Queen's University
Senate Committee on Academic Procedures

REPORT ON GRADING PRACTICES

February 2012

Background

In May 2009, Queen's Senate approved an official grading system comprised of letter grades, with pluses and minuses, grade points, and grade descriptors. In April 2010, Senate approved the specific grading scale, with a 4.3 grade point being deemed equivalent to an A+ letter grade.

Prior to the approval of Senate, proposals and research were presented by the Senate Committee on Academic Procedures (SCAP) to all units' Faculty Boards and Academic Councils for discussion. Extensive consultation of stakeholder groups was completed by the Chair of SCAP and the University Registrar, and feedback was brought to SCAP for discussion at several meetings in 2009 and 2010. The Chair and Registrar attended meetings with the following bodies in addition to one-on-one or small group consultations with faculty, staff, and students:

- Vice-Principal (Academic) and Deans
- Faculty of Arts and Science Undergraduate Chairs
- Faculty of Arts and Science Faculty Board
- School of Business Faculty Forum and Faculty Board
- School of Graduate Studies Graduate Council
- Faculty of Applied Science Operations Committee
- Faculty of Applied Science Faculty Board
- School of Nursing Academic Council
- School of Medicine Associate Dean
- School of Theology Faculty Board
- Student Senate Caucus
- Queen's Career Services and the School of Business Career Centre

On May 1, 2011, Queen's University's new grading scheme became effective.

Analysis and Discussion

On November 22, 2011, Queen's University Senate passed the following motion:

> *That Senate ask the Senate Committee on Academic Procedures (SCAP) to require all Faculties and Schools to report to SCAP about the provisions they have implemented concerning grading practices and to confirm that the necessary corrective action has been taken to eliminate any disadvantage; and that SCAP report back to Senate in February with its findings.*

On November 29, the Chair of SCAP wrote to the Deans of the Faculty of Arts and Science, Education, Engineering and Applied Science, Health Sciences, and Law, and the Schools of Business, and Graduate Studies to ask that they report to the Committee on the provisions they had implemented concerning grading practices and the new grading scheme (e.g., Dean's Honour List, academic probation, requirements to withdraw, etc.). Responses to this request were reviewed by the Committee and are presented below for the information of Senate.

Faculty/School	Provisions Implemented Concerning Grading Practices
Arts and Science	To prepare for the transition to the new grading scheme, the Associate Deans (Studies) reviewed over 20,000 past and current student academic records. The relevant academic thresholds and progression requirements were reassessed with the objectives of: i) translating percent averages to the new GPA system for making academic progress decisions, ii) ensuring reasonably identical academic outcomes for students under the new system as they would have achieved under the old, iii) taking advantage of the automation available in the new PeopleSoft Student administration software. The revised set of academic regulations was approved by Faculty Board in October 2010 and came into effect May 1, 2011. In the new system, failed courses are counted toward a student's cumulative GPA. In the old system, failures were not used in computing the percent average in Arts and Science; however, a much more complex set of rules involving a combination of percent average and the number of failed courses was used to make academic progression decisions. The new rules are simpler and thresholds for various academic progression decisions have been set taking into account failures being included in the GPA. Under the new system, students with a year GPA of 3.50 but less than 3.90 were placed on the **Dean's Honour List**, and those with a year GPA of 3.90 were placed on the **Dean's Honour List with Distinction**. The total number of students on the Lists (2,507) was comparable to previous academic years (2,385 in 09/10), suggesting that the lower 3.50 GPA threshold was comparable to the old 80% cumulative average required for the Dean's Honour Lists. However, the GPA threshold for the Dean's Honour List with Distinction resulted in many more students being placed on that list than in previous years (897 versus 253 in 09/10) and will need to be reassessed. It is currently being reviewed by the Faculty's Awards Committee. There are a number of academic decisions issued by the Faculty regarding academic progression and specifically related to academic probation, a requirement to withdraw, and progression to Honours degrees. A total of 477 students were placed on **academic probation** for the 2010/11 academic year, which is significantly higher than in previous years. This increase is due to: - students now being automatically placed on probation when they return from being required to withdraw, - students who would have been previously required to withdraw now being placed on probation, and - students admitted as part-time on probation being included in this category for the first time. It is anticipated that the number of students placed on probation will decrease over the next several years as they are either required to withdraw or return to good standing. The Associate Deans (Studies) sought to be as lenient as possible when students were on the borderline of probation in this first year of implementation of the new regulations. The number of students **required to withdraw for one year** is comparable to previous years, but is expected to increase next year as students on probation fail to meet the conditions to return to good standing and are required to

	withdraw. After this spike, the number should return to a steady state. The number of students **required to withdraw for three years** is significantly less than last year (19 compared to 78) and is due to the change in regulations that require a student to have first been required to withdraw for one year before they can be required to withdraw for three. It is expected the number will increase back to its original level. The Fall 2011 **graduation** was the first in which student academic records were assessed for graduation eligibility under the new academic regulations. The Fall graduation is small (200 students) compared to Spring (2,000). In Fall 2011, approximately five students did not meet the minimum 1.60 GPA standard for a General degree, but did meet the old 60% cumulative average standard. These students were allowed to graduate. It is anticipated that a similarly small number of students will be in this situation for Spring 2012. While each case will be reviewed individually, it is anticipated that if students were maintaining a cumulative average of 60% on the courses completed before May 1, 2011 and a GPA of 1.60 (1.90 for Honours degrees) on those completed after May 1, 2011, they will be allowed to graduate.
Business	The School of Business has implemented a number of changes related to the new grading system in each of its programs – Commerce, Full-Time Queen's MBA, Queen's Executive MBA, Cornell/Queen's Executive MBA, and Accelerated MBA. The new grading system had the largest effect on the four-year Commerce program, as the MBA programs are shorter in duration and at a professional, versus undergraduate, level. Faculty Board approved a GPA of 3.7 for the **Dean's List** designation, and a GPA of 4.0 for the **Dean's List with Distinction** designation. Reporting is currently being undertaken to determine whether the number of Commerce students who would have qualified for the designations in the old system is higher or lower than the number who qualify for the designations in the new system. In general, since the Dean's List and the Dean's List with Distinction are generated from the grades received in one academic year and there is no combination of grading systems in the evaluation, the impact on students is very low. The one exception to this is third year students who go on an exchange in the Fall or Winter term, of which approximately 85% do. These students have typically had their second year Winter term grades combined with the one term of grades for which the student was at Queen's in third year. When this results in using both percentage and grade points for students, a detailed analysis will be done to ensure that those who would have received a Dean's List designation will receive it. Students with a cumulative GPA of 3.7 or higher will receive the designation of **First Class Honours**. After completing analysis of four years' worth of grades, it was determined that the threshold for this designation be lowered to 3.2 for any student who received grades in both the percentage and grade point systems, to ensure no students are disadvantaged. The designations of **Academic Probation** and **Required to Withdraw** are made based on one year's worth of grades as well as cumulative grades. As stated in the Commerce Program regulations, students must maintain an academic year GPA of not less than 2.0 as well as a cumulative GPA of not less than 2.0. A detailed report is currently being developed that will permit

	the analysis of grades from the past several years to determine if students are being disadvantaged by receiving a designation of academic probation or a requirement to withdraw in the new system that they may not have received in the old. Once analysis is complete, a determination will be made that is in the best interest of students. Full-Time Queen's MBA and Queen's Accelerated MBA Due to the start dates and duration of these programs, students did not receive grades in both the old and new grading schemes. Queen's Executive MBA and Cornell-Queen's MBA Students in these programs did not have any grades entered when the new system took effect. When grades were calculated and entered into the system, they were done so with the new scheme in mind to ensure no disadvantage for students.
Education	Prior to May 1, 2011, the Faculty used an Honours/Pass/Fail grading scheme with no numerical equivalents. The new grading scheme adopted for Education courses uses letter grades and grade points, with Pass/Fail courses reserved for Practica or as approved by the Dean. In general, the newly adopted grading system provides a finer scale with numerical equivalencies for grades that can now be used to support applications to graduate schools and other initiatives where transcripts are required. The transcript information offered by Education's old pass/fail system was inadequate and typically ignored by assessment departments at universities and granting agencies. There is no **Dean's Honour List** in the Faculty of Education. Given that the Bachelor of Education program is one year, academic progress decisions do not come into play except for students in Concurrent Education prior to the start of their B.Ed. year. Progress is reviewed at the end of each year by the Faculty of Arts and Science. Students on **academic probation** are required to concentrate their efforts on their Arts and Science courses and to suspend their work in Education until removed from probation. To proceed into the B.Ed. year, students are required to have a minimum 3.0 GPA in their best 60 units. Given that there are Concurrent Education students in progress with courses completed under both the old and new grading schemes, the Education Registrar's Office has designed a query for PeopleSoft Student involving courses, grades, and units that is then manipulated in a spreadsheet to determine whether a student is qualified to enter the B.Ed. year. To be eligible for **graduation** with the B.Ed. degree, students are required to have passing grades in all required courses/components and a minimum cumulative GPA of 2.0. The Education Registrar's Office has designed a PS Student query to accomplish this review.
Engineering and Applied Science	The Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science has adopted a new set of Academic Regulations based on the new grading system. Through the transition to the new grading system, each student close to the thresholds for **First and Second Class Honours** standings and **academic**

	probation will have his/her academic record examined as it would have been under the old system and will under the new system. In the Faculty, a GPA above 1.60 results in a student progressing to the subsequent academic year. A GPA below 1.60 would normally result in a student being placed on **academic probation** or being required to withdraw for one year; however, with a view to not disadvantaging students, those with a GPA between 1.30-1.59 were not placed on probation for the 11/12 academic year. The Faculty is currently planning for a large scale analysis of the academic records of students who will be included on the 2012 and 2013 degree lists for students who have had two or three years assessment with the previous grading system. Records will be assessed with a view to providing leniency to students and eliminating any disadvantage where it applies to students at the thresholds for First and Second Class Honours, and where it applies to the minimum requirements for satisfying degree requirements. Approximately 15% of the students who would have previously been on the **Dean's Honours List** in the old system will not receive the designation in the new system. The problem for this group of students is that they require a Cumulative GPA of 3.7 to apply to the top universities in the US. The Faculty can decide to award these students a First Class Honours degree, but their GPA cannot be changed. The Faculty of Engineering and Applied Science has offered to write a letter explaining how these students have been affected by the changeover from one system to another, however it is not clear whether these letters would be considered in the highly competitive environment of these top schools. In addition, an explanation of the grading system and conversion scale is printed on the back of an official transcript.
Graduate Studies	The School of Graduate Studies does not employ standards such as **Dean's Honours List** or **First Class Standing**. Likewise, there is no process to place graduate students on academic probation based on grades received. The grading of graduate courses is a distributed process handled by graduate faculty members and the students' department and program. The School has purview over the regulation concerning failure of a primary (required) course. In December 2009, the Graduate Studies Executive Council determined that a grade of B minus be established as the **minimum passing grade** as of May 1, 2011. There does not seem to be a significant difference between the number of students who met the minimum passing grade in the old grading scheme and the number who are meeting it in the new grading scheme. The School examined many current Queen's transcripts throughout Fall 2011 via applications to **external scholarship competitions** for OGS, NSERC, and SSHRC and noted no disadvantaging of students in terms of their eligibility to apply for these scholarships. The School is certain that Queen's students remain highly competitive for these prestigious scholarships. For students on the borderline of eligibility to apply, SGS staff calculated the relevant averages as both a GPA and percentage and, if the relevant eligibility requirement was met by either method, the student was included in the School's internal review and adjudication.

Health Sciences	**Medicine** Historically, the School of Medicine had a grading scheme of Honours/Pass/ Fail; however, the majority of medical schools in Canada use a Pass/Fail system. After extensive discussion, it was decided that the School would alter its system to that of Pass/Fail. The Medical School transcript is primarily used as a record of medical school completion. Being accepted into the next phase of medical education is based on performance in interviews and by letters of reference. **Nursing** The School of Nursing's Undergraduate Progress and Graduation Committee undertook an audit of all undergraduate academic files and found that there are 31 students across the four years of the program who would have shown a cumulative average of over 80% in the old system, but do not make the threshold of a 3.50 GPA for the **Dean's Honour List** in the new system. One student who would have been required to withdraw from the program will not be required to withdraw and **academic progress** will be monitored closely. **Rehabilitation Therapy** The School of Rehabilitation Therapy offers Masters and Doctoral level programs and follows the grading policies as outlined by the School of Graduate Studies.
Law	Prior to May 1, 2011, the Faculty of Law already utilized a letter grading scale with equivalent grade points. In November 2010, Faculty Board unanimously passed a motion that the scale not be changed. The top letter grade is "A" and the top grade point is 4.0. In addition, no changes were made to the threshold for achievement of the **Dean's Honour List** (top 10% of students in each year of the Juris Doctor program). The determination of qualified students is done manually by the Faculty at the end of the Winter term each year. The Faculty determined that students are required to maintain a minimum 2.0 GPA to meet **academic progression** requirements. This standard will be implemented for the first time at the end of the 2011-12 academic year and it appears that students whose poor academic performance will be caught by the standard are those already known to be performing poorly, who would have been identified prior to the progression standard being established. A recommendation for academic probation will, as it has in the past, be determined by the Faculty's Academic Standing and Policies Committee.

Recommendations
SCAP met on February 6, 2012 to discuss the information received from Faculties/Schools on the provisions they have implemented regarding grading practices.

Members discussed the submissions from Faculties and Schools. In response to concern regarding external evaluation of Queen's new grading system, it was confirmed that graduate schools and professional programs almost always use their own conversion scales when assessing applications, as

well as letters of reference and standardized tests such as the GRE, since they receive applications from post-secondary institutions that each have their own system and scale.
SCAP recommends that Faculties and Schools:

- Regularly review the thresholds in place for both academic distinction and academic progress to ensure they accurately reflect student performance; and
- Clearly communicate with students regarding the grading system and the provisions implemented concerning grading practices.

Summary

The following motion was passed on February 14, 2012:

> *It was moved that the SCAP Report on Grading Practices be approved and forwarded to Senate for its information.*

Membership

T. Alm, Interim University Registrar
R. Coupland, Office of the University Registrar (Secretary)
C. Esselmont, PhD candidate, Department of Philosophy
H. Everson, Faculty of Arts and Science (Chair)
C. Hoeniger, Department of Art
J. Mennell, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures
T. Shearer, School of Business
J. Traficante, BAH'12