

TO: Simon Bott, Chair  
Undergraduate Council

FROM: Richard Scamell  
Academic Policies and Procedures Committee

SUBJECT: UC 10831 10F: University of Houston Grading System: Inclusion of A+ Grade Recommendation

DATE: December 8, 2010

APPROVED DEC 08 2010  


The Academic Policies and Procedures Committee met on Wednesday, October 6 and again on Wednesday, November 10 to consider UC 10831 10F – a proposal that the University of Houston grading system be modified to include an A+ grade. Participating in one or both of the discussions were committee members Betty Barr, Martha Dunkelberger, Debbie Hermann-Henry, Peter Lam, Christine Leveaux, Willie Munson, Richard Scamell, Larry Williams, and Louis Williams. Ahamed Hossain attended the October 6 meeting as a guest and Richard Alderman, Associate Dean, University of Houston Law Center, attended the November 10 meeting as a guest.

**Background**

UC 10831 10F, was referred by the Office of the President to the Office of Academic Program Management. It came from Ahamed Hossain, an undergraduate pre-law student majoring in Political Science. Ahamed's full proposal follows in *italics*.

*Hello, I have a suggestion. Our current grading system awards A-'s, but not A+'s. Many other schools do award A+'s. The Law School Admissions Council counts A+'s as 4.33's. This leaves UH pre-law students like myself at a disadvantage when it come time to apply to law schools, since we will be competing with thousands of other students who do receive those coveted 4.33's and thus have higher GPA's than us. Even if UH did not award 4.33's simply awarding A+'s valued at 4.0 would solve the problem, since the Law School Admissions Council would still count those A+'s as 4.33's not 4.0's. I am a pre-law student, so I am knowledgeable about the pre-law process; I am sure, however, that the disadvantage I am addressing is also applicable to many UH students looking for other post-graduate opportunities. This is why I courage you to consider amending our grading system to award A+'s. Secondly, I just don't think it's fair to high-performing students to always fact the risk of A-, but never the possibility of an A+. The B-student faces both prospects, so does the C-student, but the A-student in this grading system is sold short. I hope you examine both of these points and consider my suggestion. Thanks, Ahamed Hossain*

**Use of the A+ and A Grading Systems Across the Country**

The Committee began by investigating the assertion that "Many other schools do award A+'s." by taking a nonrandom, nonsystematic, etc. sample of what turned out to be 110 institutions from all over the country. Included in our sample were 23 institutions in the state of Texas (7 public and 16 private), 8 institutions in Conference USA, 17 of the 21 institutions of the "Urban 13", and more than 50 other institutions from football bowl subdivision institutions. The results revealed that slightly more one-third of the public institutions offered an A+ grade (26 out of 75) and slightly less than thirty percent of the private institutions offered an A+ grade (10 out of 35). Of the 36 institutions sampled offering an A+ grade, less than 30 percent valued it at 4.33 points. Pages 4 and 5 provide the grading system used at each of the 110 institutions sampled.

**The Law School Admission Council's Policies For Transcript Summarization**

Next, the Committee reviewed the LSAC policies related to transcript summarization available at [www.lsac.org/policies/transcript-summarization.asp](http://www.lsac.org/policies/transcript-summarization.asp) and found that "Grades are converted to a standard 4.0 system in order to furnish law schools with a uniform basis for comparing applicants. LSAC-member schools have selected a common set of numerical values to represent the various grading systems used by US/Canadian institutions. LSAC makes no attempt to assess the value of grades earned at different

colleges. Each law school sets its own rules for interpretation of applicants' grade-point averages; members of law school admission committees understand that a particular grade earned at one college may not have the same meaning as the identical grade at another. In all cases, a copy of each transcript is sent to law schools along with LSAC's Law School Report." As stated by Ahamed Hossain, the LSAC conversion 4.0 Scale converts an A+ grade to 4.33 points, an AB grade to 3.50 points, a BC grade to 2.50 points, and a CD grade to 1.50 points. Applicants coming from institutions that award four passing grades instead of using some type of A, B, C, etc. grade system receive 4.0 points for the highest passing grade, 3.0 points for the second highest passing grade, 2.0 points for the third highest passing grade, and 1.0 points for the lowest passing grade.

#### **The Admission Policy at South Texas College of Law and the University of Houston Law Center**

The Committee also solicited comments from the Donald Guter, President and Dean of the South Texas College of Law and Richard Alderman, Associate Dean of the University of Houston Law Center regarding their admissions process, and in particular, the role that "soft factors" of the applicant (i.e., letters of recommendation, major field of study, reputation of the institution at which the applicant received his/her undergraduate degree, work experience, personal statement, etc).

Dean Guter reported that the Admissions Committee at South Texas College of Law does not adjust grade point averages reported by the LSAC as individual committee members have a good sense of which schools have inflated grades. They also informally take into account when reading applications that grade point averages will be lower for students who come out of, "say, science or engineering programs as opposed to English or political science programs." In addition, the LSAC report indicates the percentile rank (based on grade point average) of a student as compared to all other students who took the same LSAT and graduated from the same college. Individual committee members may use this to get a sense of whether a particular grade point average is high or low for a specific college.

Alicia Cramer, Assistant Dean of Admissions, South Texas College of Law, addressed the role of soft factors considered during the admissions process with the following comments in *italics*.

*While it cannot be denied that LSAT and UGPA are very important parts of our decision making process, what an applicant brings to the table beyond these two predictors is very important to our Faculty Admissions Committee. I can't define for you how much it might be "weighted" as we do not use that type of process. But what they have achieved, accomplished, overcome, or experienced is strongly considered. They present these types of factors in the personal statement, resume, and/or letters of recommendation and I can assure you that the Admissions Committee strongly considers such things. An applicant who falls on the bubble or slightly before can find they are admitted by providing a well-written, thoughtful and compelling statement or letters of recommendation.*

The University of Houston Law Center receives several thousand applications each year which may help to explain why its evaluation of applicants appears to differ somewhat from that employed at South Texas College of Law. The Law Center's admissions process begins by first focusing strictly on the product of an applicant's undergraduate grade point average as reported by the LSAC multiplied by their score on the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT). All students who score above the defined cutoff are offered admission (regardless of their undergraduate major, their undergraduate field of study, and the quality of the institution from which they received their undergraduate degree). Students who come close but fail to meet the defined cutoff have their applications carefully evaluated by the Admissions Review Committee. At this point, soft factors, such as those considered at South Texas College of Law, are taken into account.

#### **Discussion**

It is clear that students applying to the University of Houston Law Center from institutions with an A+ grading system have an advantage over students applying from institutions that do not offer an A+ grade since the LSAC converts all A+ grades to 4.33 points regardless of whether the institution attended by the student counted an A+ grade as 4.00 points or 4.33 points. Nonetheless, the Committee estimates that such an advantage would be **slight** as it is doubtful that many University of Houston faculty members

would be inclined to offer an A+ grade to a student, even if one were available. For example, one committee member stated that if a grade of A indicates exceptional achievement or work of exceptional quality, how would a grade of A+ be described? Would an A+ stand for something like "extra exceptional?" In addition, the Committee doubts that an A+ grade will really skew the grade point average of some students all that much. For example, suppose a University of Houston student receives 30 grades of A and 10 grades of A+. This would mean that the grade point average of the student would be 4.08 instead of 4.00. Likewise assume that the same student received 20 grades of A, 10 grades of A+, and 10 grades of A- resulting in a 4.00 grade point average. If each of the ten A+ grades were only grades of A, the student's grade point average would still be 3.92. The Committee argues this to be a more accurate reflection of the student's academic performance in that the student was, while excellent, slightly less than exceptional in a few of his or her courses. It should also be noted that this proposal has not been endorsed by the Student's Association nor does the presence or lack of an A+ grade appear to create a problem in other disciplines. Since less than 30 percent of institutions offering an A+ grade value it as 4.0 points anyway, in the vast majority of situations, the student with 30 grades of A and 10 grades of A+ still has only a 4.00 grade point average and the student with 20 grades of A, 10 grades of A+ and 10 grades of A- still has a 3.92. grade point average. Thus should the Committee recommend approval of UC 10831 10F and it be adopted by the University of Houston, it would be doing so primarily because the LSAC converts all A+ grades to 4.33 regardless of how an A+ is valued by the institution at which it is offered.

Richard Alderman told the Committee that Law Center students would benefit most if it could **award** an A+ grade as many highly rated law schools offer an A+ grade. In fact, an important factor in the ranking of law schools is the overall grade point average of its graduating class since many law firms look at a student's grade point average when considering candidates they wish to interview for a position. Top law schools have an overall grade point average in the vicinity of 3.40 while the Law Center's overall grade point average currently stands in the vicinity of 3.10. An ability to offer an A+ grade to its students represents one way to raise its overall grade point average. It should be noted that The University of Texas at Austin offers an A+ grade to law school students while the rest of the university is on an A, A-, B+, B, B-, etc grading system.

### **Recommendations**

The Committee is not in support of UC 10831 10F. The Committee believes that the current University of Houston grading system is not broken and that it is prudent to retain 4.0 as the highest possible GPA because a 4.0 GPA is clearly the most common upper-limit on grade point scales. Including an A+ worth 4.33 points could even result in a disadvantage to all University of Houston students competing with University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M, and many other Texas universities because such a move might lead some graduate schools and/or employers "translating" all University of Houston students' grade point averages to a 4.0 scale (in other words, dividing students' cumulative grade point averages by 4.33), an action that would lower overall University of Houston grade point averages by approximately eight percent. Further the Committee believes that there is no need to define an A+ grade worth 4.0 points (i.e., an A+ and an A grade would both be worth 4.0 points) as such a grading scale is used in less than one quarter of the 110 public and private institutions surveyed. The Committee does recommend, however, that the Law Center pursue with the Graduate and Professional Studies Council the possibility of a separate and distinct grading system for Law Center students that includes awarding an A+ grade to its students.

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<b>Public Universities With A+</b>	<b>Public Universities Without A+</b>	<b>Private Universities With A+</b>	<b>Private Universities Without A+</b>
University of Texas at Dallas	University of Washington	Rice University	Baylor University
Texas Southern University	University of Oklahoma	Dallas Baptist University	Southern Methodist University
University of California – San Diego	University of Oregon	Duke University	Texas Christian University
University of California – Davis	University of Arizona	Pennsylvania University	Abilene Christian University
University of California – Berkeley	Kansas State University	Princeton University	Trinity University
University of California – Santa Barbara	Iowa State University	Cornell University	Southwestern University
University of California – Los Angeles	Missouri State University	Stanford University	University of Dallas
University of Alabama	University of Kansas	Tufts University	St. Edward’s University
University of Nebraska	Texas Tech University	Johns Hopkins University	St. Mary’s University
Boise State University	University of Texas at Austin	Carnegie Mellon University	Houston Baptist University
University of Miami	Washington State University		Hardin-Simmons University
University of Chicago	Oregon State University	<b>Total: 10 Institutions</b>	University of St. Thomas
Colorado State University	University of Tennessee		Texas Lutheran University
Arizona State University	University of Southern Mississippi		Austin College
University of Kentucky	Georgia Tech		Case Western University
University of Memphis	University of Minnesota		Northwestern University
Indiana University – Bloomington	Penn State University		Haverford University
Purdue University	University of Wisconsin – Madison		Wake Forest University
University of Virginia	University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill		Yale University
University of Michigan – Ann Arbor	Virginia Tech University		Boston College
University of Illinois – Champagne-Urbana	Clemson University		Dartmouth
University of Missouri	New York University		Emory University
North Carolina State University	University of Georgia		Georgetown University
City University of New York	University of Connecticut		University of Notre Dame
University of Pittsburgh	University of Utah		University of Southern California
Temple University	Texas A&M University		
	Binghamton University		<b>Total: 25 Institutions</b>
<b>Total: 26 Institutions</b>	Stony Brook University		

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<b>Public Universities With A+</b>	<b>Public Universities Without A+</b>	<b>Private Universities With A+</b>	<b>Private Universities Without A+</b>
	University of Buffalo		
	University of Rochester		
	University of North Texas		
	University of Texas at El Paso		
	University of Alabama – Birmingham		
	Louisiana State University		
	University of Cincinnati		
	Ohio University		
	Iowa State University		
	University of Florida		
	University of Central Florida		
	East Carolina University		
	Cleveland State University		
	University of Massachusetts - Boston		
	Wayne State University		
	University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee		
	University of Missouri – St. Louis		
	University of Missouri – Kansas City		
	University of New Orleans		
	Portland State University		
	Virginia Commonwealth University		
	<b><u>Total: 49 Institutions</u></b>		