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Research studies +/- grading

News | Nisha Phatak

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According to a study done by a group of undergraduate statistics students, 68 percent of undergraduate students are against the implementation of +/- grading. The survey was implemented as a semester-long class project for 36-303 Sampling, Surveys, and Society.

The group believed the survey was necessary in order to finally have a student body consensus on the issue; the students involved in the study included Joel Bergstein, a senior mechanical engineering and engineering and public policy double major, Manisha Johary, a junior business administration major and Grace DeForest, a senior operations research and statistics double major.

The survey asked 341 randomly selected students a series of questions regarding their opinions about +/- grading, in addition to its effects on job prospects and the number of units carried. First considered at a Student Senate Spotlight Series in early February, the survey has brought the topic of +/- grading back to the forefront. The idea was presented to Senators and guests by the Faculty Senate, whose members argued that Carnegie Mellon's average QPA is much lower compared to those of peer institutions using +/- grading, and that a similar system at Carnegie Mellon might help change this statistic.

However, not all students were convinced.

Some concerns that were brought up by individual students in February included increased competitiveness, lack of a uniform scale across majors and colleges, and increased difficulty in reaching the highest grades possible, such as the A and A+.

Jared Itkowitz, a junior business administration and Chinese studies double major and recently elected student body president for the upcoming school year, stated that, "the number one health risk of college students is stress, and, in my estimation, making +/- grading would not help confront that risk."

On the other hand, some students feel that +/- grading may be more fair than the current system.

"For a student who has a high 80-something with a borderline A, it is unfair for someone two points higher to get an A, while they get a B," said Kate Yan, a first-year in the Science and Humanities Scholars program.

Similarly, the survey indicated that some feel that students who have grades in the high 80s should not receive the same letter grade as students with grades in the low 80s.

In addition to this concern, the survey explored the differing opinions between students at each of Carnegie Mellon's colleges, while also asking questions about how students believe +/- grading would affect their overall

QPA and life after college.

The questionnaire itself consisted of 15 demographic questions, which sought information such as age, school, class, major, ethnicity, desired career path, and highest level of education desired. The group had hypothesized significant differences in attitudes towards +/- grading between certain groups, such as first-years compared to seniors, or students in the Carnegie Institute of Technology compared to students in the College of Fine Arts.

The group's major variable of interest, however, was the implementation of a +/- grading system at Carnegie Mellon. The survey questions went on to ask how a change to a +/- grading scale would affect each student's semester and overall QPA, how it would affect their ability to get a job after graduation, and whether it would affect the number of units they would take.

The survey was sent out over e-mail on March 25. In less than four days, 180 students out of the 341 surveyed responded to the questionnaire.

This number was much more than the intended sample size, indicating the importance of the issue to today's student body.

Question-specific results about implementation of a +/- grading system varied.

Fifty four percent of respondents believed that a +/- grading system would have a negative impact on their semester GPA and overall QPA.

Yet, while 72 percent said that such a system would not affect the number of units they carried, 58 percent said it would affect their ability to obtain a job.

The overall support for the implementation of a +/- grading system was as follows: 18 percent supported it, 68 percent were against it, and 14 percent remained undecided. Further weighting and analysis have yet to be completed.

As the group had expected, seniors were the least represented class in the survey. Since seniors will not be affected by any such switch in the grading system, some worry that they will not voice their views as the topic is brought to discussion.

"I think our class is still invested enough in the university to give their input, but I don't think my class sees it as being a huge issue for the future. I don't think we see it as drastically affecting the grades of younger students," said Siobhan Halloran, a senior chemical engineering major.

According to Halloran, the hypothetical effect on her college academic experience would be minimal.

"I don't think my QPA would have been majorly affected," Halloran said. "I think jobs are often given to CMU student based on their QPAs compared to other CMU students, since [employers] know how rigorous our grading can be, so I don't think it would have affected my job search at all. I don't see a major need to implement +/- grading at our university."

Senior or not, most of the current undergraduate students will remain unaffected if the switch in grading systems is passed.

Itkowitz noted that if the university decides to implement the new system, it will probably not go into effect until "at least three to four years from now."

Nevertheless, the topic is an important one, and the views of current students on +/- grading will ultimately influence the fate of the Carnegie Mellon students of the future.

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