

# WASC Self-Study Newsletter # 3

June 20, 2002

## Grading Trends at CSUSB

One of the critical issues that emerged in developing our WASC Preparatory Report is the general topic of Grade Inflation and Evidence of Student Achievement. After several years of not being able to run Grade Distribution Reports due to changes in software and the database format, this year we have started to look more systematically at trend data for grades assigned by instructors. We have now prepared an analysis of long-term trends in Grade Point Averages and we would like to begin a widespread campus conversation about this topic.

A series of reports and analyses are posted at:

<http://wasc.csusb.edu/data/grades/>

### Some Trends noted:

--Grade Inflation appears to be a serious problem. The average grade given has gone up consistently since 1965: From 2.37 in 1965-66 to 2.98 in 2000-01, yet the faculty surveys rate the preparation and quality of students as very low and lower than comparison institutions. We also know that we have a very high percentage of under-prepared students, who need remediation in either Mathematics or English. Here is the link to charts and graphs for this historical trend data:

<http://wasc.csusb.edu/data/grades/GradeDistTrend.pdf>

The increases are more pronounced in some departments and, in recent years, much of the rise has been in a couple of colleges, which have large graduate enrollments. Even since 1995, overall GPAs have gone up gradually at each class level, yet individual departments and disciplines have their own unique trends and ups and downs from year to year. Here is where you will find break down of the data by college and departments:

<http://wasc.csusb.edu/data/grades/Grades1994-2001Rev.pdf>

--Most disturbing is the very high (and growing) percentage of A grades given in recent years: *40% of all grades given at the undergraduate level were A or A- in 2000-01.* Here is the breakdown by course level:

39.8% for 100-level classes  
34.1% for 200-level classes  
40.4% for 300-level classes  
52.1% for 400-level classes  
69.4% for 500-level classes

**83.9% for 600-level classes**

**--The average grade goes up by level from first year to graduate level.**

**--Grades go down with faculty rank from Teaching Assistant to Full Professor. See:**

<http://wasc.csusb.edu/data/grades/GradesByRank.pdf>

**Higher grades are given by part-time faculty members. 43.9% of sections taught during Winter, Spring and Fall of 2001 were taught by Part-time faculty--who tend to give higher grades than Full-time faculty. In 2001, the average grade given by rank was:**

**3.42 by Teaching Assistants (58% As)**

**3.23 by Instructors (48% As)**

**2.30 by Assistant Professors (47.6 % As)**

**3.19 by Associate Professors (42.1% As)**

**3.18 by Full Professors (37.8% As)**

**--The relationship of high grades to high Student Evaluations of Teaching Effectiveness (SETE) ratings seems clear. Our analysis of SETE ratings revealed that the higher the grades given, the higher the student rating of faculty member. This needs further investigation by departments and university committees.**

**--SETE formats and procedures need further analysis and possible revision by Faculty Senate committees. Since such a small percentage of courses taught by tenured faculty are evaluated the data in our study may not be representative and the results may be skewed.**

**A number of questions about the rise in average GPA have been raised: Are we simply getting better and better students? Are students studying more or more effectively? Our participation in the pilot study of the National Survey of Student Engagement showed that our CSUSB undergraduate students study fewer hours per week for each course than students at other comprehensive universities in the study. In fact, in almost every measure of student involvement in both academics and campus life, CSUSB ranked in the lowest quartile. The original sample (285 students) was fairly small, however, and we have expanded our pool to 1000 students. By September 2002 we hope to have more comprehensive results from a three-year period. We also have formed a cohort of other CSU campuses that have agreed to participate in this study and we have arranged to share data with this comparison group.**

**The University GE Assessment Committee also attempted during 2001 to get comparative data about the General Education knowledge and skills of our CSUSB students. The results from having 1100 upper division CSUSB students take the ETS Academic Profile exam were disappointing. Although the median score of**

**CSUSB students was lower than that of students at 610 comparable institutions, the spread of scores from highest to lowest was not great and just a small improvement would have moved CSUSB to the median. The Academic Profile does provide average scores for our students' ability to use and apply reading, critical thinking, quantitative, and analytical skills to Humanities, Social Sciences, and Natural Sciences, but this exam provided little useful information on what might be done to improve our scores or about the content knowledge gained from our GE program.**

**Still, the low scores on this exam of ability and broad knowledge further reinforce the concern about grade inflation and the amount and quality of student academic effort. And, we still need to develop better local measurements of the effectiveness of instruction and learning in our General Education program. The GE Assessment Committee has been working with faculty representatives from each college to develop more explicit expectations for each GE category and is planning to develop a series of "embedded questions" for the Humanities, Social Sciences and Natural Science breadth areas, which we plan to pilot test in GE courses in the Fall of 2002 and track over time.**

**A number of other questions about the rise in average GPA have been discussed: Are we being realistic and honest in our evaluation of student work? Are faculty being more explicit about their expectations and giving clearer directions and using better instructional methods? Are we simply lowering our expectations? Are part-time and junior faculty members being subtly pressured to grade easier? Are we doing more "mastery teaching" and/or competency-based learning rather than grading on a strict curve?**

**All these questions and many other issues need to be discussed and debated in the academic departments over the next year. There does not seem to be an easy explanation or solution. We don't expect that the same conclusions will be reached or the same approach will be used in every department--and we certainly won't put pressure on individual faculty members to change their grading practices, yet we believe this matter warrants full discussion and careful consideration throughout the university and by Faculty Senate committees.**

**Ross Moran and the Institutional Research Office staff are developing some training materials that will assist a department chair or individual faculty member to use Excel spreadsheets to examine the data in more depth. They are hoping to make it easy to do comparisons of average grades given by college, department, year, course, or instructor. Thus, faculty members could look at how they have been grading over several years, or over several terms in a particular course, or compare their grading in a course with faculty teaching other sections of the same courses. We intend to share this normative grading data regularly with deans, department chairs, curriculum committees, and individual faculty members so they can compare their grading patterns to that of their colleagues.**

Faculty members involved directly in the WASC self-study effort to date have been generally alarmed by the information presented here. Accordingly, some have suggested that it is imperative that the campus as a whole begins to engage in open dialogue and discussion regarding it. The timing of this newsletter may be regarded by some as unfortunate, given that this concern is highlighted at the close of an academic year. However, this timing may ultimately prove to be fortuitous, allowing needed reflective time before beginning to work on the matter in the fall.

## Current Status of CSUSB WASC Self-study Projects

The *Preparatory Report* draft is under committee review.

--Focus on Context, Structure, Process, and Methods of demonstrating Effectiveness of campus operations and programs.

--Emphasis on Capacity and Potential for Quality

--Honest, open identification of issues, concerns, strengths and weakness, and recommendations for future.

--Need Reflective Essay to be based on conclusions, but supported by evidence.

--Is the Report for WASC or the Institution? Both!

The *Educational Effectiveness Report* is still under development, collecting data, analyzing findings.

## Spring 2002 Activities and Focus

--Progress Reports from each Theme Committee

--Newsletters and E-mail messages to inform campus and solicit input/ comment

--Completion of standard Data Set of Statistics and Trend Data

Summarizing Findings from:

TRACS Surveys

SETEs Study

Report on Trends in GPA

Academic Profile exams

Commencement Survey

Benchmarking and Quality Improvement Surveys

Accountability Reports to Trustees

Faculty Activity Reports

--Collecting data and opinions of campus' effectiveness and involvement of

community from Advisory bodies to campus, colleges, programs

--Review of Prep Report Draft by Steering Committee, Theme chairs, President

--Completion of Data/Evidence Collection:

Academic Program Review findings, use and follow up

Inventory of Good Practices in departments and offices

Examples of development of campus community

Faculty Survey

Develop TRACS survey questions for Fall registration

Diversity and Campus Climate Survey (Fall?)

N.B.. --Need more evidence of student work, level of achievement, good practices, and results of outcomes assessments.

--What examples can we show of typical level of student achievement in General Education and the majors?

--Review of Syllabi for indications of practices, level of achievement expected, types of instruction, development of higher order skills of analysis, synthesis, application and evaluation.

--Analysis of Samples of Student Writing in 306 writing courses

--Sharing of findings of studies and reports with campus on listservs

--Strategic Planning Reports and Annual reports from divisions

--Syllabi Review

## **Summer 2002 Activities and Focus**

--Putting together Report and Data Portfolio of Evidence

--Placing it on the Web site /resolving security issues

--Polishing up Preparatory Report

--Completion of first draft of Educational Effectiveness Report

N.B.. --*Putting Outcomes Assessment reports and findings on Web site.*

(Need timely, clearly presented, and complete reports)

-- Review of recently completed planning documents:

Technology Plan

Distance Learning Plan

Palm Desert Campus Plan

## **Fall 2002 Activities and Focus**

**Campus Review and Comment on “final” Draft of Preparatory Report**

**Steering Committee Review of first draft of Educational Effectiveness Report**

**November 1, 2002 Deadline for sending Preparatory Report to WASC and Visitation Team**

**December Conference Call with WASC staff and Team Chair to clarify issues, see if more data or evidence is needed, and establish focus and manner of team visit to campus**

## **Winter 2003 Activities and Focus**

**Make Arrangements for Team Visit**

**Schedule Campus meetings and appointments with individual team members**

**Host Team visit:**

**March 5-7 Team Visit -- Mark your calendars!!**

**Six -member team chosen as experts on issues, themes, needs of our campus**

**Verification of facts, analysis of reports and supporting data**

**Consultation and clarification of issues identified the report**

**Group meetings and focused individual meetings.**

**Conversations about issues, directions, and possible recommendations**

**How well do we deal with 4 Standards?**

**What is our Inquiry Model? What do we know and how do we know it?**

**What is the character and pulse of the institution?**

**Review reports and evidence from three Theme committees**

**Completion of “final” Draft of Educational Effectiveness**

## **Spring 2003 Activities and Focus**

**Campus Review of Educational Effectiveness Report**

**Educational Effectiveness Report sent to WASC and Visit team by June 15**