Resolution 2007-9. On Adopting the Achievement Index as the Metric for University-wide Comparative Rankings of Students.

Submitted by the Educational Policy Committee

Defeated at the April 27, 2007 Faculty Council meeting.

Whereas, interdepartmental and inter-instructor variation in grading in undergraduate courses has been identified by the Educational Policy Committee as a serious and ongoing concern; and

Whereas, although departmental and disciplinary grading standard may appropriately vary in consequence of the philosophies and orientations of the disciplines, nevertheless such grading disparities constitute a specific threat to the validity of University-wide comparative rankings of undergraduate students based solely on grades; now therefore

The Faculty Council resolves:

Pursuant to the recommendation of the Educational Policy Committee in its report to the Council of January, 2007, the Achievement Index [as defined in Valen E. Johnson, "An Alternative to Traditional GPA for Evaluating Student Performance," Statistical Science, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Nov. 1997), pp. 251-269] is adopted as the preferred metric for University-wide comparative rankings of undergraduate students, including but not limited to the awarding of University distinction.

Pursuant to the conclusions of the Implementation Task Force defined below, the University Registrar is requested to record the student's Achievement Index (AI), or a derivative measure on the official undergraduate transcript in addition to the traditional Grade Point Average (GPA). The Registrar shall also provide appropriate documentation, prepared by the Implementation Task Force, to allow those relying on transcript information to interpret the AI.

The Provost is requested to appoint an AI Implementation Task Force charged with making recommendations concerning the timing of implementation and the institutional and technical steps needed to insure the long-term viability of, and stakeholders' confidence in, the calculation, recording, and dissemination of the AI. The task force is also charged with developing procedures for tracking the impact over time of these changes.

Commentary by the Educational Policy Committee

Grades in college are often used to compare the performance of different students. While comparing students is not the only purpose of grading, and for many faculty it is not a major one, it is a common use that often has very important consequences for students. Like most universities, Carolina currently uses grade-point average (GPA) as a summary measure of student performance. GPA is a problematic measure for comparing student performance because students take different classes and grading practices vary greatly across classes for many reasons, including instructor's philosophy, academic discipline, and class goals. Given the great variety of

goals, teaching methods, and evaluation methods that are legitimately used in the rich set of course offerings at Carolina (and other contemporary universities), it is not surprising that simply averaging grades fails to capture important information about student achievement. The EPC recommendation to adopt the Achievement Index (AI) proceeds from the premise that when grades are used to compare the performance of different students, Carolina should interpret grades in a way that allows those comparisons to be made fairly and accurately. The AI measures the relative academic performance of students independently of instructors' grading patterns. EPC recommends that it be listed on student transcripts as a supplement to GPA and that it be used by the University for purposes that explicitly compare students' academic performance, such as the awarding of University Distinction.

Analyses conducted by EPC show that the current reliance on GPA means that every year about 170 Carolina graduates do not receive the level of University Distinction that they deserve when their academic performance is measured more accurately using the AI. Further, where direct comparison is possible, the academic performance of this group of students is better than that of the students whose GPAs qualified them for Distinction but whose AIs would not have. These results are a good indication of the inequities that occur any time a decision about students is made by applying a GPA cutoff. Those inequities also occur when corporate recruiters use minimum GPAs as a screening tool for interviews or when providers of scholarships, such as the Morehead Foundation, make funding contingent on minimum GPAs. The University may ask recruiters and scholarship providers not to use GPA cutoffs in this way, but its case for doing so is undermined by its own use of GPA and its current inability to offer an alternative measure.

Faculty may sincerely hope that students – despite the pressures and uncertainties that they face – enroll in courses in order to further their intellectual development. However, we should not be surprised that there is sufficient student interest in grade disparities across courses to support a large website, Pick-a-prof, where students pay to obtain information about grades broken down by course and instructor's name. The proposed use of a statistically-adjusted composite measure of student academic performance is a modest policy step that will increase equity in the comparative use of grades. This is an important goal, given the role of a college education in our society, and one that should improve the intellectual climate on campus.

The resolution to establish the policy recognizes that many important details must be worked out before the policy is implemented and, therefore, the resolution does not set a date for putting the policy in place. Instead, it requests that the Provost appoint an implementation committee to further specify important features of the policy. Those include: methods for communicating information about AI, policy rules for its use, procedures for accurate record keeping, and methods for monitoring unintended consequences, such as increased competitiveness among students. The Provost is requested to put the policy in place only after the implementation committee has created viable methods for administering the policy and to report back to Faculty Council if serious challenges are encountered in that effort.