

# The Nine-Point Grading System comes of age

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by Brent Jang

Twenty years ago, sixty-nine members of the General Faculties Council (GFC), decided to switch from a percentage grading system to a nine-point grading system.

The vote was hardly unanimous: 29 For the nine-point scale, 16 Against and 24 Undecided.

After two years of administrative and academic discussions, the Grade Point System was implemented in September 1966.

Seventeen-and-a-half years later, the "new" marking system remains intact, having gone through several GFC reviews and revisions.

U of A Registrar William Blanchard says "the most common misunderstanding in the student community is the idea that we have a stanine system. A stanine system is a formal, forced distribution of grades and that's not what we have. If you look at the suggested distribution in the grade book, you'll see it's referred to as the Nine-Point Grading System. It's a suggested distribution and it's not forced upon a class before the fact."

Faye Alexander, the admissions supervisor for the Faculty of Business, says "high school students don't understand the system. You're not supposed to equate it with percentages. The majority of the professors grade on percentages, then use a chart or some other mechanism to convert it to a mark on the nine-point scale."

Faculty of Arts Associate Dean B.L. Harris says: "I haven't heard students say this is a wonderful system. We occasionally get complaints in institutional conversions (for transfer students) to the nine-point system."

"None of us likes to be evaluated because it has such implications for one's life — for one's future," said Blanchard. "But I think the Grade Point Average (GPA) is a useful instrument. Its usefulness is limited, of course. And as long as it's used in this limited way, I think it can be both valuable and a good thing."

"If you're asking me if I'm going to characterize somebody as an 8.0 student or a 7.0 student, and if I make a judgment that has moral overtones with respect to the basic values of the individual, then the grade is being misused. However, if you want to use it to characterize the individual's academic achievements and perhaps some inference about his abilities in an academic setting, you've got to delimit the meaningful use of that particular method of assessment."

"It'd be a dangerous mistake to broaden a grade so that you begin to characterize the individual's basic worth as a person, as a member of society, in those limited terms. And it's a mistake that we're prone to," said Blanchard.

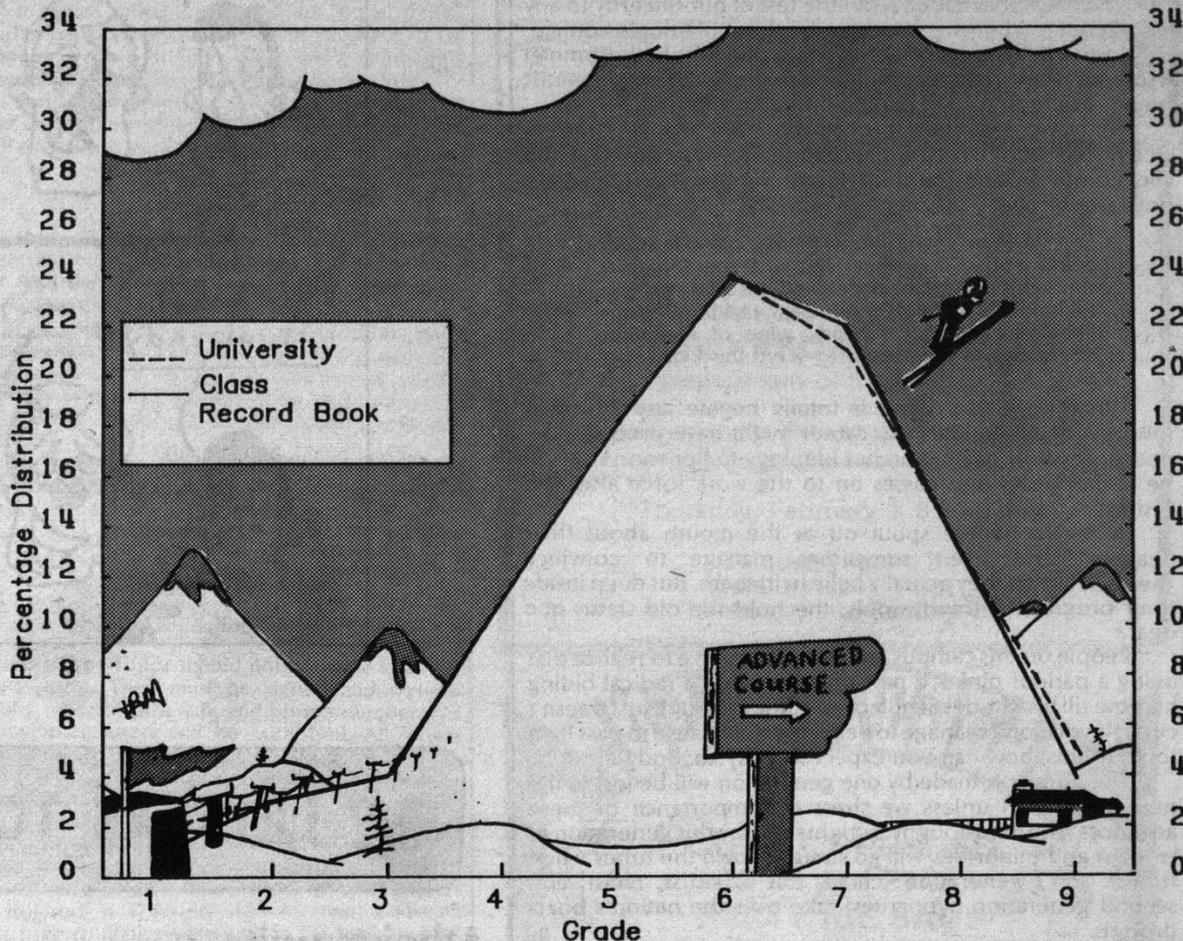
Arts Associate Dean Harris said "if some student has an 8.0 and another has a 6.0, then the 8.0 student, by academic standards, has obviously achieved demonstratively better work. He's achieved higher on the scale. Still, one must be careful about generalizing across the university."

"If a section is marked radically different," said Alexander of the Business faculty, "the faculty can talk to the instructor. It can't tell the instructor to change the mark. Most students calm down when they find out they've received a low grade. In any case, there needs to be consistency between multi-section courses."

Harris asserts that "grade returns go through a variety of stages. There're filtered out for unusual practices and errors."

"I think this system we're using is as good as any," said Blanchard, "All systems for assessing people, in that they are invented by and used by people, are imperfect."

1981-82 Grade Distributions in 200 Level Courses with at least 100 Numeric Grades Assigned



The skier in the above graph has a Grade Point Average of 7.8. The skier represents a top student in a typical 200 level course. According to the 1971-72 "approximate distribution" for marks, you have a four per cent chance of getting a nine, a thirteen per cent chance of getting an eight, and a twenty-two per cent chance of getting a seven. As depicted in the fictitious ski hill, getting a

one, two, or three can be likened to the difficulty of skiing down a bunny hill. Getting a four is only slightly more difficult, while eighteen per cent of you will get fives and twenty-four per cent of you will get sixes. These are only suggested ways of giving out marks, although many professors have been known to adhere to them rather strictly.

A study released last year by Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) said "average grades have varied considerably over the (past) twelve years."

Agriculture and Forestry, Home Economics, and Medicine have shown the greatest variability in marks in 200-level courses.

The GPA in Agriculture and Forestry in 1971-72 was 5.8. In 1981-82, it was 7.0.

In Home Economics, the GPA was 5.9 in 1971-72, rose to 7.2 in 1979-80, and slipped to 5.8 in 1981-82.

In Medicine, the GPA in 1970-71 was 6.5 and in 1981-82, it was 5.4

In courses numbered 200-299 or first year courses, the overall GPA at the University of Alberta was 5.9. For 300-level courses the GPA was 6.2, and for 400-level courses, it was 6.6.

"I don't think it's the system's fault," said Blanchard, referring to the IRP findings, "You'd find the same amount of variability regardless of the system. It

probably has more to do with the understanding of the system and with the educating of others of its use.

"There are all kinds of explanations that one could generate on speculative basis for that kind of variability. Maybe there was a real variability in performance. Not that students were brighter a particular year, but they applied themselves."

The grade point system, particularly the problems with the distribution of marks, was investigated most recently in 1982-83 by GFC's Academic Development Committee (ADC). ADC eventually settled with the 1971-72 "approximate distribution:"

GRADE	APPROX. DISTR.
9	4 percent
8 Excellent	13 percent
7	22 percent
6 Good	24 percent
5	18 percent
4 Pass	11 percent
3 Conditional	4 percent
2	3 percent
1	1 percent

ADC decided not to discuss the Pass/Fail system, feeling it was a non-issue. Blanchard says this is because the Pass/Fail alternative was tried on a discretionary basis and was found to be unsuccessful in the 1970s.

"Pass/Fail would effectively be a waste of our time and our energy and our resources," said Blanchard. "I'd be hard pressed to see any advantages. The primary argument for Pass/Fail is that it is useful if you want to take a course for interest in something outside your major. For example, if a Fine Arts student feels that he or she lacks the background and lacks the preparation for a physics course, the student might not take it. And in a liberal arts argument, you would want to encourage that kind of cross-over."

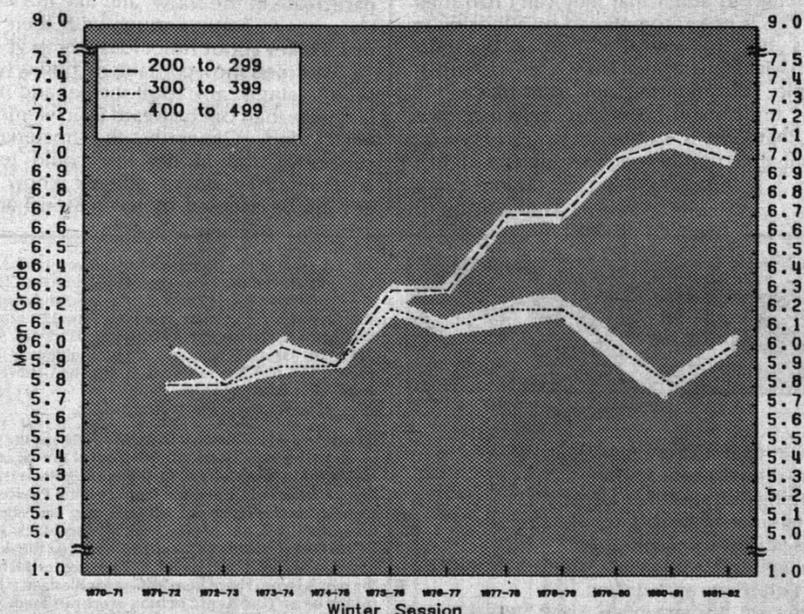
"The Grade Point System is needed to make awards, give scholarships, and determine who gets into graduate school. Employers also want to know."

Alexander agreed, saying, "Pass/Fail is not definitive enough. You'd find entrance exams springing up all over the place. And how would you do things like administer your awards?"

Blanchard says the Nine-Point System is so imbedded in our computer support system, it'd be a radical change to go to Pass/Fail because of both cost and personal adjustment.

"Pass/Fail had a minor flourish, but the Grade Point System, whether it be on a scale of four or nine, is here to stay," said Blanchard.

Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry Grade Distributions for Courses Numbered 200 to 499 with at least 100 Numeric Grades Assigned



This graph shows the variability in the nine-point system. The GPA in Agriculture and Forestry in 1971-72 was 5.8. In 1981-82 it was 7.0. "It's not the (GPA) system's fault," says Registrar William Blanchard.