

Faculty Senate Resolution on Changes in Grading Policy

Background

Late in the spring semester 2019 (about six months ago now), Dean of Faculty Charles Van Loan brought to the attention of the Faculty Senate that the University had been changing course grades without the knowledge of the instructor. Here is Dean Van Loan's synopsis of the discussion in the Faculty Senate that followed:

"The resolution on grade changes generated some debate. No one objects to the requirement that the instructor-of-record always be informed of changes made. However, there was concern about the authority of the student's college to make grade changes and that the wording of the resolution may weaken faculty control of the grade-change process, especially if the student and instructor are not affiliated with the same college. In reply it was mentioned that the resolution simply adds a feature to the grade-change process (informing the instructor) that would help guard against improper changes and that this is the best we can do at this time. It emerged during the discussion that we need more data to understand the scope of the problem and that we need to totally understand the grade-changing protocols that are in place in each of the colleges. Only then can the Senate effectively participate in the design a transparent, low-overhead, bullet-proof system that is consistent across the colleges. The associate deans and the college registrars need to be engaged and preliminary discussions with the DoF have been set up for May 15 and June 20 respectively. Discussions informed by summertime work will take place in the Senate in the fall. Electronic voting on the grade change, meeting time, and FTZ resolutions is to be conducted with this ballot that needs to be returned by May 15."

The discussion in the Faculty Senate focused on this paragraph from page 99 of the Cornell Faculty Handbook (accessed online on October 4, 2019):

"Only the instructor of the course has the responsibility and authority to judge the quality of a student's work and assess the appropriate grade. No one can overrule instructors and require them to go against their judgment of the work. Grading must not be arbitrary or capricious or influenced by illegal discriminatory considerations. To avoid the influencing of grades by improper consideration or student pressure, a grade once given, may only be changed if an error in the original grade is claimed by the instructor. The instructor should be willing to review the basis of an assigned grade with an inquiring student and correct the grade if an error is found. The evaluation of the quality of the student's work is solely up to the instructor, but the grade must not contain a punitive element for an offense against academic integrity if the student has been found innocent of this offense by a duly constituted board."

Following this discussion, the senators voted on the following resolution (which passed: 57 Yea, 2 Nay, 1 Abstention):

"Whereas, the assignment of grades is at the core of the instruction process and must be conducted with utmost integrity and professionalism;

"Be it resolved that the Faculty Handbook section on grading be modified as specified in the table below:

The following is the text that was proposed in that resolution:

"Only the instructor of the course has the responsibility and authority to judge the quality of a student's work and assess the appropriate letter grade. No one can overrule instructors and require them to go against their judgment of the work. A grade must not be arbitrary or capricious or influenced by illegal discriminatory considerations. It must not contain a punitive element for an offense against academic integrity if the student has been found innocent by a duly constituted board. To avoid the influencing of grades by improper consideration or student pressure, a grade, once given, may only be changed if an error in the original grade is claimed by the instructor. The instructor should be willing to review the basis of an assigned grade with an inquiring student and correct the grade if an error is found.

"In rare circumstances, a letter grade or incomplete can be changed to a "W" or expunged from a student's transcript by action of the student's college or by the Provost, for example, if so advised by Cornell Health, the Title IX Office, or by University Counsel. Regardless the instructor of record must be informed by the registrar office making the change before the actual change is made. If the instructor of record is no longer employed by the university, then the director of the student's degree program is the appropriate contact.

"Any individual who believes that a grade change has been made improperly may communicate their concerns to the proper authorities via the Cornell Hotline. Faculty also have the option of sharing a grade-change concern with the Dean of Faculty." Note: The Faculty Handbook has apparently not been updated to reflect passage of this resolution.

The Faculty Senate has clear jurisdiction over grading policy: Under the bylaws of Cornell University, the "...functions of the University Faculty [Senate] shall be to consider questions of educational policy which concern more than one college, school or separate academic unit, or are general in nature..." (Cornell Faculty Handbook, p. 16).

Justification for the Faculty Senate Resolution on Changes in Grading Policy

1) The new grading policy was originally created in secret. Because faculty were not notified that changes were being made, the Faculty Senate had no way of knowing that a new policy had been instituted. There was certainly no consultation with the Faculty Senate before the new policy was instituted.

2) All policy changes involving the educational mission or educational policy of the University must be presented to the Faculty Senate for review and consultation. We have a clear and abiding responsibility to represent our faculty colleagues on matters vitally concerning their roles as members of the faculty.

3) Faculty responsibility for grading is a fundamental part of educational policy and, thus, should have come before the Faculty Senate before it was instituted. It is clearly within our jurisdiction (and our

responsibilities) that grade changes without the consent of the faculty member of record be discussed in the Faculty Senate.

4) As Dean Van Loan says in his synopsis relaying the outcome of voting, "this is the best we can do at this time." However, it is not the best we can do now. And the aim should be, as Dean Van Loan stated in the synopsis quoted above, "we need more data to understand the scope of the problem and that we need to totally understand the grade-changing protocols that are in place in each of the colleges. Only then can the Senate effectively participate in the design a transparent, low-overhead, bullet-proof system that is consistent across the colleges." We are, as we stand now, a long, long way from such "a transparent, low-overhead, bullet-proof system."

5) All this resolution is intended to do is: (a) compel the University to describe the new grading policy in order to (b) permit the Faculty Senate to deliberate and vote on the design of that policy.

Thank you for your attention.

Richard Bensel, Senator for the Department of Government