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**July-August 1999 University of Illinois at  
Urbana-Champaign**

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## **ACADEMIC PROGRAMS**

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**From the Office of Associate Dean**

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# **Guidelines and Concerns Regarding Plus/Minus Grades**

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**The following statement was prepared by the ACES Undergraduate Educational Policy Committee. In 1993, the UIUC Senate revised the campus grading system to include plus and minus grades (Section 70 of the Code of Policies and Regulations Applying to All Students). The new grading system became effective Fall 1996. While there are some important positive attributes associated with the revised grading system, there have been several issues raised regarding its use. These issues affect many students and are a source of complaints to advisors and the College. Students report that they are sometimes unaware of the grading system used in a course until the end of the semester. Others report that the instructor changes the grading system during or at the end of the semester. Still others report that a different grading system is used in the same course taught by different instructors. Worse yet, some students report that different grading**

**systems are used in different sections of a course taught in the same semester. And finally, students are concerned that there is no mathematical balance to a grade of A-, since A+ is equal to an A in the computation of the point hour ratio.**

**ACES Undergraduate Educational Policy Committee has reviewed the plus-minus grading system and the various issues that have been raised. UEPC fully embraces the rights of the individual instructor to use whatever grading system he or she deems appropriate, within the rules of the campus. The use of a plus/minus grading system is determined by the instructor. Students may be awarded grades on a scale that includes only A, B, C, D, and F.**

**UEPC encourages all instructors to establish the grading system for the course prior to the start of the session, publish the grading system as a part of the course syllabus, and not alter the grading system during the progress of the course.**

**UEPC also encourages multiple instructors of the same course to be consistent in using the same grading system.**

**UEPC encourages instructors to delete A- from the grading scale if plus/minus grades are used. This action would eliminate the "penalty" of A- when there is no equal "reward" for A+.**

**UEPC recommends that the same grading system be used in multiple sections of a course taught during the same semester.**

**UEPC has forwarded a recommendation to the College to request a change in GPA calculation. The current system that is used can create errors in rounding, so that 7 hours of B+ and 7 hours of B- result in a 2.99 rather than a 3.00. Instructors and others should be cautious in making decisions based on GPA when small differences among students may be due to calculation error rather than**

**performance.**

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# **ACES TEACHING SYMPOSIUM**

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**Dr. M. Susie Whittington from Penn State will be the keynote speaker and workshop leader for the second annual ACES Fall Teaching Symposium. The theme for this year's symposium is Cognitive Challenges for Today's Students. Dr. Whittington has conducted various research projects at Penn State, Ohio State and the University of Idaho that address opportunities given by professors for students to think at higher cognitive levels during class. The premise is that if students are to acquire and enhance higher level thought processes, then instructors must teach and test at those higher levels. The symposium will include a presentation on cognition plus small group activities to help instructors assess their cognitive level of instruction and implement cognitive strategies.**

**Registration materials will be distributed Aug. 1. The symposium will be held on Friday, Aug. 20, 8:30 a.m. -1:00 p.m. at the Levis Faculty Center.**

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## **Getting Started Right — A Good Course Syllabus**

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**Starting off right for the fall semester (or the start of any teaching activity) begins with a good course syllabus. As instructors, we are actually not even required to have a written syllabus, once the course is approved by**

**campus. That approval may have occurred years ago!**

**Why have a course syllabus? Think of the syllabus as a contract, or a pre-course agreement. The instructor provides sufficient information for the students to know what is going to happen, what each party of the contract is expected to do, and what the results will be if the terms of the agreement are not fulfilled.**

**Instructor Information Most syllabi begin with what the instructor will do. By sharing pertinent information about the instructor and any teaching assistants, the message is sent that the instructor is available to assist students as needed. Be careful — indicating "office hours" of one hour per week for a course with 100 students sends the message that the instructor is NOT willing to meet with students! But providing a web board, e-mail address or chat space can be an excellent opportunity for students to ask questions and receive feedback.**

**Course Objectives The most important content of the syllabus is the list of course objectives. Here is where the instructor says "This is what you will learn. And if you show me you have learned this, you will pass the course." Objectives can be broad, but they must be written so that course topics and daily class topics can be tied back to them. Class topics help students (and the instructor) keep on-task and on a reasonable time line. And the daily schedule helps students plan for reading, homework, papers and examinations. It is only fair to let students know, at the beginning of the course, what is expected and when.**

**Assignments Students turn to this section first. What do they have to do in the course? All course assignments should be listed on the syllabus. Remember, the students are entering into a contract, and they deserve to**

**know every expectation up front. Additional details of assignments can be distributed later if necessary, but the outline of expected work should be on the syllabus. Assignments must be aligned with the course objectives. Students should be able to see how each assignment contributes toward their learning and toward the instructor's assessment of how well the objectives are being met. Grading** Grading criteria must be congruent with what was approved for the course and any department regulations. The grading scale must appear on the syllabus, and must not be changed during or after the course! Be clear about the use of plus/minus grades. Each evaluation of a student's work should contribute to the student's ability to evaluate his or her own work more effectively. Timing is also important; will the student have sufficient knowledge of the progress being made in the course prior to the deadline for dropping the course?

**Excuses and Errant Behavior** Not every concern can be anticipated, but it is helpful to be ready for common concerns such as the late paper, missed exam, or illness. The course policy should be included in the syllabus, but be prepared to temper the strict written version as needed. Include a statement on academic misconduct, indicating that students are responsible for understanding the campus Code (Section 33) and that the Code will be followed.

**A clear and complete syllabus paves the way for good communication throughout the semester and prevents surprises and disappointments along the way. Good communication during the course helps prevent confrontation at the end. A well-written syllabus is worth the investment!**

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# **New Gen Ed Course Proposed**

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**Darrel Kesler has been awarded a Gen Ed Cultural Studies Course Development Grant for AN SCI 110, Living with Animals and Biotechnology. Professor Kesler will be revising the course to meet Gen Ed requirements and submit the course for approval during the 1999-00 academic year. When approved, this will be only the fourth ACES course accepted for meeting the Cultural Studies requirement of the Gen Ed curriculum.**

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**Teaching Enhancement  
Seminars The May-June issue of Academic Programs included a response sheet for suggesting topics to be addressed in Spice Box Seminars for 1999-00. If you have not taken the time to complete and return the form, please take a moment to do so now. Thanks!!**

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## **An Experience with Contract Grading**

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**Adapted from The Teaching Professor, April 1999.**

**In contract grading, students typically select**

**what**

**grade they want and at the same time see how much and what type of work is required for the grade. They "contract" to do the work. It's an approach that makes some different philosophical assumptions about students, learning, and assessment. The point of the article referenced below is not to make the philosophical case, although key points are mentioned and the article contains references to pieces that more completely address the philosophical issues. Here the focus is on how a biology faculty person used a "streamlined" kind of contract system in a non-majors biology lab. It's an interesting example.**

**In this course, lab instructor and faculty member Harold J. Grau graded student performance in three areas: 1) quizzes; 2) lab hand-ins (in this case written work, sort of lab reports but with some differences); and 3) out-of-lab experiences (viewing videos and reporting on them, completing computer simulation exercises). Under the terms of this contract, in order to get an A, students needed to pass five quizzes, complete five lab hand-ins with three receiving a check-plus, and complete five out-of-lab experiences with a check-plus needed on a designated two. The contract requirements for the other grades are specified in the article. A total of eight quizzes were given, and there were seven possible lab hand-ins and six out-of-lab experiences.**

**The streamlined part of the contract was Grau's use of check (equivalent to C or better), a check-plus (equivalent to A), and a U for unsatisfactory work. He used this approach because it de-emphasized grade numbers, thereby encouraging both the students and faculty member to be focused on mastering the material and completing the required number of assignments. He also**

**believed the approach streamlined the instructor's work by reducing some of the bookkeeping as well as the number and intensity of student grade grievances. Best of all, he found it was a quicker and more efficient grading system because it eliminated the need to allocate multiple points across different categories.**

**Rather than just worrying and wondering whether these two important variables compromised course quality and performance standards, Grau developed a comprehensive system to test the contract grading systems. He graded student work using both his traditional approach and the new streamlined grading scheme.**

**Grau concluded from the analysis that the streamlined contract grading system is fair to the students and does not compromise standards of evaluation. Although any given student would likely have received a grade that was slightly different (either higher or lower) from what he or she would have earned with a traditional grading scheme, the average grades were virtually identical between the two grading schemes.**

**Grau reports not all student feedback was positive. On an end-of-course evaluation, one student described the grading system as "kind of crazy." But then perhaps a bit of crazy is just what's needed to help cure student complacency.**

**Reference: Grau, Harold J. (February 1999). "Streamlined" contract grading— A performance measuring alternative to traditional evaluation methods. Journal of College Science Teaching. 254-258.**

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## **Participate in North Central Workshop**

**Seven faculty from ACES participated in the annual North Central Teaching Workshop at Iowa State University. The workshop is sponsored by the North Central Academic Programs Section. Those who attended from ACES were: Lei Tian, Agricultural Engineering; Vince Gabert, Animal Sciences; Sandra Rodriguez-Zas, Animal Sciences; Patrick Tranel, Crop Sciences; German Bollero, Crop Sciences; Joe Harper, Human and Community Development and Robert Hudson, Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences.**

**The theme for the 1999 conference was Communications Across the Curriculum. Iowa State has been conducting a wide range of activities to support the improvement of students' communications skills in all areas of the curriculum. A clearinghouse of courses, strategies and programs is located on the project web site. <http://www.ag.iastate.edu/grants/home/html>**

**The involvement of ACES faculty was supported financially by the Gardner Teaching Enhancement Endowment and the departments of the participants.**

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## **LeaderShape 1999**

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**The College of ACES is firmly committed to the total development of our undergraduate students, including opportunities for them to acquire and refine leadership skills. Each year the College supports the participation of selected undergraduate students in the LeaderShape program. Twelve students are participating in this summer's program. During the week-long event, students**

**participate in various workshops to learn more about their own abilities, learn new skills, and develop plans for applying what they learned in student organizations and activities. Activities such as the ACES New Student Welcome are a direct result of LeaderShape participation. This year's participants included: Laurel Barmore, ACE; Kimberly Bartlow, ACE; Cindy Boston, ACE; DaVon Carter, HCD; Michael Gunderson, ACE; Amy Matthews, HCD; Paula Meeker, ACE; Sarah Pfeifer, ANSCI; Jack Riewerts, ACE; Jennifer Smith, NRES; Mark Uchanski, NRES and Jeremy Williams, ANSCI.**

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## **Champaign Unit 4 Summer Mentors**

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**Faculty and staff from ACES participated as mentors for the 1999 Champaign Unit 4 Summer Mentor Program, a science program for teachers who want to enhance scientific literacy skills by working with mentors in labs of UIUC. The program is sponsored by Cham paign Schools Science Center, Chicago Section of the Institute of Food Technologists, ACES, and the Departments of Crop Sciences, Food Science and Human Nutrition and Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences. Participants from ACES included Marv Carbonneau, Dianne Noland, John Hassett, and Robert Novak from NRES; Patrick Tranel, and Lane Rayburn from CRSC; and William Artz and Karl Weingartner from FSHN. Kris Campbell, FSHN, is a coordinator for the program.**

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# Ideas for Teaching Enhancement Seminars

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**Student ratings of courses and instructors should serve as one source of evidence in determining areas where we can improve. The ACES teaching enhancement seminars in 1999-2000 will address ICES questionnaire items that receive relatively lower "scores" from students. The following is a partial list of ICES items that are frequently used in ACES. Please mark those items (or many as you want) that receive lower scores or that you would like some assistance in making improvements. There is also room to make additional suggestions for teaching enhancement seminar topics. Once you have completed the survey form, fold it so that the return address is visible and drop it in campus mail. Thanks for your assistance.**

**1. Was the progression of the course logical and coherent from beginning to end?**

**2. Clarity of objectives and purposes of the course.**

**3. Instructor's classroom performance**

**Daily preparation: excellent/poor**

**Vocal delivery: excellent/poor**

**Clarity of presentation: excellent/poor**

**Ability to answer questions: excellent/poor**

**Enthusiasm for teaching the subject:  
excellent/poor**

**Ability to arouse interest and stimulate  
study: excellent/poor**

**Explanation of subject matter: excellent/poor**

**Apparent knowledge of the subject: excellent/  
poor**

**Organizational skills: excellent/poor**

**Availability to students: excellent/poor**  
**Fairness in grading exams: excellent/poor**

**4. The main points of lectures were clearly understood.**

**5. Instructional materials**

**Text: useful and helpful/useless**

**Homework: useful and helpful/useless**

**Use of blackboard/overhead transparency:  
useful and helpful/useless**

**6. Laboratory Assignments content and/or length**

**7. How helpful did you find the Labs/  
Discussion instruction?**

**8. Were Labs/Discussion coordinated with  
class work? and important to learning in this  
course?**

**9. Did this course improve your  
understanding of concepts and principles in  
this field?**

**10. Quizzes and Exams**

**Length: too short/too short**

**Difficulty: too difficult/too easy**

**Fairness: very fair content/unfair content**

**Grading: fairly graded/unfairly graded**

**11. Workload for the course credit given: too  
much work/too little work.**

**12. Appropriateness of exams relative to  
course content.**

**13. Amount of work required for the credit  
earned.**

**14. The grading procedures for the course**

were: very fair/very unfair.

**Other suggested topics**

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