
6 Engineering & Computing	3.03	1.33	1.15
7 Health and Human Services	3.60	0.64	0.80
8 Humanities & Social Sciences	3.21	1.25	1.12
9 INTO Mason	3.26	1.36	1.16
10 Schar School of Policy and Gov	3.30	1.02	1.01
11 School of Business	2.99	1.22	1.10
12 University (Provost)	3.61	0.75	0.87

Table A1-3: Graduate Grades by College (0-4 scale) 2017-2023

COLLEGE	mean grade	var grade	sd grade
1 Carter Peace & Conflict Res	3.85	0.30	0.55
2 Coll Visual & Performing Arts	3.84	0.21	0.46
3 College of Public Health	3.86	0.23	0.48
4 College of Science	3.74	0.38	0.62
5 Education & Human Development	3.83	0.34	0.59
6 Engineering & Computing	3.64	0.51	0.71
7 Health and Human Services	3.82	0.27	0.52
8 Humanities & Social Sciences	3.81	0.30	0.55
9 INTO Mason	3.60	0.50	0.70
10 Schar School of Policy and Gov	3.76	0.30	0.54
11 School of Business	3.68	0.34	0.58
12 University (Provost)	3.82	0.22	0.47

Table A1-5: Grades by College (Undergraduate) 2017-2023

	Carter	Visual	Pub Health	Science	Education	Eng/Comp	Health/Hum	Human/SS	INTO	Schar	Business	Uni(Provost)
A+	0.14	0.15	0.12	0.09	0.10	0.10	0.09	0.12	0.19	0.09	0.04	0.13
A	0.38	0.39	0.39	0.23	0.33	0.20	0.44	0.26	0.18	0.28	0.20	0.28
A-	0.16	0.11	0.14	0.08	0.14	0.11	0.15	0.14	0.11	0.16	0.13	0.09
B+	0.08	0.06	0.06	0.08	0.08	0.10	0.07	0.10	0.07	0.11	0.11	0.04
B	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.15	0.09	0.14	0.08	0.11	0.07	0.11	0.15	0.04
B-	0.04	0.03	0.03	0.05	0.06	0.06	0.03	0.06	0.04	0.05	0.08	0.02
C+	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.05	0.03	0.04	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.06	0.01
C	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.10	0.03	0.07	0.02	0.04	0.03	0.05	0.09	0.01
C-	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01
D	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.05	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.03	0.01
F	0.05	0.04	0.03	0.07	0.04	0.06	0.02	0.06	0.06	0.04	0.06	0.02
AB	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
AU	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00
IN	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
IP	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
IX	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
NC	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00
NR	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
S	0.00	0.06	0.10	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.04	0.00	0.16	0.01	0.00	0.33
SP	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
W	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
XN	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00
XP	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00
XS	0.02	0.01	0.00	0.03	0.01	0.04	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.03	0.03	0.01
XW	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Figure A1-3: Grades Over Time (Undergraduate) 2017-2023

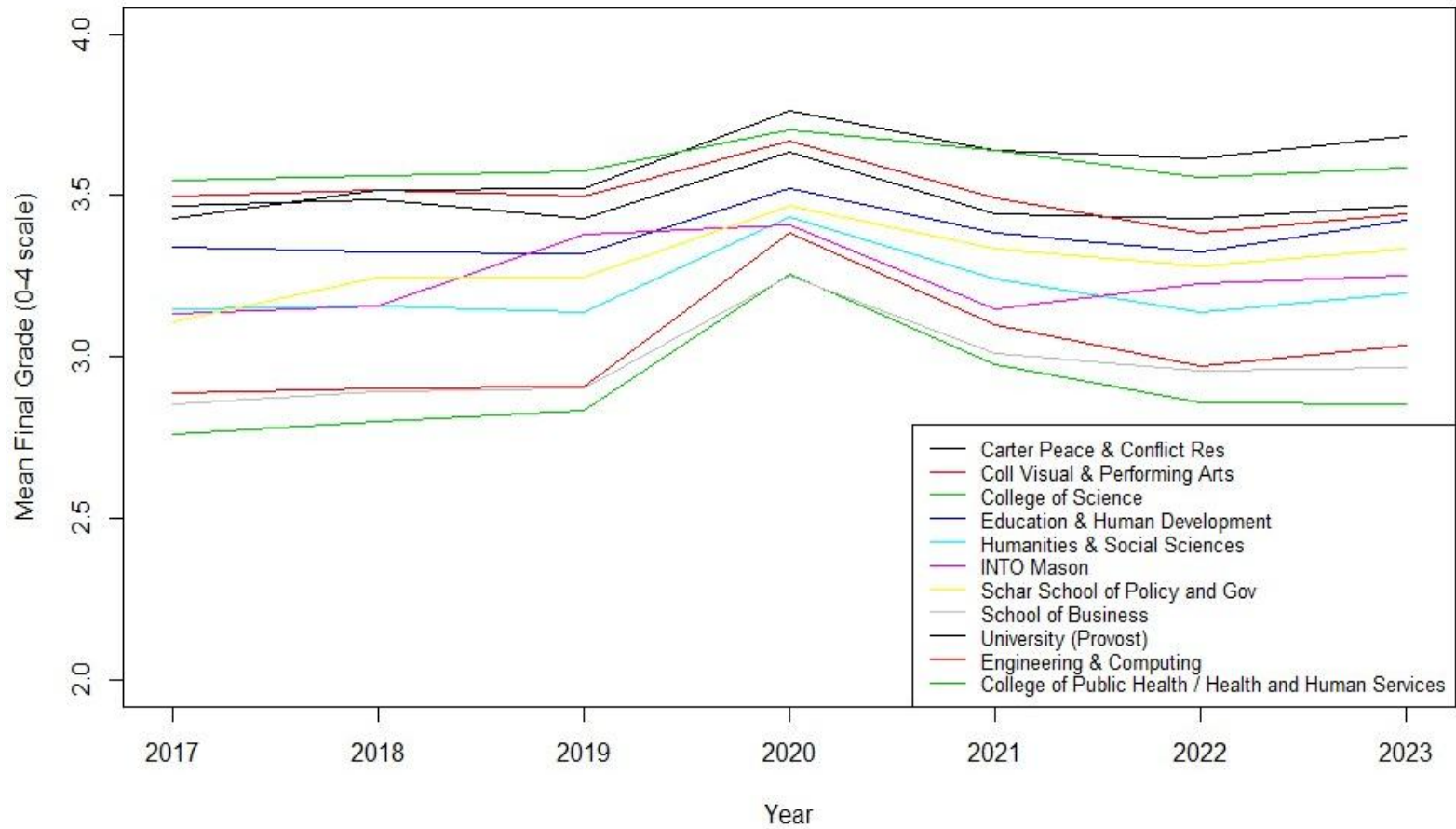


Table A1-6: Mean Grades Over Time (Undergraduate, 0-4 Scale) 2017-2023

COLLEGE	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
1 Carter Peace & Conflict Res	3.47	3.49	3.43	3.64	3.44	3.43	3.47
2 Coll Visual & Performing Arts	3.50	3.52	3.50	3.67	3.49	3.38	3.45
3 College of Science	2.76	2.80	2.83	3.26	2.98	2.86	2.86
4 Education & Human Development	3.34	3.33	3.32	3.52	3.38	3.33	3.42
5 Humanities & Social Sciences	3.15	3.16	3.14	3.43	3.24	3.14	3.20
6 INTO Mason	3.13	3.16	3.38	3.41	3.15	3.23	3.25
7 Schar School of Policy and Gov	3.11	3.25	3.25	3.47	3.34	3.28	3.34
8 School of Business	2.86	2.89	2.90	3.25	3.01	2.96	2.97
9 University (Provost)	3.43	3.52	3.52	3.76	3.64	3.62	3.68
10 Engineering & Computing	2.89	2.91	2.91	3.39	3.10	2.97	3.04
11 College of Public Health / Health and Human Services	3.54	3.56	3.58	3.70	3.64	3.56	3.58

Appendix 2: Grades at Peer Institutions

Peer institutions for George Mason University were defined as the SCHEV approved peer groups as well as the peer groups used by the George Mason COACHE Committee.

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 (also in SCHEV list)
Texas Tech University
University of Cincinnati
Virginia Commonwealth University

Undergraduate Grade Schemes Data Collection Summary: Most peers used plus or minus grades (23 of 28) at the undergraduate level. For those that use plus/minus schemes, most (17 of the 23) did not use A+ and most had C- (22 of the 23). Of the 6 school that used A+ (excluding law programs), only 2 of those 6 gave more than 4.0 for A+ grades. Of the 5 peers that did not use plus/minus, 2 used plus but not any minus grades, and 3 used straight letter grades without any plus/minus designation. Other variations included some institutions that used an E letter grade as the functional equivalent of F, and use of D+

(87% of peers with plus and minus grades) and D- (70% of peers with plus and minus grades).

Table A2-1: Characteristics of Undergraduate Grade Schemes at 28 Peer Institutions

Characteristic	N	%
Peer institutions listing plus and minus grades in scheme	23	82% of peer institutions
A+ listed in plus-minus grade scheme	6	26% of those with plus-minus
A+ grade earns more than 4.0 quality points	2	33% of those with A+ grades
C- grade listed in plus-minus grade scheme	22	96% of those with plus-minus
D+ grade listed in plus-minus grade scheme	20	87% of those with plus-minus
D- grade listed in plus-minus grade scheme	16	70% of those with plus-minus
Only plus grades listed in scheme (no minus grades)	2	7% of peer institutions
Straight letter grades only (no plus or minus grades)	3	11% of peer institutions

Graduate Grade Schemes Data Collection Summary: Most peers (25 of 28) publish a plus-minus grade scheme for graduate grades. Nearly all of these (24 of 25) accept a B- for credit at the course level, but many of the institutions caution that variation exists on the program level on the minimal acceptable grade for a course (some explicitly mention that a B- may be unacceptable as per program rules). Some institutions allow for a C passing graduate grade, while others are simply unclear on university pages what, if any, university-wide minimums exist.

Table A2-2: Characteristics of Graduate Grade Schemes at 28 Peer Institutions

Characteristic	N	%
Peer institutions listing plus and minus grades in scheme	25	89% of peer institutions
B- grade listed as satisfactory in graduate grade scheme	24	96% of those with plus-minus
3.0 minimum GPA required for good standing	15	63% of those allowing B-
Grade schemes listing minus grades below B-	19	76% of those with plus-minus
C grade listed as satisfactory in graduate grade scheme	7	25% of those with plus-minus
Peers that caution program variation in grade use	8	29% of peer institutions

Appendix 3: Qualitative Study Overview and Methods

In addition to collecting extant quantitative data and conducting a peer-institution comparison, the Grading Process Task Force (GPTF) collected qualitative data to contextualize early findings and to provide university stakeholders an opportunity to voice concerns, beliefs, and ideas regarding undergraduate grading practices. Qualitative survey responses from faculty and academic advisors offer insight into the pedagogical rationales, administrative constraints, and perceived downstream effects that are not captured by quantitative measures alone.

A brief analysis of the open-ended survey responses can be found in Appendices 5 and 6.

Survey Exigence

Early conversations among GPTF members revealed substantial disciplinary variation in attitudes toward grading schemes. Local academic unit (LAU) policies and practices reflect both shared pedagogical commitments and discipline-specific considerations, including licensure requirements, graduate school preparation, and external accreditation expectations. Collecting qualitative data alongside quantitative findings was intended to surface nuance that could inform any eventual recommendations.

The findings summarized here are limited to undergraduate education. In 2025, Mason's Graduate Council expressed interest in conducting its own analysis of graduate grading practices. GPTF leadership coordinated the transfer of relevant data to the Graduate Council and provided consultation as needed, allowing the task force to focus on undergraduate-related findings.

Upon completion of its charge, the GPTF plans to transfer all collected data to the Faculty Senate for stewardship and potential future analysis. GPTF leadership remains available to relevant stakeholders to answer questions regarding the survey instrument and findings. Some task force members are also considering additional analyses for scholarly publication; however, such work falls outside the scope of the GPTF's formal charge.

Importantly, the inclusion of open-ended questions alongside multiple-choice survey items generated a rich body of qualitative data that extends beyond the immediate aims of this report.

Survey Design: Contextualizing Quantitative Findings

The faculty survey was designed to deepen understanding of early quantitative analyses of grade assignment at Mason and of peer-institution practices—specifically, the use of the A+ grade, the C- grade, and +/- grading more broadly. Binary and ternary questions were used to assess baseline support for potential policy changes (e.g., “Would you support removing the C- from Mason's undergraduate regular scale, while maintaining all other +/- grades?”). Each item was followed by an open-ended prompt inviting respondents to elaborate on their reasoning or describe local practices.

Note on Priming Participants

Because several survey items were motivated directly by early GPTF findings, respondents were provided with brief contextual statements explaining the rationale for each set of questions. For example, prior to items regarding the A+ grade, participants read the following statement:

“The A+ on Mason’s grading scale is unusual in that it holds the same GPA points as an A, and 75% of Mason’s peer institutions do not have an A+ in their undergraduate grading scale (*with the exception of the Antonin Scalia Law School).”

Participants were then asked:

- Do you currently use the A+ in your classes? (Yes/No)
- Are there specific uses of the A+ or reasons why the A+ isn’t used you can share, including any policies about the A+ in your department? (Open-ended)
- Would you support removing the A+ from Mason’s undergraduate regular grading scale, while maintaining all other +/- grades? (Yes/No)

Similar contextual information was provided for questions concerning the C- grade and Mason’s alternative grading scheme implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Potential limitation. While priming was intended to elicit focused and informed responses, it may also have shaped participant framing by foregrounding institutional comparisons or prior policy rationales. As a result, some responses may reflect reactions to the provided context rather than fully independent judgments.

Addressing Two Student Populations

To account for potential, even likely, differences in responses between faculty teaching primarily undergraduate students or those with a focus on graduate education, the survey included a branch in the Qualtrics survey that allowed participants to self-identify as regularly teaching students from one group or the other. Given the different grading policies for graduate and undergraduate (see Tables 1 and 2, and Mason Catalog AP3.1 and AP3.2), this allowed GPTF to focus on undergraduate grading. All data was shared with Graduate Council to use as they see fit, with GPTF co-chairs providing direct assistance as needed.

Survey of Academic Advisors

GPTF crafted a separate survey for academic advisors, a key stakeholder group offering unique insights. The survey was similar to that given to faculty, but included a question regarding advisor workload, asking, “If Mason removed +/- grades, what impact do you

think that would have on your workload (i.e., increase or decrease in time communicating or engaging with students)? Please describe.”

Note: see Appendices 4, 5, and 6 for summaries and prominent themes of each survey.

Analytic Approach

Quantitative responses were analyzed separately from optional open-ended commentary (i.e. binary responses were not paired with the data in this part of the report). This qualitative analysis focused exclusively on non-null narrative responses, which were reviewed and coded using a phenomenological lens to identify recurring themes and points of tension.

Note: Further analysis could potentially yield additional insights regarding faculty attitudes by investigating tone and/or specific language; that is outside the scope and charge of GPTF.

The summaries found in Appendices 5 and 6 present prominent themes that emerged across survey items. Select paraphrased quotations have been provided for illustration. Further analyses—such as examining tone, disciplinary language, or the relationship between multiple-choice responses and narrative explanations—could yield additional insight but were beyond the scope of the GPTF charge.

Appendix 4: Faculty and Advisor Survey Responses

Two surveys (one for all faculty, another targeted to advisors) were launched in late fall 2024 and received 582 faculty responses and 135 advisor responses. **Explanation of the survey design methodology can be found in [Appendix 3](#).** Respondent faculty were affiliated with a wide range of schools and colleges. Most respondents were either tenure stream faculty (41%) or term faculty (38%), with additional representation from adjunct faculty (16%) and administrative or library faculty (5%). Faculty and advisors were presented with a series of multiple-choice questions regarding use of the current A-F grade scale (Table 1) as well as the special circumstances grade scheme used during the COVID-impacted terms (see Table 3), followed by the option to elaborate on their reasoning or describe local practices via open-ended prompts. Faculty and advisor responses to some of the multiple-choice questions are shown below. Thematic analysis of comments from faculty survey respondents is given in [Appendix 5](#) and analysis of advisor survey respondents is given in [Appendix 6](#).

Tables A4-1 through A4-4 show faculty responses to questions on current use of C- and A+ undergraduate grades and support for changes to the undergraduate grade scale (removal of C-, A+, or all plus/minus distinctions from the scheme).

Table A4-1: Is the grade of C- currently (Fall 2024) used in your department or program? (Question 13)

Response	n	%
Yes	276	69.9
No	68	17.2
Unsure	51	12.9

Table A4-2: Would you support removing the C- from Mason's undergraduate regular grading scale, while maintaining all other +/- grades? (Question 15)

Response	n	%
No	210	53.3
Yes	184	46.7

Table A4-3: Do you currently use the A+ in your classes? (Question 16)

Response	n	%
Yes	302	76.6
No	92	23.4

Table A4-4: Would you support removing the A+ from Mason’s undergraduate regular grading scale, while maintaining all other +/- grades? (Question 17)

Response	n	%
No	211	53.3
Yes	185	46.7

Table A4-5: Would you support removing all pluses and minuses from the undergraduate regular grading scale (A, B, C, D, F, IN)? (Question 19)

Response	n	%
No	257	65.1
Maybe	84	21.3
Yes	54	13.7

Tables A4-7 and A4-8 show faculty responses to questions on codifying the alternative grade scheme optionally used during COVID-impacted terms.

Table A4-6: Were you teaching at Mason when the alternative grading scheme was used? (Question 34)

Response	n	%
Yes	307	76.8
No	93	23.2

Table A4-7: Would you support Mason codifying this grading scheme for undergraduate students in campus-wide emergency circumstances only? (Question 8)

Response	n	%
Yes, when students opt in before final grades are available to them	199	51.0
Yes, when students opt in after final grades are available to them	80	20.5
No, I don’t think this option should be offered in emergency circumstances	65	16.7
No, I think the X-grades scheme needs revision	46	11.8

Table A4-8: Would you support Mason codifying this grading scheme for undergraduate students in non-emergency circumstances? (Question 10)

Response	n	%
No, I don't think this option should be offered in non-emergency circumstances	275	69.8
Yes, when students opt in before final grades are available to them	63	16.0
No, I think the X-grades scheme needs revision	32	8.1
Yes, when students opt in after final grades are available to them	24	6.1

Tables A4-9 through A4-11 show advisor responses to questions on current use of C- and A+ undergraduate grades and support for changes to the undergraduate grade scale (removal of C-, A+, or all plus/minus distinctions from the scheme).

Table A4-9: When looking at quantitative data, we saw that C- grades are rarely assigned across Mason. Would you support removing the C- from Mason's undergraduate regular grading scale, while maintaining all other +/- grades? (Question 13)

Response	n	%
Yes	39	54.2
No	33	45.8

Table A4-10: Would you support removing the A+ from Mason's undergraduate regular grading scale, while maintaining all other +/- grades? (Question 16)

Response	n	%
Yes	42	60.0
No	28	40.0

Table A4-11: Some instructors do not use pluses and minuses in the grading scale. Would you support removing all pluses and minuses from the undergraduate regular grading scale (A, B, C, D, F, IN)? (Question 19)

Response	n	%
No	45	67.2
Yes	22	32.8

Tables A4-12 through A4-14 show advisor responses to questions on codifying the alternative grade scheme optionally used during COVID-impacted terms.

Table A4-12: Were you advising at Mason when the alternative grading scheme was used? ? (Question 34)

Response	n	%
Yes	50	68.5
No	23	31.5

Table A4-13: Would you support Mason codifying this grading scheme for undergraduate students in campus-wide emergency circumstances only? (? (Question 8)

Response	n	%
Yes, when students opt in before final grades are available to them	34	47.9
Yes, when students opt in after final grades are available to them	18	25.4
No, I don't think this option should be offered in emergency circumstances	12	16.9
No, I think the X-grades scheme needs revision	7	9.9

Table A4-14: Would you support Mason codifying this grading scheme for undergraduate students in non-emergency circumstances? (Question 10)

Response	n	%
No, I don't think this option should be offered in non-emergency circumstances	61	85.9
No, I think the X-grades scheme needs revision	5	7.0
Yes, when students opt in before final grades are available to them	3	4.2
Yes, when students opt in after final grades are available to them	2	2.8

Appendix 5: Faculty Survey Comments Analysis

The following presents a thematic analysis of the comments volunteered by survey participants.

Question 9 (Q9): Emergency-Only Alternative Grading Schemes

Prompt: Please add any comments you have about why undergraduate students should or shouldn't be offered this alternative grading scheme in emergency circumstances only.

Responses to Q9 reflected the complexity of defining and implementing emergency-only grading alternatives. Initial coding revealed several recurring concerns and considerations, including the definition of "emergency," student stress and well-being, downstream consequences for post-graduate opportunities, and administrative or instructional burden.

Theme 1: Student and Faculty Stress

Many respondents emphasized the potential of alternative grading schemes to reduce stress during extraordinary circumstances. One participant noted that "the policy reduces pressure on students, and on faculty too," while another asked rhetorically, "Are we here to punish them?" These responses framed alternative grading as an ethical or compassionate response to crisis conditions. A smaller number of respondents mentioned stress reduction for faculty, though typically without elaboration.

Theme 2: Student Opt-In vs. Universal Application

Responses were divided regarding the opt-in nature of alternative grading. Supporters of student choice emphasized autonomy and informed decision-making, particularly when learning is disrupted unevenly. As one respondent stated, "Students should know their final grade before opting in or out, so they can make an informed decision, not one based on fear or confusion."

Opponents of opt-in models argued that emergency conditions should apply uniformly to all students or expressed concern that opt-in grading undermines learning outcomes and work habits. Some characterized the policy as a mid-term shift to pass/fail grading that should not occur routinely.

Theme 3: Suggested Alternatives

Several respondents proposed alternatives to Mason's prior emergency grading scheme. Some advocated for broader reconsideration of traditional A–F grading, while others suggested restricting alternative grades to elective courses rather than major or prerequisite coursework.

Summary. Overall, responses to Q9 suggest cautious support for flexibility during emergencies, tempered by concerns about clarity, consistency, and long-term academic consequences.

Question 14 (Q14): Uses and Meanings of the C-

Prompt: Are there specific uses of the C- in your local academic unit? Can you share reasons why the C- isn't used if it is not?

Responses to Q14 revealed significant ambiguity and inconsistency in how the C- grade is understood and applied across units.

Theme 1: University Policies and Requirements

A majority of respondents referenced the requirement of a C or higher to advance in a major or satisfy degree requirements. Many characterized the C- as effectively failing, leading faculty to avoid assigning it or to round grades upward. Others cited administrative guidance discouraging or prohibiting the use of the C-, often without clarity as to whether such guidance was formal policy or departmental practice.

Importantly, responses often conflated the C- as “failing” with its inability to count toward major requirements. GPTF notes that a C- may count toward degree credit in some contexts (e.g., free electives, Mason Core), suggesting a need for clearer institutional communication regarding what the C- signifies.

Note: Only one response explicitly referenced the C- in relation to the 2.0 GPA threshold for academic action. While this absence from other responses does not explicitly imply ignorance of the threshold and its implications, it is notable given the frequency with which respondents cited policy-based concerns without mentioning ‘academic action’ that may impact a student’s funding or support in other areas.

Theme 2: LAU Policies and Mandates

Many faculty described LAU-level policies discouraging or eliminating the C- grade, sometimes through formal votes. Several respondents expressed personal disagreement with such policies, indicating tension between individual pedagogical judgment and unit-level norms.

Theme 3: Instructor Perspectives and Workload

Faculty frequently cited student confusion and the labor involved in appeals as reasons for avoiding the C-. Some argued that if a C- does not allow progression, it should be replaced with a D. Others framed grading as a purely numerical calculation but still questioned

whether the minimal percentage distinctions justifying a C- warranted the administrative burden.

Summary. Collectively, these responses point to a need for greater clarity and consistency regarding the definition, purpose, and consequences of the C- grade.

Question 18 (Q18): Uses and Meanings of the A+

Prompt: Are there specific uses of the A+ or reasons why the A+ isn't used you can share, including any policies about the A+ in your program or department?

Theme 1: A+ as Honorific or Indicator

Many respondents described using the A+ as a marker of exceptional performance beyond numerical thresholds. Some cited its value for letters of recommendation, peer-mentor selection, undergraduate teaching assistantships, or departmental awards.

Theme 2: Challenges Associated with the A+

Other respondents highlighted tensions arising from student disputes over A+ versus A grades, particularly given the lack of GPA distinction. Concerns about perfectionism, student well-being, and reduced academic risk-taking were also noted.

Theme 3: A+ as External Signal

Several faculty viewed the A+ as a signal to graduate programs or employers, sometimes noting that students contextualize grades on résumés by providing a distribution of grades earned during their course of study.

Theme 4: Calculation-Based Approaches

Many respondents reported no need for revisiting the university grading scheme, mentioning that they award grades based solely on numerical data reflecting student achievement in a course.

Question 20 (Q20): Advantages and Disadvantages of the Current Undergraduate Regular Grading Scale

Prompt: What are the advantages and disadvantages of the current undergraduate regular grading scale (A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D, F, IN) when reporting grades (not assessing student work)?

Theme 1: Value of Granularity and Nuance

A dominant theme across responses was strong support for the +/- grading system as a means of providing granular distinctions in student performance. Faculty described the

scale as allowing for more precise reporting of achievement than a coarser letter-grade system, particularly when small but meaningful differences in performance exist.

Theme 2: Motivation and Performance Signaling

Many respondents emphasized the motivational role of +/- grades, noting that finer distinctions encourage students to work harder and provide clearer signals of relative performance. Several faculty cited the communicative value of grades such as B+ versus B- as conveying substantively different levels of achievement.

Theme 3: Instructional Flexibility and Curved Grading

Faculty frequently referenced the utility of the current grading scale in courses that employ curved grading practices. The availability of +/- grades was described as enabling instructors to distribute grades more equitably while maintaining differentiation among students.

Theme 4: Institutional Continuity and Practical Constraints

A number of responses highlighted the difficulty of transitioning away from the current grading system. Concerns included the effort required to recalibrate courses, potential student confusion, and the loss of comparability across cohorts and over time.

Theme 5: Concerns About Grade Inflation

Several respondents expressed concern that removing +/- grades would compress grade distributions and contribute to grade inflation. These responses framed the current scale as a mechanism for preserving meaningful distinctions without upward pressure on final grades.

Summary. Collectively, responses to Q20 reflect broad faculty endorsement of the current undergraduate grading scale, with particular emphasis on its precision, motivational effects, and institutional stability as a reporting mechanism.

Appendix 6: Advisors Survey Comments Analysis

The following presents a thematic analysis of the comments volunteered by survey participants.

Question 9 (Q9): Emergency-Only Grading Schemes

Prompt: Please add any comments you have about why undergraduate students should or shouldn't be offered this alternative grading scheme in campus-wide emergency circumstances only. Do you feel the COVID-19 grading scheme was well understood by students? Do you think it was effective?

Theme 1: Confusion and Consequences

Many respondents cited confusion among students regarding how the alternative grading scheme functioned and its downstream implications. Reported consequences included unintended effects on financial aid, academic progress, and post-graduation opportunities. Some respondents also noted confusion among external audiences (e.g., graduate admissions committees or employers) who may have been unfamiliar with the alternative grading notation. One respondent described students retaking courses to replace X-grades with letter grades in preparation for graduate school applications.

Theme 2: COVID-19 Grading Scheme as Appropriate

Responses expressing support for the alternative grading scheme framed it as an appropriate and fair response to the unprecedented conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faculty emphasized the institution's rapid pivot to remote instruction and the uneven impacts on students' learning environments. Even among supportive responses, however, concerns about student understanding of the policy were frequently noted.

Theme 3: Unintended Consequences

Responses opposing the use of alternative grading schemes emphasized potential long-term detriments to student learning. Some characterized the policy as allowing low-performing students to avoid accountability, with negative effects that would surface in subsequent coursework. One respondent specifically noted that X-grades delayed identification and intervention for students struggling academically, regardless of emergency circumstances.

Summary. Responses to Q9 reflect ambivalence toward emergency-only grading schemes, balancing compassion and flexibility against concerns about clarity, learning outcomes, and long-term consequences.

Question 11 (Q11): Effectiveness of the COVID-19 Grading Scheme

Prompt: Please add any comments you have about why undergraduate students should or shouldn't be offered this alternative grading scheme in campus-wide emergency

circumstances only. Do you feel the COVID-19 grading scheme was well understood by students? Do you think it was effective?

Theme 1: A Disservice to Students

Several respondents described the COVID-19 grading scheme as ultimately disadvantaging students. Concerns included diminished preparedness, erosion of work habits, and complications for post-graduate plans such as graduate school applications. Additional issues raised included poor student understanding of the policy, increased administrative burden, and unintended consequences related to financial aid eligibility.

Theme 2: Revisiting Existing Policies

Rather than adopting alternative grading schemes, many respondents suggested strengthening or clarifying existing academic policies. These included improving transparency around non-academic withdrawals, standardizing practices for granting Incomplete (I) grades, and offering post-term grading options such as Satisfactory/No Credit. Other suggestions included limiting the number of X-grades a student could receive or prohibiting their use within a student's major program of study.

Note. One respondent emphasized the need for a broader cultural shift encouraging earlier student self-reporting of academic difficulty. A proposed example included a structured "pause" or check-in period during the term to prompt students to assess their progress and consider available options such as withdrawal.

Summary. Responses to Q11 suggest skepticism regarding the effectiveness of the COVID-19 grading scheme, with respondents favoring clearer communication and refinement of existing academic support mechanisms.

Question 20 (Q20): Use of the Existing +/- Grading Scheme

Prompt: What are the advantages and disadvantages of the current undergraduate regular grading scale (A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C, C-, D, F, IN) when reporting grades (not assessing student work)?

Theme 1: Accurate Performance Indicator and Student Motivation

A majority of respondents supported retaining the +/- grading system, citing its ability to provide more precise distinctions in student performance and greater flexibility for instructors. Some respondents framed +/- grades as assessment tools, while others emphasized their motivational function—particularly the differentiation between base letter grades and plus grades (e.g., B versus B+).

Theme 2: Suggested Alternatives and Points of Confusion

Several respondents proposed modifications to the current system, often citing confusion surrounding certain grades, particularly the C-. Suggestions included removing the C- due to inconsistent use across programs and its limited applicability toward major requirements. Respondents noted that such ambiguity contributes to student confusion and increased administrative labor.

Note: One response suggested retaining +/- grades for reporting purposes while collapsing GPA point values (e.g., treating A-, A, and A+ equivalently). This approach was framed as preserving nuance in reporting while simplifying GPA calculation for students.

Summary. Responses to Q20 reflect general support for the existing +/- grading scale, alongside targeted concerns about clarity and consistency in how specific grades are used and interpreted.

Question 36 (Q36): Impacts of Removing +/- Grades

Prompt: If Mason removed +/- grades, what impact do you think that would have on undergraduate students and their common concerns (e.g., financial aid, benefits)? Please describe.

Theme 1: Financial Aid Implications

Responses referenced potential impacts on financial aid and scholarships both in favor of and against removing +/- grades. Without additional context or data, responses reflected uncertainty and a lack of consensus regarding whether student GPAs would increase or decrease as a result.

Theme 2: Potential Academic and Post-Graduation Impacts

Many respondents echoed arguments in favor of retaining +/- grades, citing their role in performance differentiation and academic action. Others raised concerns about downstream effects on graduate school admissions and employment opportunities.

Theme 3: Predicted Impacts and Hypothetical Scenarios

Respondents opposing removal frequently offered hypothetical scenarios predicting negative outcomes, including reduced student motivation, grade inflation, GPA compression, or GPA increases not reflective of earned performance. While these claims were speculative and not supported by data within the survey, respondents' close engagement with student records and outcomes was frequently cited as informing their perspectives.

Summary. Responses to Q36 suggest apprehension about unintended consequences of removing +/- grades, particularly with respect to student motivation, GPA interpretation, and institutional outcomes.

Question 37 (Q37): Impact of Removing +/- Grades on Advisor Workload

Prompt: If Mason removed +/- grades, what impact do you think that would have on your workload (i.e., increase or decrease in time communicating or engaging with students)? Please describe.

Theme 1: Workload Remains the Same

The most common response indicated that removing +/- grades would not significantly affect advisor workload. Some respondents anticipated a modest decrease in workload, while others emphasized the need for clear, institution-wide communication of any policy changes and adjustments to early warning or intervention practices.

Theme 2: Increased Workload

A smaller subset of respondents anticipated increased workload due to student disputes, grade appeals, or increased instances of academic action. Some cited expectations of increased “borderline” grade concerns and student advocacy. Responses mentioning direct grade appeals may reflect the inclusion of faculty who also serve as advisors.

Summary. Overall, advisors anticipated minimal workload changes associated with removing +/- grades, though a subset expressed concern about increased student engagement related to grades and academic standing.

Appendix 7: Responses from UGC and GC on Task Force Findings

A representative from the Grade Process Task force attended meetings of both the Undergraduate Council and Graduate Council and presented the Task Force's findings on the use of grades at Mason (see [Goal 1](#) and [Appendix 1](#)) and of faculty and advisor grade use survey responses (see [Goal 3](#) and [Appendix 4](#)). After discussion and considerations, the Councils provided feedback of Task Force findings and recommendations, which are provided below. Minor edits to formatting have been made in order to merge the documents with this report, but no other changes were made.

Response from Undergraduate Council



Office of the Provost
Undergraduate Education, Johnson Center, Room 228
4400 University Drive, MS 1E2, Fairfax, Virginia 22030

April 24, 2025

Dear Members of the Grading Process Task Force:

A representative of the Grading Process Task Force presented the charge and results of the Task Force's work to the Undergraduate Council on February 19 and March 19, and invited feedback from the Council. We appreciate this opportunity, and I am writing this memo to summarize and convey the general feedback from the Undergraduate Council on the Task Force's four primary areas of consideration:

1. Removing the C- grade for undergraduate students
2. Removing the A+ grade for undergraduate students
3. Removing all +/- grades for undergraduate students
4. Codifying the alternative grade scheme used during the COVID-19 pandemic for use by undergraduate students in non-emergency situations

Removing the C- Grade

Council members took note of the fact that C- was the least frequently assigned grade for undergraduate students in the period from Fall 2017 to Summer 2023. In addition to its infrequent use, the Council recognized that this grade has often created confusion in relation to policies that specify a C as a minimum required grade. Some students mistakenly interpret a C- as equivalent to C, not fully recognizing that policies do not align with that interpretation. In addition, because of the policy implications, students and instructors alike feel strong pressure about the assignment of C- as a final grade, leading to excessive requests, complaints, and “back-and-forth” between students and instructors.

On the other hand, Council members did note that a large majority of the peers who were evaluated (79%) assign C- grades. In addition, some units worried that eliminating a C- might lead to grade inflation (with more Cs assigned when a C- might better reflect performance), and that it could possibly lead to some students gaining eligibility for certain courses or credit that otherwise would not have been warranted by their performance (because a student could achieve a C with only a 70% rather than a 73%). On balance, these concerns were endorsed by only a small number of Council members.

In sum, in light of the infrequent use and multiple negative consequences of the C- grade, **the majority of Undergraduate Council membership was in favor** of removing C- from the undergraduate grading scheme at George Mason.

Removing the A+ Grade

Council members noted that the A+ was assigned somewhat frequently at George Mason. Moreover, some members noted the usefulness of the grade for recognizing excellence in a concrete way, and for providing greater discrimination in academic performance across a wide range of students. Furthermore, some members expressed that some graduate and law schools might place value on A+ grades. On the other hand, Council members noted that the A+ was indistinguishable from an A in GPA calculations and was used inconsistently across units and instructors.

In sum, Council members were mixed about the notion of removing the A+ grade. On one hand, overall, slightly more members than not expressed support for **removing** the grade. On the other hand, more potential benefits of retaining the A+ were specified, relative to potential benefits of removing the A+.

Removing all +/- Grades There was **little discussion of or support for** this proposal within the Undergraduate Council.

Codifying the Alternative Grade Scheme

The COVID-19 pandemic was a singularly challenging time in the modern history of higher education. The extreme changes in course delivery that occurred midway through the semester and the global nature of the challenge facing all students and instructors called for dramatic measures. George Mason, like many other institutions, responded in numerous ways, one of which was the alternative grading scheme. Retrospective analysis demonstrated that students disproportionately used this scheme to avoid being penalized for poor performance, which may well have been appropriate in that context.

It is not apparent that there would be benefits to codifying this alternative grading scheme within a standing policy. Council members noted that many policies related to poor academic performance rely on the standard grading scheme, and these policies are intended to help identify students who are struggling before their academic progress is so compromised that they have difficulty succeeding in the long-term. Enabling an alternative grade scheme might allow some students to “skirt around” such policies, inadvertently causing greater problems in the long-term. Moreover, we have policies in place to allow for academic and non-academic withdrawal; thus, in the absence of a widespread emergency, it was not clear what need would be served by codifying this alternative grading scheme in standing policy.

In light of these considerations, the Undergraduate Council membership was **generally opposed** to codifying the alternative grade scheme for undergraduate students.

Sincerely,



Keith D. Renshaw, PhD
Senior Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education

Response from Graduate Council

Graduate Council Feedback Statement on Grading Process Task Force Draft Report

Dear Task Force Members,

Thank you for giving the Graduate Council members the opportunity to provide feedback to the Grading Process Task Force regarding its draft report.

We are pleased to see through the draft report that there is common interest in exploring the utility of +/- grades across the undergraduate and graduate levels. As indicated through the initial survey results, there are considerations unique to graduate education when contemplating the utility of +/- grades. For example, currently, the graduate grading scale in AP.3 only permits the use of + and – grades at the A and B levels. A C- grade is not allowed. Consequently, any changes regarding the use of such grade distinctions would have different impacts on graduate student populations than undergraduates. Over the coming academic year, the Graduate Council will be finalizing a revision and implementation of graduate academic standing policy under AP.6 in the University Catalog that incorporates these considerations and can be more aligned with graduate degree conferral and grading policy expectations.

Thus, we would like to suggest that once the Task Force has fulfilled its charge, the Faculty Senate consider, as a follow-up step, establishing a subcommittee that focuses solely on examination of the graduate grading scale to understand the specific impacts of current and contemplated grading schemes on various graduate populations such as master's and doctoral students. For example, the subcommittee could review data on time-to-degree and attrition rates at the master's and doctoral levels separately. This subcommittee could also study the utility of retaining or discarding +/- options for graduate grading, as well as consider the potential for alignment of any proposed graduate grading scale with graduate academic policies that establish GPA standards for satisfactory progress, admissions, and degree conferral. Additionally, a survey specifically targeted towards graduate faculty, program coordinators, and graduate council voting members would gather additional input and provide valuable insights into the nuances of graduate-level grading policies in daily practice across our varied academic units, including impacts on assistantship eligibility. Finally, solicitation of input from administrative partners such as University Career Services could help inform the subcommittee how any grading scheme may impact our students' competitiveness as they graduate and move on to employment or additional graduate education.

We thank you for your consideration and look forward to further discussions.

Graduate Council

Appendix 8: References and Suggested Reading

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