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Grade Normalization

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The University of Southern California Law Center recently has, in the form of grade normalization, adopted modifications in its grading system which may be of interest to those now concerned with grade reform. Unlike many institutions which have abandoned numerical grades in the past few years, the Law Center retained its current system, which permits faculty to award number grades on a scale from 55 to 100.[1] There was general agreement that alternative systems using only two or three levels of grades (*e.g.*, pass/fail; honors/pass/fail) are worse than the current system because they render it impossible in most cases to record clearly perceived differences in performance, and at the break points they force distinctions in grades far more dramatic than differences in performance warrant. It is indeed true that under the numerical system there are likely to be many small "mistakes" (*e.g.*, 78 instead of 80), but the consequences of these errors, which in the long run should be random, are less drastic than are those of "mistakes" when fine distinctions are not allowed to be drawn.[2]

In our discussion of grade reform, much concern was expressed over the different distributions of grades from one course to the next.[3]

* Associate Professor of Law, University of Southern California. A.B. 1964, Columbia University; A.B. 1966, Oxford University; LL.B. 1968, Yale University.

1. The official letter equivalents for the number grades are as follows: $90-100 = A$; $80-89 = B$; $70-79 = C$; $60-69 = D$; $55-59 = F$. A 70 average is needed to remain in school; a grade of 60 to receive unit credit for any particular class. Over the years, however, a set of informal letter equivalents have been established such that in actual practice the letter equivalents are: A = about 85 and up, B = about 78-84, and C = about 70-77. In recent years the medium grade in the law school has tended to be about 76; an 81 average has usually been sufficient for Law Review, while grades of 90 and above are but rarely given.

2. The question of numerical grades should be kept distinct from any question of ranking. Numerical grades need not be abandoned in order to counteract the false impressions created by an undue reliance upon class rank. For example, it is often the case that changes in grade average measured in fractions of a point can alter considerably a student's rank in class. In response to this problem a law school could release class rank charts or graphs which show the relationship between rank and average. This law school decided to publish the graph but, in addition, restricted the use of class rank to the internal purposes of the law school, although it is difficult to understand why rank should not be released once the graphs are made generally available. The entire issue, however, was severed in our discussion from the general discussion of grade normalization.

3. Throughout this paper the term "course" refers to a given class in a given subject taught by a given professor in a given semester. The term section refers to a group of first year students who all have the same courses, as just defined.

The problem was most acute in the first year. There, it was not uncommon in a given subject for one section of the first year class to have a median grade four (or even more) points higher than the median for the other section. Similarly, the curves in some courses tended to be quite bunched, while others were quite flat with many extreme grades. Moreover, in years where all the low (or, to take the other view, high) grading instructors were concentrated in one section, most of the top positions in the class were occupied by students from only one section. Since every effort was made at the outset to equalize the strength of the sections, it was hard to believe that the differences in results were attributable to differences in the levels of student performance. Few thought that the assessments of grades within a section, particularly with regard to rank order, were improper or inaccurate, but most argued that some common measure, some uniform interpretation, some collective control over the grades, was necessary to make legitimate comparisons of the grades between courses. In response to these observations, the Law Center adopted procedures for "grade normalization" which, if successful, will facilitate the fair comparison of student performance not only for any given course, but between courses, and over the three years of law school as well.

The normalization of grades works in the following manner. In each first year course, the instructor, free from any collective control, first computes raw score evaluations for the students in the manner he thinks appropriate. Once the raw grades have thus been determined, grade normalization presumptively requires the instructor to set the *median* grade for his course at 76, although he may vary the median by one point if he so chooses.

After the median has been determined the instructor must then make his final grades conform to two other constraints. First, he must provide that one-half the grades are no more than five points from the median he just selected. Secondly, 85 per cent of the grades in that course must be no more than 10 points from the median. The principle is of general importance but the given numbers in all cases are peculiar to the Law Center. They were chosen in order to make the distribution of grades in any first year course conform to the consensus distribution of grades in the law school over the past several years. The desire throughout was to rationalize past practices and to preserve past conventions, such as they were, in order to minimize any collateral changes which on their own merits might not be approved by the faculty.

Grade normalization has, with some minor modifications, been expanded to apply to all courses in law school. As the students enroll in their upper division classes (whether or not required), their collective performance can be predicted on the basis of their prior records (the best evidence of that performance), and upper division grades then normalized in a manner akin to that used in the first year. First, the average of the students' averages is computed for each upper division course.[4] In most cases that figure will differ from the initial median of 76, depending upon the strength or weakness of the students in the class. Again, the instructor is permitted some variation in the placement of the mean at the conclusion of the course. In large upper division classes, the instructor is given the same degree of freedom applicable in the first year. In "small" classes (defined somewhat arbitrarily as classes with fewer than 20 students), the instructor is given greater discretion—plus-or-minus three points—because of the greater variations statistically possible in aggregate performance in smaller groups. Once the median is established in upper division courses, it is only necessary that 50 per cent of the grades be no more than five points from the chosen median. The second level of grade constraints were dropped for upper division courses, largely because there was little complaint of extreme grades.

Grade normalization in the upper years should help eliminate much of the traditional shopping presently found in the selection of courses. Even if a student had perfect knowledge of the relative position of every student enrolled in every course, he could not use that knowledge to improve his expected grades. Let a given class be very strong, and a student will fear doing poorly relative to the other students in it, but he will be protected in large part by the high median imposed upon

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4. As a theoretical matter, it is better to compute the median for each upper division course by taking the *median of all grades* (weighted by the number of units) previously recorded by all students in the course. *The average of the averages* (rounded off to the nearest whole number) adopted here, should be close to the theoretical median, and its comparative ease of computation supports its use as the median for each upper division course. The faculty first voted to use as the median for each upper division course the *median of all the averages* of all the students enrolled in the course. That figure was abandoned after Professor Vaughn Ball pointed out its potential instability. For example, in a class of 31 students in which 15 have averages of over 80 and 16 have averages of 75 or under, the median of all the averages will be 75. It is, however, quite doubtful that the medians computed in the theoretically correct fashion (median of all grades weighted by units) will be either 75 or 80. Doubtless it will lie somewhere between those two numbers, and could move but slightly if two more students with averages over 80 were to subsequently enroll in the course. The averages of the averages, would not, of course, shift half as much if the addition of two students with averages over 80.

the class. Let one student be strong and the class weak, and he will fear the low median but take comfort in his relative strength. In other words, a student's *expected* grade should be equal to the median grade which he received in his prior courses, regardless of his choice of courses and instructors. Of course his *actual* grades, as a function of his performance in those courses, may be different from his expected grade, but that possibility is consistent with the system of grade normalization which in no way is meant to wed a given student to any given grade when it places limitation on the powers of the instructor to pass judgment on the collective performance of his class.

As an alternative to the scheme of grade normalization, the faculty could have adopted a system of mandatory curves in response to the criticisms of the current system. While such curves could eliminate, if sufficiently strict, all variations between courses, it was believed that they were—certainly at this time—unnecessarily coercive. Most of the student complaints concerned the use of either high or low medians, or the excessive use of extreme grades. Grade normalization is responsive to both criticisms, every bit as much as mandatory curves, because it both sets the median and limits the spread of the curve. Further it was generally expected that most instructors will spread their curves to take some advantage of the discretion left uncontrolled under this system. Hence, it seems probable that the actual distributions will approach those required by mandatory curves, even absent any requirement that they be adopted.[5]

The impostion of the restraints now required will in most cases only effect the number grade which a student will receive in a particular course. In some cases, however, it may well turn out that the readjustments necessary could require an instructor to pass a student whom he thinks should fail. Again, he may be required to move a grade from the D range to the C range, even if some form of a C average is necessary to remain in school. In other cases, the instructor may think that the work of the entire class is so outstanding that he will be unable in good conscience to comply with the collective constraints that work to lower the grades for his course. It is unwise to pretend that those

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5. There is some evidence available to support this point. Last semester's grades were issued before normalization was approved by the faculty but after the discussion of the program had begun. Under the influence of the plan, the curves of the two sections of the first year class were almost identical, with virtually all instructors using most of the number grades from 55 to 90. The second level of distribution constraints was added because the prospect of normalization itself was not sufficient to insure conformity at the extremes.

difficulties will not occur under any system of grade normalization. Once it is accepted, however, that some collective control should be exerted over grading, it is hard to see why that control should not extend to the difficult as well as the simple cases. The fact that the impact of collective control is increased at the break points does not in itself indicate that the decision as to its use should be changed. Nonetheless, it was thought advisable to provide some means, other than mechanical tests, which would enable an instructor who found the constraints of normalization intolerable, for whatever reason, to present his case for the relaxation of these standards. Hence the grade normalization program provides that any instructor who feels aggrieved may appear before an administrative board[6] to request a waiver or modification of the constraints. It is too early to say how often faculty members will avail themselves of this option, or how successful their appeals, if any, will be.

In conclusion, several further observations about grade normalization are in order. First, the system of grade normalization appears to commit an institution to a system of grading that utilizes a large number of possible grades (*i.e.*, numbers are preferable to letters) because ouly then can the instructor make the large number of relatively minute variations necessary to bring his raw grades into conformity with the constraints imposed by the system.

Secondly, even if a law school adopts grade normalization, it retains, as a collective matter, a free hand to decide whether, and if so how many, students should fail out of school at some point in their legal careers. It would be possible, though probably undesirable, to decide that a certain percentage of students at the bottom of the class must fail regardless of their averages. Alternatively, if, as at this law school, some minimum average must be achieved in order for a student to remain in school, the rate of failure will be a function of the complex relationship between the median, the distributional constraints, the average needed to remain in good standing, *and* the willingness of instructors to give failing or D grades. For example, few if any students would fail at the Law Center if the median grade for the first year were set at 79 instead of 76, provided that all other constraints remained unchanged.

Finally, grade normalization does not address itself to the impor-

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6. The Administrative Board, composed of five faculty members and one student, thus far has concerned itself with the review of academic and disciplinary problems of individual students.

tant questions of educational policy faced by law schools today. It presupposes the validity of a system of grading. It does not speak to the questions of what should be taught in law school; nor to the question of how that knowledge should be transmitted. But grade normalization may render the discussion of those larger questions more susceptible to study and mastery because it isolates and resolves the problems of comparative measurement and evaluation. That task may not be the end of a legal education, but it is a task well worth performing.

APPENDIX

Grade Normalization Plan Adopted By Law Center

A. First-year Courses

   1. Median

      The median grade in the first-year courses shall be 76, except that each instructor may adjust his course's median plus or minus one point from 76.

   2. Distribution

      (a) At least one-half of the students must receive grades within a range of plus or minus five points from the median, *e.g.*, $76 \pm 5 = 71$ to 81 for at least 50% of the students.

      (b) In first-year courses with more than 20 students, at least 85% of the students must receive grades within a range of plus or minus ten points from the median, *e.g.*, $76 \pm 10 = 66$ to 86 for at least 85% of the students. In calculating the number of grades which may fall 11 or more points from the median, fractions shall be rounded off to the next higher number.

B. Upper Division Courses

   1. Median

      (a) In each upper division course with more than 20 students, the median grade shall be no more than plus or minus *one point* from the average of the averages of those students who enroll in and complete the course.

      (b) In each upper division course or seminar of 20 or fewer students, the median grade shall be no more than plus or minus *three points* from the average of the averages of those students who enroll in and complete the course.

2. Distribution

In all upper division courses, at least one-half of the students must receive grades within a range of plus or minus five points from the median, *e.g.*, 77 ± 5 = 72 to 82 for at least 50% of the students.

C. Non Normalized Grades

1. If an instructor fails to normalize his grades in compliance with this policy, the administration shall consult with him, and, if necessary, may adjust his grades to achieve compliance.

2. An instructor in any course may petition the Administrative Board for authorization to deviate from some or all of the restrictions of this grade normalization system. The Administrative Board shall have the authority and responsibility for developing standards and procedures for handling such petitions.