

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Annual Report of the Educational Policy Committee to Faculty Council
April 23, 2004

Membership: Lucia Binotti (2005), Karen Booth (2006), Peter C. Gordon (2005; Chair), Clayton Koelb (2006), David Lanier (ex officio), Brian Phelps (Undergraduate student), Susan Pierce (2004), Joseph Templeton (2004), Barbara Wildemuth (2005), Adam Versenyi (2006), James White (2004), Thomas Winkler (Graduate/professional student).

Meetings. In 2003-2004, the Educational Policy Committee met on the following dates: 9/3, 10/1, 11/5, 11/19, 12/3, 1/21, 1/28, 2/4, 2/18, 3/3, 3/17, 3/24 and 3/31.

Annual Report prepared by Peter C. Gordon (Chair), with review by the committee.

Committee charge: "The committee is concerned with those matters of educational policy and its implementation which have significant impact upon graduate and undergraduate instruction within the Division of Academic Affairs, and as to which the Faculty Council possesses legislative powers by delegation from the General Faculty under Article II of the Faculty Code. The committee's function is advisory to the Faculty Council in respect of such matters."

Activities, AY 2003-2004 (through April 12, 2004).

Report on Grades

In February 2000, EPC submitted a report to Faculty Council titled "Grade Inflation at UNC Chapel Hill"^[1]. This report, known now as the Turchi Report after its author, documented increases in GPAs at Carolina over the period of 1967 to 1999, with a focus on comparing grade levels in 1986 and 1999. It concluded that grade inflation was a serious problem at Carolina. In response to this report Faculty Council empanelled a task force on grading standards, which issued a report in April 2001^[2]. That report was far less critical of rising grade levels than was the Turchi Report. Since these two reports, Departments and Programs have been asked to regularly discuss grading standards and EPC has been asked to report annually on GPAs. A sense developed on EPC that by this current academic year there would be enough additional data on grading since the Turchi Report to merit a more in-depth report on grading than in previous years.

At the outset, we want to acknowledge that GPAs are an important and controversial subject. It is not controversial that average grades have gotten higher over the last 40 years, but there is strong disagreement about why this has happened, what it means, and whether anything should be done about it. Very different views on these questions can be seen in the Turchi Report and the *Report of the Task Force on Grading Standards*. This report does not attempt to review all of the issues (e.g., the purpose of grading, why grades are getting higher, and disparities in grades across disciplines) that are covered in these previous reports or in the many discussions of this topic at other universities. Here, we review some developments related to grading since the Turchi report and we outline several steps for addressing rising GPAs that we believe should be studied for possible implementation at Carolina. A substantial majority of current EPC members believe that grade inflation is a serious problem that the University should address. However, a smaller group on EPC believes that grading practices are not a serious problem. These differing perspectives

are similar to those found in the two reports mentioned above and in discussions of this issue at other universities.

Grading Since the Turchi Report

The Turchi Report provided information about changes in overall grade level between Fall of 1967 and Spring of 1999, as well as a number of more detailed comparisons of grading in Spring of 1987 and Spring of 1999. Here, we update most of those analyses.

Figure 1 shows changes in average grades given in the years since the Turchi Report. The increase in grades averages .0185 grade points per year over the four year period from Spring 1999 to Spring 2003. The rate of increase between 1987 and 1999 was .0208 per year. One substantial review of national trends in grading indicates that grades are increasing at a rate of .0146 per year.^[3] Thus, the rate of increase shown in Figure 1 is comparable to what is going on nationally and is similar to the average rate of increase reviewed in the Turchi report.

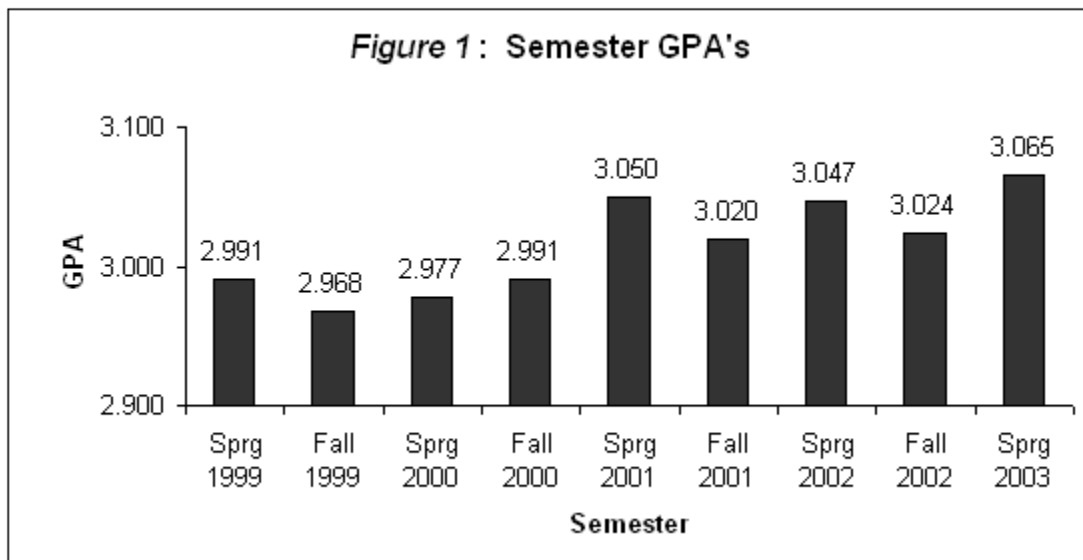


Figure 2 shows the same information broken down by class year of the students. The pattern suggests that the trend for increasing grades exists at all class levels.

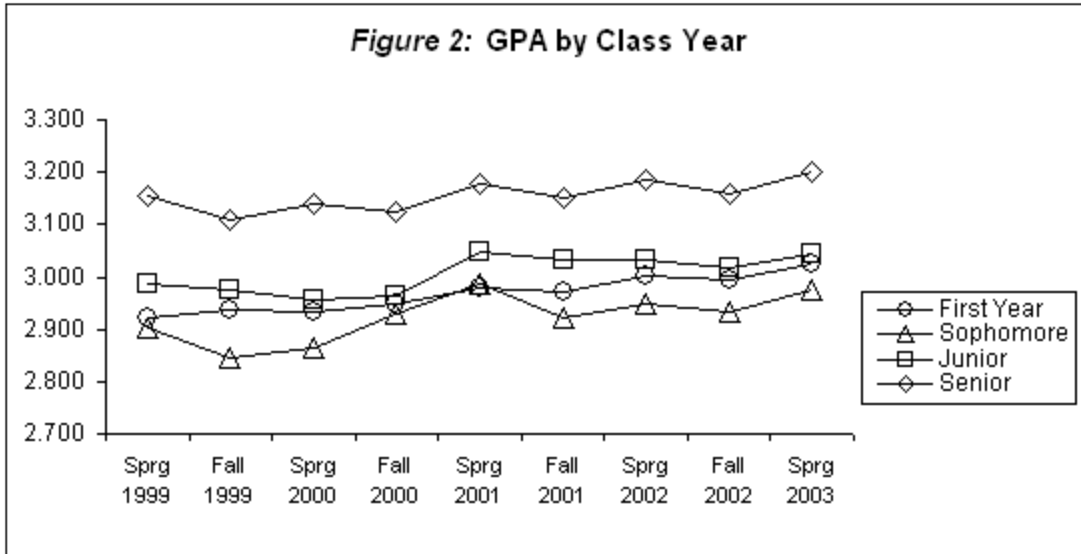


Figure 3 shows the distribution of undergraduate letter grades in Spring 1999 and Spring 2003. At the time of the Turchi Report, the most frequently given letter grade was B with A not far behind. Since then, A has passed B to become the most commonly given letter grade at Carolina.

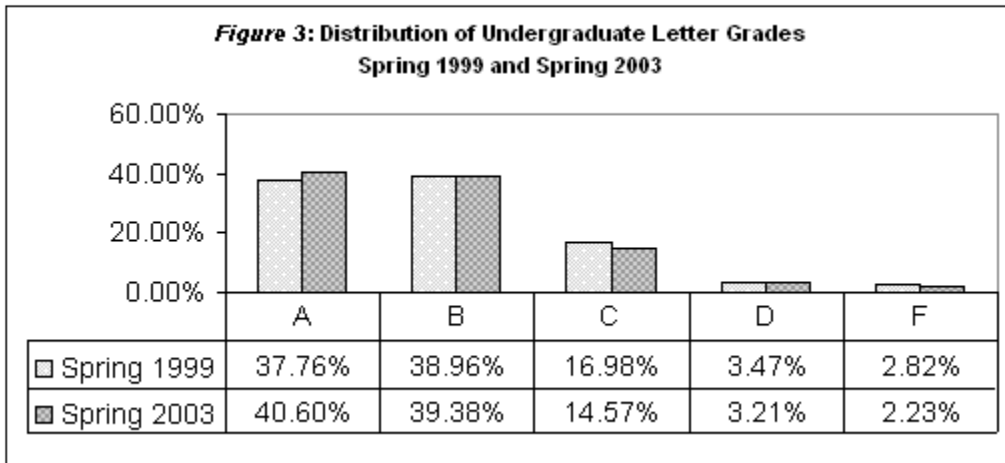
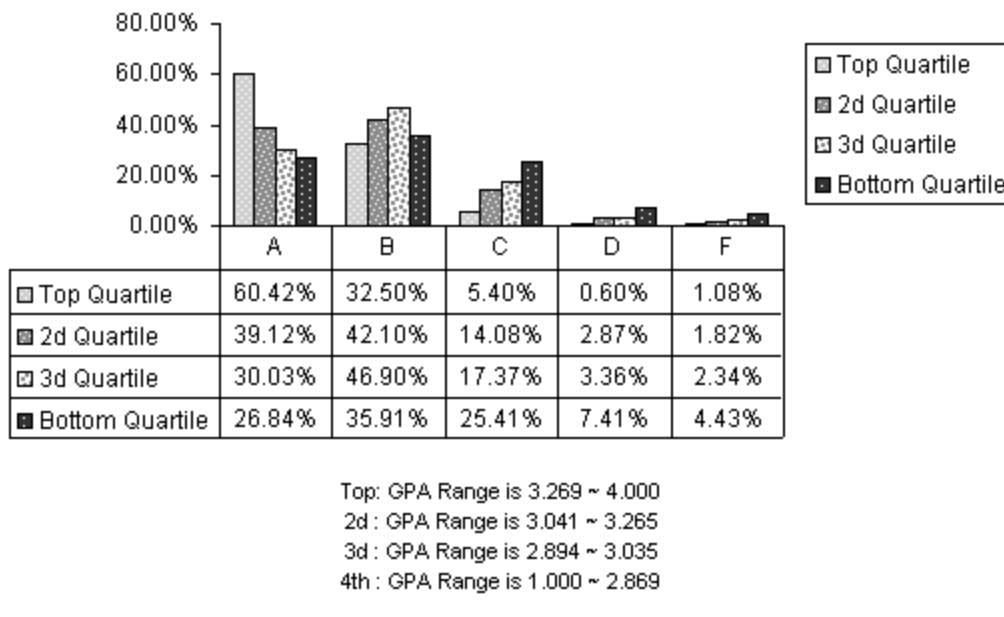


Figure 4 shows the distribution of undergraduate letter grades grouped into four roughly equal quartiles by departmental grading practices. The results show that there is very substantial variation in grading practices across departments, a pattern that was analyzed in more detail in the Turchi Report.

**Figure 4: Distribution of Letter Grades by Department
Grouped by Departmental GPAs
Spring 2003**



Pick-a-Prof™

In addition to changes in grades, one other significant development since the Turchi Report merits discussion here. A for-profit web service, Pick-a-Prof, has begun to provide information about grade distributions in individual sections, listed by instructor, for classes taught at UNC Chapel Hill and many other universities. (Pick-a-Prof also provides a forum for students to post evaluations of courses and instructors.) Pick-a-Prof obtains grade information from the University Registrar under the State of North Carolina's public information law. At least one inquiry has been made to the Registrar from another organization about how to obtain this information in order to offer a similar service.

Ready accessibility of the kind of information offered by Pick-a-Prof could accelerate one of the dynamics that concerns critics of rising GPAs. That concern is that some students would use information about grading practices in individual sections for purposes of selecting courses. This would lead to greater demand for courses where grades are high and less demand for courses where grades are low, which in turn could lead faculty to compete for student enrollment (either consciously or unconsciously) by giving higher grades. Of course, this sort of dynamic may operate simply on a course's reputation, but Pick-a-Prof (and possible similar services to come) provide information that is far more detailed and comprehensive than word-of-mouth reputation. To our knowledge, there is only one study that has examined whether students would use such grading information to guide their selection of courses. From fall of 1998 to spring of 1999, a group at Duke University conducted a study in which information about grade distributions was made available to Duke students through a web site that tracked how students' examination of grades was related to their subsequent enrollment choices. The study concluded that grade levels

had a significant effect on students' enrollment choices, with students being inclined to select courses in which the grades were higher.^[4]

Easily accessible information about grade distributions could also erode public confidence in whether the University is effectively fulfilling its obligations with respect to evaluating student performance. In recent years, some of the nation's most prestigious private universities have been subjected to ridicule in the press over the proportion of their students who graduate with honors. It is easy to imagine that information about grade distributions (at least for some classes or departments) could lead to the same kind of negative public reaction to grading at Carolina. For a state institution, loss of public confidence about the performance of a basic function, like evaluation of student performance, could undermine public support.

Possible Mechanisms for Addressing Grade Inflation

1. The Turchi Report recommended that the Provost set a standard that the mean grade for all departments be 2.7 and that after a transition period this standard be enforced by budgetary sanctions to departments where grade levels exceed the standard. This recommendation was not implemented, nor did it receive serious consideration as far as we know. We believe that this recommendation should be explored with senior academic administrators in order to hear their views on the value of this approach and on any practical difficulties that might emerge in implementing it.
2. It is a common belief that student evaluations of teachers (SETs) have promoted grade inflation because they provide a way for students to reinforce teachers for giving them high grades. (As with all other beliefs about increased grades, this view is also vigorously contested.) In an attempt both to break this feedback cycle and to obtain more accurate evaluations of teachers, the University of Washington has implemented a procedure where SETs are adjusted statistically for factors that have been shown to influence evaluations but which are not related to teaching effectiveness^[5]. Those factors include class size, whether the class is in the student's major and the student's expected grade in the class. At Carolina, SETs are a mandated procedure for evaluating teaching. Therefore, we believe that approaches to SETs, such as the one taken at the University of Washington, should be explored so that any harmful effects of SETs on grading could be minimized and so that the validity of SETs could be maximized.
3. The Turchi report describes grade inflation as a market failure. Universities and society have an interest in grading practices that differentiate levels of student performance and that have a stable meaning that is comparable across disciplines and over time. However, the incentive for any individual student is to seek out higher grades and for any individual instructor is to give higher grades. The addition of ranking systems to letter grades alters the incentives faced by students and faculty in a way that might reduce or reverse rising grade levels. A simple system might convert grades for a class into ranks indicating the percentage of students who did more poorly than a given grade in relation to the percentage of students who did better than that grade. A more sophisticated system would take into account the abilities of the students in a class, by weighing their performance in other classes, before grades are converted to ranks in the class. The rationale is similar to

that underlying the Rating Percentage Index (RPI) used in college sports; the RPI looks at a team's record in relation to the strength of a team's schedule (as indicated by its opponents' records) as a factor in determining whether it is invited to participate in postseason play. A normative procedure for ranking college grades in this way has been published^[6]; this method was considered and rejected by the Arts and Sciences Council at Duke University in 1997. We believe that the use of ranking systems to augment letter grades at Carolina should be evaluated.

Recommendations

As stated above, a majority on EPC believes that grade inflation at Carolina is a problem and that steps should be taken to halt or reverse it. This general assessment is similar to that in EPC's last extensive analysis of the issue, as described in the Turchi Report. We have sketched additional mechanisms for addressing grade inflation beyond those in the Turchi Report, and we believe that those mechanisms should be studied further by EPC. However, we recognize that grading is a controversial topic where different people interpret exactly the same data in very different ways. We therefore take this opportunity to seek input from Faculty Council on how the issue of rising grades should be addressed.

Report on Carolina Summer Reading Program

The Carolina Summer Reading Program (CSRP) at UNC Chapel Hill has been in existence for five years, having received its initial impetus from the UNC-CH Intellectual Climate Task Force Report (1997), which recommended that such a program be created as part of a First Year Initiative. In response to a request from the Chair of the Faculty, EPC has conducted a review of the CSRP. This first review of the program by a body of faculty governance seems appropriate given that the University now has some experience with the program and because the program has received a great deal of public attention. EPC's review involved examination of data on the program's first five years, supplied by the office of the Vice Chancellor for Student Affairs, as well as consultation with a number of individuals who have had important roles in running the program and preparing materials for it.^[7] Our review has led to the following conclusions and recommendations.

- EPC believes that the CSRP has made valuable contributions to the University's intellectual climate and that it has the potential to continue to do so. The program enhances the intellectual substance of student orientation in a very visible way; it provides the opportunity for a conversation on a single reading among all entering undergraduate students and is one of the few intellectual activities that students can share among themselves and with the broader university community. The CSRP has also attracted a great deal of public comment, both favorable and unfavorable. EPC believes that public attention to academic activities at the University is beneficial because it gives the University a chance to explain publicly its educational and intellectual values. The educational emphasis of the CSRP is one of understanding issues not of advocating political positions. Though some of the public discussion of the CSRP has created tension, we believe that the University must continue to respond to such situations by emphasizing its commitment to the fair-minded exploration of important ideas.

- EPC believes that it is important to recognize that the CSRP is not an academic requirement for any degree or program, nor should it be. Students should be encouraged to participate in the CSRP as a valuable addition to their academic coursework. In this way, the CSRP is like many other academic activities that are not required for earning a degree but which are an important part of university life. These activities include departmental colloquia with invited speakers, lunch-time talks drawing on Carolina faculty and students, undergraduate clubs focused on academic topics, the annual celebration of undergraduate research, as well as many other important academic activities. The CSRP does strive to involve many more students, faculty and staff than do most other voluntary academic activities, but it shares with them the purpose of giving students opportunities to experience the intrinsic reward of exploring ideas as part of an academic community.

- In recognition of the voluntary character of the CSRP, and the necessarily selective nature of a single reading, EPC believes that the program should be kept within the bounds of an afternoon's discussion and that temptations to expand the program, or promote its integration into other academic activities, should be resisted. In particular, on some occasions the materials informing incoming students about the CSRP have suggested that the selected book may also be covered in classes that are offered during the students' first semester at Carolina. EPC believes that the content of for-credit courses should not be guided by the selection of a book for the summer reading program. Administrative leaders of the CSRP should not suggest to instructors that they consider covering the book and students should not be led to believe that the book may somehow be part of the courses that they will be taking. On the other hand, EPC believes that it is appropriate and valuable to make students aware of courses offered at Carolina that address topics that are raised by the selected book.

- Administering the CSRP is a complex affair for a number of reasons: It involves a very large number of people; it occurs at the very beginning of the school year; and it draws on administrative and instructional resources from a large number of units on campus. At least some of the controversies caused by the CSRP may be attributable to the growing pains involved in developing a new program that involves coordination of many units that do not usually work together. EPC came to the following conclusions about the administration of the program:
 1. The current arrangement of shared responsibility for program administration between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs seems to be working and we recommend that it continue.

 2. The process for selecting a book appears to work well. The book selection committee, comprised of students, faculty and staff, has a very difficult job. In selecting a single book, there is no way that the committee can please everyone and given the controversy that the program has generated, they are almost certain to severely annoy some. The book selection committees of the past years should be commended for their conscientious work. One aspect of the book selection process that could be improved would be to increase the book-buying budget for the selection committee.

Given that the committee must consider many books in a short time (particularly at the final selection stage), it is impractical for committee members to share copies of the books being considered. This has led to the committee members having to buy their own copies of the books (or at least in one case to the chair of the committee using personal funds to buy books for student members of the committee). EPC believes that administrators in Academic and Student Affairs should consult with recent chairs of the book selection committee on this matter and should provide an adequate budget for the book selection process.

3. The task of presenting the CSRP and the selected book to incoming students is very challenging. EPC has several specific recommendations about how to handle this task more effectively. Many of these recommendations come from those with direct experience in helping to run the CSRP and are being, or have already been, implemented.
 - The book selection committee has quite properly approached the task of book selection from the perspective of non-specialists on the topics of the books that they are considering. This is appropriate because a major goal of the CSRP is to contribute to students' educations as informed generalists. However, in selecting the supplementary readings, and in framing questions for discussion, it is valuable and necessary to draw on the specialized intellectual resources of the University community. In the past, this has not always happened in a timely manner. EPC believes that when the book-selection committee has made its selection (or perhaps when it has narrowed its choices to two or three books), the faculty chair of the committee should enlist efforts of faculty colleagues with specialized knowledge in the area of the book in suggesting appropriate supplementary materials. Participation at this stage by one of the academic deans may also be useful. The members of the book selection committee should also be asked to comment on suggested supplementary materials as a way of assessing their intelligibility to non-specialists.
 - The primary goals of the promotional materials for the CSRP should be to encourage students to participate in the program and to give a sense of the ideas that the selected book generates. Some of the materials used to promote the program in the past could be seen as promoting the book and its author, an impression that should not be created because it can be seen as endorsing the views expressed in the book and by the author.
 - The promotional materials for the CSRP should be very clear in indicating that participation in the program is not an academic requirement. For three years those materials did say that the program was "required". As with any other voluntary academic activity, the CSRP must sink or swim based on its intrinsic appeal to students' curiosity.

Overall, EPC regards the CSRP as conceptually sound and valuable to the University. Data on rates of participation in the program by students, staff and faculty support that view. Insights

gained by examining the first five years of the program suggest ways in which its operation could be improved, but that is to be expected for any program. In addition, as with any University program, the CSRP should be monitored and periodically evaluated.

Class Attendance Policy/Excused Absence Policy

Two factors prompted EPC to review class attendance policy: (1) a resolution from Student Government asked that students be provided with a way of appealing an instructor's decision not to count an absence as excused and (2) concerns that the current policy allowing unlimited excused absences for authorized extracurricular activities was problematic given developments in instructional techniques. We discuss these issues in turn.

Appeal of faculty decisions on absences. On November 4, 2003, Student Congress passed a resolution (SCR-85-042), which requested that students be given a way of appealing an absence whose notice was not approved by the instructor of a course. While the resolution outlined a variety of legitimate reasons why a student might need to miss class, it was EPC's understanding that a primary impetus for the resolution was concern about absences due to important religious holidays. The resolution stated that students should notify an instructor in writing two weeks in advance (if possible) about the reason for a planned absence. It then asked that students be given an avenue of appeal in cases where instructors deemed the planned absence to be unexcused.

EPC focused its discussion on cases where the planned absence could be anticipated well in advance (as is the case with important religious holidays). We concluded that it would be reasonable to provide an appeal process in such cases, but that the process would have to be streamlined so that a decision could be made in advance of the planned absence. Therefore, we propose that Faculty Council consider amending class attendance policy so that under specified circumstances a student could appeal an instructor's decision not to consider a planned absence excused *as long as the appeal is made in advance of the date in question*. EPC believes that the appeal should be made to the head (chair or director) of the unit in which the course is being taught. (In cases where the instructor is the head of the unit, then the appeal would be made to the Dean to whom the unit head reports.)

EPC further believes that the statement of class attendance policy should be amended. Currently the policy states "The University calendar does not recognize religious holidays." However, the calendar does recognize holidays taken by the State of North Carolina; those include two religious holidays, Good Friday and Christmas. The current statement of policy can be seen as denying the reality that the calendar does recognize some religious holidays, if only indirectly through State policies. We believe that the statement concerning the recognition of religious holidays should either be deleted or modified to say that the University calendar only cancels classes on holidays that are recognized by the State of North Carolina.

Absences for regularly organized and authorized University activities.

Current policy gives instructors sole responsibility and authority for excusing absences, except in the case of students who are out of town for scheduled events related to regularly organized and authorized University activities. In such instances students must be excused during the approved period of the absence. This policy is becoming problematic because there has been a shift toward instructional practices that emphasize activities and experiences rather than studying for tests and writing papers. Attendance has become essential to successful completion of many courses. In

some instances, such as language courses, strict policies have been put in place such that a student cannot pass the course if absences exceed a certain number (3 class meetings in some language classes). Current policy creates a situation where there are two types of students, those to whom class attendance policy applies and those involved in extracurricular activities. In principle, this latter group of students could miss an unlimited number of classes. The new curriculum places a strong emphasis on experiential education, so conflicts between extra-curricular activities and need to attend class are likely to increase in the future. Given the great variety of “regularly organized and authorized University activities”, it is difficult to make general statements about the extent to which extra-curricular activities conflict with developing trends in class attendance policies. The Athletic Department houses a great number of such activities and maintains a strong commitment to keeping student athletes in good academic standing; it is likely that the Athletic Department has adequate records for assessing the extent to which student athletes miss class because of their participation in athletics. Determining the extent to which other types of extra-curricular activities impact class attendance will require some study. EPC recommends that two steps be taken in the coming year. First, Faculty Council (perhaps through EPC) should begin discussions with the Athletic Department about ways that schedules for student athletes could be arranged so that they are not absent from class more frequently than is allowed for other students in those classes that have mandatory class attendance policies. Second, data should be collected on the broad range of non-athletic extra-curricular activities in order to facilitate development of appropriate mechanisms for handling absences in those classes.

Allowable Number of Majors and Minors

Revision of the General Education Curriculum has raised the issue of the allowable number of specializations that an undergraduate should be allowed to pursue. Some argue that a student should not be limited in this regard and should be able to complete as many majors or minors as he or she can. Others argue that a student who is very accomplished should expend effort in pursuing a smaller set of disciplines in greater depth rather than attempting to complete diverse sets of departmental requirements. In addition to these differing perspectives on desirable educational goals, there are also practical issues related to how students are allowed to declare majors. Students within a major get some preference in course registration within the major so some students might declare a major for purposes of registration without having a serious intention to pursue the major. If such activity occurred it would complicate an already challenging registration process.

In consideration of these issues, EPC recommends that students be allowed a maximum of three specializations (majors, minors and certificates) with a limit of two majors. This means that undergraduates now will be able to declare, for example, two majors and one minor or one major and two minors; this relaxes current rules that allow students to declare only two majors or one major and one minor. We include certificates in our listing of specializations because it is anticipated that the creation of interdisciplinary clusters as part of the new curriculum will lead to an increase in the number of certificates offered at Carolina.

^[1] <http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/reports/R2000EPCGrdInfl.PDF>

^[2] <http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/reports/R2001GradingStandards.htm>

^[3] Rojstaczer, S. *Grade inflation at American colleges and universities*. Retrieved March 29, 2004 from <http://www.gradeinflation.com/>.

^[4] Johnson, V.E. **Grade inflation: A crisis in college education**. New York, NY: Springer.

^[5] University of Washington, Office of Educational Assessment: <http://www.washington.edu/oea/uwrepts.htm>

^[6] Johnson, V.E. (1997). An alternative to traditional GPA for evaluating student performance. **Statistical Science**, **12**, 257-278.

^[7] We thank the following individuals who graciously assisted us in our review: Cindy Wolf Johnson (Associate Vice Chancellor and Dean of Student Affairs), Judy DesHotels (Director, Student Affairs New Students' Program), Karen Gil (Senior Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education), Madeleine Grumet (Professor of Education and Chair of the Book Selection Committee for Fall 2003), Mike Stegman (Professor and Chair of the Department of Public Policy) and Dan Gitterman (Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Policy).