

# helpful than a mark?

not only the basic transcript and the student's evaluations for the last six quarters—normally eighteen evaluations—but a summary evaluation, written by the student's adviser on the basis of the student's entire academic record and of the adviser's personal knowledge of him. This summary evaluation is the only confidential document in the student's file.

## Evaluation

You will appreciate that the written evaluation by the instructor of the student's performance in each course is the essential ingredient of the pass-fail system at Santa Cruz.

The type of evaluation expected is laid down in an official memorandum of two closely printed sides circulated to all instructors. The most important single rule is that the instructor must evaluate the student's work, *not the student*. Thus, you can *never* say "Joe Blow is lazy"; what you *can* say is "Joe Blow didn't do a lick of work all quarter". The distinction is essential.

Even with the best of guidance, however, from the instructor's point of view writing evaluations is a time-consuming and exacting task, requiring not only at least a day's time for an average-sized class, but a certain amount of practice and skill. I must confess that the first set of evaluations I wrote was far too curt. But by the end of the year I had more or less mastered the technique, and found myself writing an appraisal of each piece of written work turned in by each student, plus an assessment of his contribution to class discussion, plus in some cases an over-all statement as to the student's performance.

## Evaluation in practice

A few examples may serve to show the way in which evaluations reveal the student's performance.

Student A, widely read in both medieval and modern history, with a special interest in medieval art, and an exceptional sensitivity to prose style, made many contributions to class discussion and displayed, in my opinion, more originality of mind in proposing new and convincing interpretations of evidence than any other student I have encountered. Student B was an unstoppable worker, who would read at least three dozen books on any essay topic, half of them in German, and come up with an essay that was completely documented and faultlessly written and often witty and entertaining; she also had a real talent for writing examinations. I am glad that I could report these facts on their evaluations, without having to give a numerical grade.

At the other end of the scale, Student C had what seemed to be a number of *idées fixes* drawn from a superficial study of theology and sociology that prevented him from appreciating or even looking for evidence; and his command of language was frankly inadequate to the point of being a palpable impediment to proper reasoning. He had done enough work in the course that I felt he should be awarded a pass, but my lengthy evaluation, directed partly to his adviser, made clear my dissatisfaction with his work, and strongly recommended further study of languages.

Student D came from a Japanese background, and was taking my course because he wanted to know more about Western civilization; as a Buddhist he found the Reformation especially inscrutable. He was neither the most erudite scholar nor the most polished writer in the class, and on a numerical grading he would have suffered in comparison with others; but I was happy with his work because his essay projects clearly showed that within the limits of his topics he had achieved a real living rapport with certain aspects of fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, and on his evaluation I could say so.

It will be evident from these examples how much more meaningful a written evaluation can be than a simple number or letter.

## Dangers in evaluation

Two problems may occur to you in connection with evaluation. One is the problem of the very large class; the other that of personal prejudice on the part of the instructor.

Large classes present a real difficulty. Without the help of a teaching assistant, it may be actually impossible to come to know many students well enough to evaluate them meaningfully. One is still permitted, of course, to give examination results on the student by letter grades or even in numerical terms; this may be useful and will not be supposed to refer to any standard but the instructor's own. The advice of the Committee on Educational Policy, however, was to pick out the best and the worst students in the class—there will always be a few who stand out—to evaluate them, and for the large number in the middle to write something like "In this very large class, Joe Blow had little opportunity to distinguish himself as either very good or very bad. However, his work was clearly passing." Even this is more meaningful than a mere letter-grade.

Bias in the instructor is perhaps an even more awkward problem, though I believe that in practice there has been no cause for complaint about it. My guess is, however, that a really

prejudiced evaluation would be revealed, as often as not, by the terms used by the instructor. If not, it might still be detected by contrast with the other evaluations the student had received.

If personal prejudice is suspected the student's adviser is in a position to help him. The adviser has the power to suppress an obviously prejudiced or frivolous evaluation from the student's circulated transcript. He also may take exception to it in his confidential summary evaluation. Such safeguards may not be absolute, but once again, they offer far more protection to the student than a mere numerical grading system.

## Honors

There is no provision in the grading system, as distinguished from the evaluations, for recognizing specially meritorious performances. However, at the end of a student's degree program, his work is reviewed both by the Board of Studies in the subject in which he has majored, and by the council of the college of which he is a member.

"With Honors in Astrobotany" or whatever—rarely "Highest Honors"—on the basis of the student's performance in courses in that subject. The College may award "General College Honors" for excellence in the student's record in all courses taken together. The student may thus receive honors in his subject, general college honors, or quite often both.

The decision to award honors, once again, is necessarily subjective, but at least it is a collective decision and the student has two chances. It would be hard to prove that the award of distinction on the basis of a numerical average is in reality any less subjective.

## Estimate of the system

You may gather from the tone of my presentation that I strongly approve of the system of evaluation used at Santa Cruz, and I do. I have in fact just one unfavorable criticism of it. Under the rules with respect to academic standing, one failure places a student on academic warning; a second failure places him on probation; a third dismisses him from the institution. In view of the extraordinary pressure on admissions at UCSC, such severity is understandable.

However, in practice I am inclined to suspect — of course I cannot produce evidence — that it leads to some distortion in the grading system. Theoretically, a low pass — a 'D' at most American institutions — should

lead to failure at Santa Cruz. But most instructors, contrary to popular belief, are softies at heart, and knowing the consequences of even one failure on a student's record, they are, I suspect, very reluctant not to award a pass.

The high intelligence of the student body, and the excellent teaching on which UCSC plumes itself, are of course alternative explanations for the low failure rate and probably valid ones; but it would be interesting to see what would happen if each student were allowed *one* failure with no further penalty, on somewhat the same principle as that which in law allows every dog one bite.

Having made this comment, however, I must say that the system of grading and evaluation at Santa Cruz seems to me to be excellent. It avoids the spurious appearance of mathematical exactitude and all the questions of comparability of grade resulting from a numerical grading system, and at the same time affords much more meaningful information about a student's work both to those concerned with assessing the student's record and to the student himself.

## Pass-fail at Alberta?

If the pass-fail system were to be adopted at The University of Alberta, I believe that two main changes would have to be made in the system, and two in the University. As for changes in the system:

First, Alberta has no college system, and so the award of "General College Honors" would be out of the question.

Secondly, the term "Honors" used to indicate a level of performance at Santa Cruz means at Alberta a different type of curriculum. The Alberta equivalent, as far as I can see, is "Distinction"; thus a degree might be awarded with "Honors and Distinction (or even "High Distinction") in History".

As for changes in the University:

You will have observed that the student's adviser has an important role to play in the grading and evaluating process. If the pass-fail system were adopted here, I believe that large numbers of staff would have to be willing to undertake the work of an adviser to limited numbers of students. In my opinion, the appointment of staff members as advisers would be desirable in any event; advisers have a multiplicity of uses.

Finally, the staff would have to accept the fact that pass-fail grading, with evaluations, is a lot of work; even when done once instead of three times a year, it will take days on end out of their lives. I cannot speak for my colleagues, but in my opinion, the extra effort is worth it.