



Variations in Course Grade Assignments Among Faculty Members

A Study Conducted by

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■ Objectives of Study

- Raise the awareness among faculty about the importance of grading and its variations.
- Assess the variations in assigning grade among faculty members.
- Identify the most commonly used methods for assigning grade by our faculty.
- Explore the main reasons of variations in grade assignment.
- Recommendations to improve grading.

■ Grading Methods Jokes:

- **Dept. of Religion:** Grade is determined by God.
- **Dept. of Philosophy:** What is a grade?
- **Dept. of Mathematics:** Grades are variable.
- **Dept. of History:** All students get the same grade they got last year.
- **Computer Science:** Random number generator determines grade.
- **Law school:** Students are asked to defend their position of why they should receive an A

(Source: www.netfunny.com)

- **There are several grading methods used by faculty members worldwide. Here are some of the famous ones:**
 - **Absolute Grading Method Based on Fixed Scales.**
 - **Absolute Grading Method Based on Content.**
 - **Relative Grading Methods.**

Absolute Grading Methods Based on Fixed Scales

- **Based on a fixed Percent Scale and total score of points.**

Advantages:

- **Clear and understood by students**
- **Grade assignment is direct.**
- **Consistency leads to some fairness.**
- **Increases collaboration among students and reduces negative competitive behaviour.**

Absolute Grading Methods Based on Fixed Scales

Disadvantages:

- Fixed scales are arbitrary & may be meaningless.
- Minimal Variations- Not useful for comparative selection.
- May influence the nature of tests – Course objectives.

Absolute Grading Method Based on Content

- **Based on learning outcomes and course contents where each student is given a grade according to the outcomes that he fulfils and masters.**

Advantages:

- **An objective method fulfilling learning outcomes.**
- **Increases collaboration among students.**
- **Acceptable level of fairness to students.**

Absolute Grading Method Based on Content

Disadvantages:

- Possible mismatching between outcomes and grade.
- Students can get the same grade without measuring desired comparativeness.
- Need frequent adjustment of outcomes over long time.
- May lead to minimum learning, sometimes.

■ **Relative Grading Methods**

- A widely used method based on approximating the grades to a Bell-shaped curve and standard deviation.

Advantages:

- Useful for comparative achievement.
- Tendency for increased learning among students.
- Comparison to peers more than outcomes – useful for relative selection.

Relative Grading Methods

Disadvantages:

- Possible mismatching between outcomes and grade.
- Significantly reduces collaboration among students.
- Not very acceptable level of fairness.
- Arbitrary curves may be meaningless – subjectivity is high.

■ Comparison summary between the three methods

	Fixed Scale	Content Based	Relative Curve
Collaboration among students	High	High	Low
Negative competitiveness	Low	Low	High
Course objectives fulfillment	Low/high	Low/high	Low
Comparativeness	Low	Low	High
Objectivity	Low	High	Low
Fairness	High	High	Low

- A real sample of 25 raw scores of a certain course (including all exams, HWs, quizzes, attendance, class activities, etc.) was sent to faculty members in all the colleges.
- Each participant was asked to assign a letter grade to the given 25 scores and describe the grading method used.
- Total responses received = 75

- **The received responses were analyzed and examined to assess the following:**
 - **The variations of class GPA among the faculty members.**
 - **The variations in the Letter Grade for each student.**
 - **Identify the commonly used grading methods.**

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Grading Method by Faculty Members	No. of Responses
Relative Curve (avg., SD, sorting & clusters)	34
KFUPM Fixed Scale	8
Scaling to Fixed Scale System	4
Scaling using Z-value and T-score	2
Converting the scores to equivalent GPA	3
Not Mentioned	20

■ Distribution of class GPA

Class GPA	<1.80	1.80-2.30	>2.30
# of Faculty	12	50	13
% of the Total	16%	67 %	17 %

■ Overall GPA 2.06

- None of the grading methods used mentioned measuring a course outcomes and instructional objectives.
- Grade variations vary widely (up to 4 letter grades).
- Majority of faculty used the relative curve method, but different cutoffs and clusters.

- Several have used a scaling procedure to proportionally adjust the grades.
- Some have used the standard scale in the University regulations.
- Consultation with other faculty have not been mentioned in the process of grading.
- Average and low performing Students have bigger chance of getting different grades than solid strong and failing ones.

- **There is a great need for awareness on the subject among faculty:**
 - Discussion forums within Depts./Colleges.
 - Sharing and exchange approaches among them.
 - General instructions are needed.
- **A content based grading approach that is tied with the learning outcomes needs to be considered.**
- **Design of exams and class activities affect the grading results and should be observed.**

- A mixture between relative and content based grading may be a reasonable approach.
- A University-wide Taskforce should be assigned to
 - Further study this matter.
 - Compare with international standards.
 - Develop a University grading guidelines for faculty.
- Students should be informed of the grading method and expectations early in the course.
- Student feedback on their satisfaction of the grading process and learning outcomes can be sought.

- It is not appropriate for chairmen to formulate prior expectations on grades distribution or average, which may lead faculty to adjust their grading.
- **A question:** Could grading variations and approaches affect the overall University GPA?

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Thank You