

HEAD TO HEAD

Plus/minus grades show high standards



Sarah Muir

Truman State is considering changing its grading system to use plus/minus grades that would be reflected in GPA scores.

Truman should switch to a plus/minus grading system because it matches our ideals of academic excellence for three key reasons. First, it would combat grade inflation. Second, it would lead to more accurate measurement of student performance. Finally, it would increase student motivation.

Grade inflation occurs when higher grades are given out for work that would have earned lower grades in the past. This causes high grades to lose their value because more students receive them as time goes by. The plus/minus grading system allows professors to better differentiate between students' performance and avoid just rounding up, thus reducing the likelihood of grade inflation, according to a 2002 study from Educational Research Quarterly. This increases the value and meaning of an A grade and also increases the value of a high GPA.

The second benefit to a plus/minus grading system is better measurement of student performance, which is useful for graduate schools or employers who are evaluating student GPAs. A student who consistently gets high A's in courses will achieve a higher GPA than students who consistently get low A's in class. It is a better system of measurement that shows a student's work ethic and academic achievement more specifically than the current system.

Finally, a plus/minus system motivates students to raise their grades. I think we all can relate to the experience at the end of a semester when you calculate your grade and realize you can't raise your grade no matter what — it significantly lowers your motivation to do well at the end of the semester. A plus/minus system will provide more incentive for students because it makes every grade matter, according to the Educational Research Quarterly study. This increases student learning and forces students to engage with the material throughout the entire semester.

Some potential concerns about the switch to a plus/minus system are lower retention rates and lower graduation rates. The argument is students who are barely meeting the requirement for a given program will transfer to a school that has easier requirements or simply will not be able to graduate after the change.

These potential disadvantages should not deter Truman from switching. Truman should be more concerned about having high standards and credibility than whether change will drive students away from the program. If we really consider ourselves the "Harvard of the Midwest," we should care more about rigor and integrity of programs than students potentially transferring to easier institutions.

Other institutions, such as Missouri State University and the University of Missouri, already use a plus/minus grading system, so it's not like Truman is trying something completely new or unfair to students. Other schools hold their students to this standard and Truman should as well.

Finally, a plus/minus system might not even impact students in more difficult programs. Programs that generally have lower student GPAs see only a small reduction of overall GPA scores after the implementation of a plus/minus system, according to the Educational Research Quarterly study. This means such a change would not necessarily incentivize students in difficult programs to switch to other programs or schools.

A plus/minus grading system would yield more benefits than costs. Implementing it at Truman would only further enhance our credibility as an excellent institution.

Sarah Muir is a sophomore political science major from Lee's Summit, Mo.

New grading system hurts high achievers



John Riti

If there's one thing Truman State students all can agree upon, it's that we care about our grades. We have a reputation as a grade-oriented student body, more so than other schools. It's part of our Truman student identity — we obsess about our GPAs to the point that people poke fun at us for it.

Because of this Truman standard, the plus/minus grading system being considered by the Undergraduate Council likely would do more harm than good.

The plus/minus system would give students in the 3.5 to 4.0 GPA range an inherent disadvantage. The A level in the proposed system is the only grade level to not have a "plus" grade available, meaning professors would have to re-define the amount of effort it would take students to earn the full A grade, an unfair task to require. The range of B- to B+ is more clearly identifiable, ranging from a B- being a 2.67 score to a B+ being a 3.33 score.

In other words, if it takes more effort in this proposed system to earn an A, then it's nonsensical to still have the grade worth the same 4.0. The logical solution would be to have an A+ available that's worth 4.33 points, but the proposed system does not allow this. With the new grading system, the A's so many Truman

students currently receive would not have their scores adjusted to reflect the range shown in the lower grade categories.

Proponents of the system claim it will help differentiate students' academic performances. However, I'm not sure how accurate this differentiation will be.

There's more room in this system for students to advocate for a grade change they don't necessarily deserve. For example, I envision a lot of semester-end office hour appointments during which students negotiate with professors as to what they need to do to tack that plus symbol onto their letter grade. Professors should expect to hear lines like "What can I do to turn my B- into a B?" Since the difference between a middle grade and a plus grade is so insubstantial — sometimes just a point or two — the system puts more pressure on professors to award a higher grade to students who scrounge for them at the last minute.

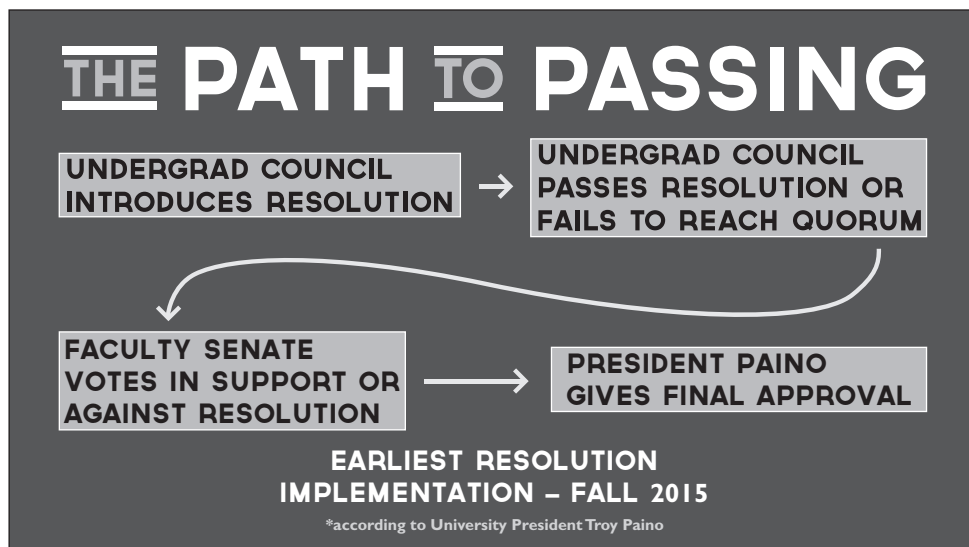
In a Feb. 27 Index article, one proposed advantage of the new system is it will encourage more student motivation. I see this possible motivation being for the wrong reasons. Universities rightfully set GPA standards to gauge performances, but this new system puts too much emphasis on students only working for a letter grade. The addition of plus/minus grades would make students more grade-obsessed and value a percentage more than actual knowledge retention and academic experience.

In the same Index article, proponents of the system claim two more advantages — that a lot of other universities are implementing similar systems and doing so will decrease the number of valedictorians.

Every institution is different, and the argument that "everyone else is doing it, so we should too" is a weak one. Additionally, I don't see how having a large number of valedictorians is a bad thing. Everyone recognizes how much of an honor this is — if anything, we should be proud of it, as it speaks to the quantity of high-caliber students on our campus.

It makes sense that this proposed system is controversial — any issue involving academics will get Truman students talking and debating. However, the plus/minus grading system is not a good fit for the Truman student body. We've cemented our academic reputation with our current grading system and we can continue to do so.

John Riti is a senior English major from St. Louis, Mo.



What do you think of next year's campus-wide smoking ban?

"I can't wait. I think people should not be allowed to smoke on campus ... others shouldn't have to smell it."

Gabriel Ditch
Sophomore



"I think it's very silly. People should be able to do what they want as long as it's not hurting others."

Alicia Wolken
Freshman



"I think it's good. There's people on campus who don't like smoking. As a nonsmoker it doesn't really affect me, but I agree with [the ban]."

McKenzie Russell
Freshman



"I'm not sure where the administration's coming from ... I've never seen a situation where smoking was unduly affecting the operation of the Truman State campus."

Chris Camie
Senior



AROUND THE QUAD

Smoking ban unfairly targets tobacco users



Laknath Gunathilake

The Truman State Board of Governors recently passed a smoking ban, which will go into effect July 2015. The ban includes all tobacco products, smoking products and electronic cigarettes.

According to a Feb. 20 Index article, concerns about the adverse effects of first- and second-hand smoking on the student body prompted the ban. However, since the campus-wide ban will not go into effect until July 2015, smokers have time to quit. The

article further states that while the move would upset a minority of smokers, the Board considered the rights and well-being of everyone in the Truman community while making the decision.

While the smoking ban might be based on the utilitarian premise of promoting the greatest good for the greatest amount of people within the Truman community, it seeks to discriminate against a group of individuals that use tobacco and smoking products. The move clearly will cause a great deal of inconvenience for a minority of students, faculty and staff. If the University fails to consider the construction of a designated smoking area, smokers would have to flee the University premises for a smoke break, or give up the habit by July 2015.

The argument against the smoking ban should not be assessed only by the inconvenience it causes for a minority of indi-

viduals, but also how the policy turns a health issue into a moral discussion. Different individuals have different values and perceptions about smoking. Just as one individual might consider smoking a disgusting habit, another might consider it a pleasurable act. Author Ayn Rand claimed smoking cigarettes signified the power human beings have over nature.

Assuming it is best for objective values to shape health policy, one could argue whether an institution has the right to enforce and universalize subjective health standards upon its student body.

Another debate is whether an institution has the power to force behavioral modification upon its student body. It is evident that the proposed smoking ban is a move to ostracize smokers by offering them an ultimatum to give up the habit by 2015.

It takes a considerable amount of time, effort and willpower to

give up the habit of tobacco use. Christopher Hitchens, writer and lifelong smoker who died from esophageal cancer, said "Waterboarding was relatively easy compared to quitting smoking." Only a smoker could tell you the difficulty of giving up the little glowing friend between the fingertips, and many individuals who try to quit smoking relapse several times before completely kicking the habit.

While compelling statistics and pictures of tar-filled lungs have persuaded most of our generation to give up the cancer stick, there still remains a good amount of people who use tobacco products. While I agree that my liberty to smoke ends where another person's nose begins, the current smoking restriction requiring smokers to be at least 25 feet away from a building ensures a balance between the rights of smokers to enjoy their

habit while ensuring the rights of the non-smokers to protect themselves from second hand smoke. And although secondhand smoke potentially could be used as an argument for banning cigarettes, the argument has yet to be extended to show how chewing tobacco has an effect on the stated objectives of the policy.

The smoking and tobacco ordinance has implications for the entire Truman community and should be formulated in a manner that is transparent and representative of the overall community opinion. The proposed smoking ban shows little consideration for the minority of smokers and tobacco users, without much support from public opinion.

Laknath Gunathilake is a senior political science major from Colombo, Sri Lanka.