Grading Subcommittee Progress Report, 2011-2012

Committee Members:

Sandy Archimedes, Chair
Toby Loeffler
Brij Lunine
Ellen Newberry
Amy Weaver

The Committee’s task: The Committee explored the benefits and drawbacks of putting letter grades on individual papers in Writing 2. We also discussed the possibility of the Writing Program having a non-uniform policy that would allow for instructors to either grade or not grade papers, according to their own preferences.

General procedure: The Committee’s procedure breaks down into three main elements: (1) We reviewed the literature on grading and not grading papers, especially focusing on more recent material; (2) we conducted a survey of “a” equivalency faculty in the Writing Program; and (3) we outlined future goals. These items are discussed in more detail below.

Key talking points in the literature: In general we discovered that although a few sources contained material that was partially or implicitly supportive of some form of grading, there was almost nothing in recent years that made an overt argument in favor of doing so; clearly, the pedagogical center of gravity has shifted from one grounded in a quantitative type of assessment to one based on holistic principles enacted within a portfolio system. (Some analysts have described this split as being between “summative” and “formative” approaches; see Huot, “Toward a New Discourse of Assessment for the College Writing Classroom,” 167). However, the issue is a bit more complicated than would initially appear from these findings, because the question addressed in the literature is not simply whether to grade or not to grade, but rather how to assess writing in a way that enables students to become better writers and that coaxes their best work out of them. Couched in these terms, there is then quite a wide variety of approaches to assessment, some of them closer to the quantitative (or summative) model and others further away from it. Thus, Peter Elbow (“Grading Student Writing: Making It Simpler, Fairer, Clearer”) discusses ways to use minimal grading (credit/no credit, no pass/pass/high pass, scores of 1/2/3, and so on) not only on “low stakes” writing, but also on “high stakes” writing such as essays. Additionally, he explores ways to give grades or a grading-like system more meaning by using grids or specific criteria. At the other end of the spectrum (and in much higher numbers) are those who shy away from quantitative measurements and develop their assessment entirely through written feedback, conferences, and open-ended assignments designed to encourage exploration and inquiry. Some of these instructors see assessment more as a partnership between teacher and student rather than a one-way process (see especially Yancey, “Teacher’s Stories: Notes toward a Portfolio Pedagogy”). Others suggest eliminating the question of merit completely and basing final course grades on quantity (all the work is credit/no credit and students gets points based on the amount of passing work they complete; see especially Adkison and Tchudi, “Grading on Merit and Achievement: Where Quality Meets Quantity”). Taken as a whole, what is striking about arguments on both ends of the spectrum is that the summative/formative distinction doesn’t always hold fast. For a list of the main readings we consulted, see the attached document, “Grading Committee Reading List.”

The survey: The survey was envisioned as a means to start a conversation, not as any kind of final pronouncement. Out of 23 potential respondents (we sent the survey only to those with the “a” equivalency) we received 18 responses (including responses from 3 of the 5 grading committee members). This represents about half of the instructors working within the Writing Program (both “a”
and non-“a” faculty). The survey posed three questions: (1) Do you think that the Writing Program needs a uniform grading policy? (2) Would you like to have the OPTION to give grades on essays in Writing 2? (3) How do you think that either grading or not grading essays would affect your pedagogy or your students’ learning experience? For the first question, a majority (8 respondents, including one with qualifications) answered “yes,” they would like a uniform policy, while a significant minority (5, including one with qualifications) answered “no.” For the second question, a majority (9 respondents) answered “no,” they would not like the option to give grades, while a significant minority (6 respondents) answered “yes”. Not surprisingly, the most interesting and complex comments came in response to the third question. Highlights from these comments are outlined below:

- Instructors who were against grading made some of these comments:
  - Grading does not motivate students.
  - If students see a grade, they don’t read the comments (several similar survey responses).
  - Grading makes students afraid to experiment and take risks.
  - It’s not fair to struggling students to grade them on work they do early in the quarter, before they have progressed.
  - Grading turns the students into passive, not active learners.
  - One instructor sees his/her role as that of writing coach, not judge.
- Instructors who gave reasons in favor of grading mentioned some of the following ideas:
  - Grading does motivate students (two similar survey responses).
  - Not grading is unfair to students; it produces anxiety.
  - Students come from a culture of grading, so they have trouble adapting to a different system.
  - Grading could possibly help instructors manage their workload.
- Instructors who were open to experimenting with grading made some of the following comments:
  - There’s not a big conflict between grading/not grading because the instructor can continue to use grades along with a portfolio system, extensive feedback, etc.
  - One instructor requires students to respond directly to his/her feedback, so grading would not change the students’ response to the instructor’s comments.
  - Some instructors are curious; they want to know whether and how grades could work with a portfolio or revision-promoting pedagogy.

For a complete transcription of the survey comments, see the separate document entitled “Grading Survey Comments.”

Future goals: To collect feedback from all instructors in the Writing Program, the Committee proposes that we allot an hour or more to discussing the topic of grading in an upcoming meeting, preferably early in the fall quarter. As background to the issue, we would send out a list of suggested readings in advance of the meeting. We have already sent out two articles, one by Peter Elbow and one by Brian Huot, via email to all Writing Program faculty. If there is interest in an experiment, we would suggest that a pilot program be performed in the spring quarter. In such a program, a few Writing 2 instructors could use letter grades on papers, perhaps in conjunction with a portfolio system. At the end of the quarter, students in these courses could fill out a survey or questionnaire in which they would respond to questions about their attitudes on grading (or whether they would automatically choose instructors who used grading, if offered a choice). As a control survey, students in the non-grading sections could be asked questions on their feelings about not receiving grades on papers, especially in comparison to their feelings at the start of the quarter (this suggestion came from Phil Longo).

Supporting documents: Attached to this report are three documents that provide more context for the topics discussed here: (1) “Grading Survey Comments” (a copy of the comment portion of the grading
survey); (2) “Grading Committee Reading List” (a list of readings that we found especially relevant); and (3) “CCCC Writing Assessment Bibliography” (a list of readings on writing assessment from CCCC).

Overall, we realize that there is much interest in this issue and that much more discussion in the program needs to take place.