

Committee on Academic Policy (CAP): Meeting Minutes

Monday, 30 October 2023, 9:00am

Meeting #8 AY2023-2024

Meeting held remotely

Attendees: B. Calli (RBE, CAP chair,), F. Levey (MME), B. Servatius (MA, CITP representative), S. Wodin-Schwartz (MME), A. Gericke (Dean of Undergraduate Studies, ad interim), D. Heilman (CBC, UOAC Representative), S. Levitan '24 (Student representative), J. Dudle (CEAE, EDC Representative), Connor Chartier '25 (Student representative), Gillian Smith (Director, IMGD), Paula Fitzpatrick (Director, Center for Well-Being), Ben Pollard (Physics).

1. The meeting was called to order at 9:00am
2. Dean Gericke presented data on grade analyses to the Committee as a basis for discussion. Data was presented broken out by projects (HUA, MQP, IQP) as well as by foundational vs upper level courses. Generally, from 2016 to present, there is a strong trend across all areas where the percentage of higher grades has significantly increased (for example, the number of "A" grades for the 1000, 2000, 3000 and 4000 level courses increased by 8 – 10%). This trend was gradual and had already started prior to the pandemic.
3. CAP hosted guests from our "ungrading" community on campus to discuss the trends in grading and current efforts on campus to experiment with different styles of assessment. The group started by clarifying what "ungrading" is; generally ungrading represents a shift in focus to the assessment of student performance and learning outcomes without applying percentages or grades to the practice. A lengthy discussion of the features and effectiveness of ungrading took place. As part of this, some participants argued that many of the conventional metrics of academic practice may undermine student work and performance; in many curricular areas, grades are neither a good incentive for optimal student performance nor a good vehicle for feedback. Additionally, some argued that grades are generally not good markers for learning and do not reflect the subjective and individual character of learning; research indicates that for graded activities, students tend to think less deeply, avoid risk, and are less focused on their understanding of the material as compared to assessments focused on outcomes in the absence of grades. As such, it was also argued that the increase in student grades since 2016 is most likely not due to an increase in learning outcomes and student performance. The Committee discussed the original incarnation of the WPI Plan, where there were no grades. The dichotomy between the current grading of courses (particularly larger populations) vs projects was discussed as was the idea of returning to a P/PD/F (pass/pass with distinction/fail) scale for projects only. Some participants argued that it may not be a bad thing for most students to have an A on a project, as for many faculty, the goal of the experience in working closely with the students is to maximize their performance and seek subjective excellence. The committee decided to discuss this matter further in the upcoming meetings.
4. The meeting was adjourned at 9:52am