Faculty Senate’s
Report to the Board of Visitors
June, 2003

As challenging as the 2002-03 academic year has been, it has also been a year of considerable accomplishment for the Faculty Senate of James Madison University. The following provides a brief year-end summary of actions of the Senate and reports some of its current deliberations.

2002-3 Year End Summary

The Faculty Senate:

1. Arranged for approximately 90% of the faculty to write to their last five years of advisees to encourage them to vote for the bond initiative and contact their legislators regarding state funding of higher education. 6000 letters were mailed to advisees.

2. Revised the requirements for the President List honors.

3. Encouraged university-wide consistency in the composition of the PAC committees that provide in-progress reviews of tenure-track faculty.

4. Identified recommendations to improve the attendance of students at the presentations of major speakers.

5. Arranged for a representative of the Student Government Association to sit with the Senate.

6. Modified its constitution to correct wording regarding Senate representation of the Library’s professional staff and provide the opportunity for teaching and research faculty with RTA appointments to sit on the Faculty Appeals Committee.

7. Implemented fully the “Expanding Horizons” project to provide educational opportunities to 24 economically disadvantaged students of Thomas Harrison Middle School.

8. Assisted in revising the “Academic Advising Initiative” to clearly define the role of faculty in providing excellence in advising.

9. Revised the Faculty Senate Website. Included in the web revisions was an updating of the Handbook Committee Website to further the opportunities for faculty to offer suggestions, monitor, and comment on the Handbook revision process.
10. Purchased gifts and arranged a reception for retiring faculty.

11. Conducted the “Computer Lottery.” For the first time, the lottery was conducted entirely on the web, including entry submission and notification of winners.

12. Arranged for a survey of faculty regarding the status and needs of retired faculty. A report is currently being drafted.

13. Provided opportunities for the Dean of Libraries, and his associates, to address department faculty regarding library needs.

14. Organized a budget advisory committee to provide the Provost with the faculty’s recommendations on budgetary matters.

15. Unanimously resolved to support the “Safe Zone” program.

16. Unanimously resolved to endorse the University’s Health Center’s prescription and provision of emergency contraception medication.

17. Reviewed the University’s grading practices and prepared recommendations. *The report of the Senate’s Academic Policies Committee immediately follows this document.*

Current Deliberations

The Faculty Senate is in its summer recess. During the summer, its steering committee:

1. Will have its annual meeting with President Rose to discuss what the Senate can contribute to the successful implementation of the University’s mission.
2. Will identify initiatives for Senate consideration to further the development of the University’s faculty.
3. Will review and revise the biannual faculty morale survey for administration in the fall semester.

Respectfully submitted,

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Report on Grade Inflation  
To the JMU Faculty Senate  
Presented by the Academic Policies Committee  
April 24, 2003

The following report on our University’s grading practices was prepared by the Faculty Senate’s Academic Policies Committee, chaired by Dr. Beth Eck.

Mr. Cunningham, at an earlier meeting of the Education Committee, noted that grade inflation appears to be occurring on campuses throughout the nation. JMU is no exception. As Table 1 illustrates, there is a slow, but steady increase in the median grades of JMU students since 1984. Table 2 provides information on grading by each of the University’s Colleges for the academic years 2000-01 and 2001-03.

As the following report describes, it is not an easy task to identify the source of grade inflation, or for that matter, whether grade inflation is indeed a problem. The Senate’s Academic Policies Committee, nevertheless, recommends several action steps that may ameliorate some of the effects of grade inflation, and which are steps that may be endorsed by the University’s faculty. The report was distributed at the April meeting of the Faculty Senate, and it is posted on the Faculty Senate’s web site. Faculty Senators have been asked to discuss the report with their respective department faculties in the fall so that the Senate may make its recommendations to the Provost.

At the end of the 2001-2002 academic year, the Academic Policies Committee of the Faculty Senate was asked to look at the issue of grade inflation at James Madison University. This was not the first time the issue had come up locally (see Grade Inflation Task Force, 1999-2000) or nationally (consider articles and editorials in The New York Times and the Chronicle as examples).

Conversations among current APC members began this academic year and reveal much of what we already know: not everyone agrees on the purpose of grades (e.g., Are they used as a way of discriminating among students? Are they a reflection of improved performance over the course of a semester?). Nor is there agreement that higher grades are actually a "problem" at all. For some, higher grades are a reflection of better students enrolled at JMU. For others, the trend toward higher grades reflects high quality teaching by JMU faculty.

Others imply that whether grade inflation is a problem is itself irrelevant. They contend that high grades at JMU are a necessary evil as long as JMU students are compared to and compete for jobs, graduate and law school admissions, etc. with students from other universities where grade inflation is a reality. Similarly, some suggest that higher grades may be the inevitable consequence of JMU’s chronic lack of instructional resources. As more and more students are taught by fewer and fewer faculty, the need for faculty to be
expedient in their grading may mean that their assessment of individual student performance (both in absolute terms and relative to other students) is not as deliberate as it should be. Furthermore, there are sometimes multiple sources of pressure on faculty to grade more leniently -- from peers, department heads, and students.

On the other side, there are those who see grade inflation as real and problematic for a number of reasons. There is concern that the university is engaged in "false advertising" when grade distributions do not reflect catalog copy about the meaning of an "A," a "B," a "C," etc. Furthermore, higher grades suggest lower academic standards. Finally, there is concern that grading practices of instructors unduly influence student evaluations and that faculty might be tempted to curry students’ favor, since JMU’s merit-pay system is tied so closely to evidence of teaching “effectiveness.”

With these conflicting opinions in mind, the APC decided the following course of action: to obtain data that reveal what the grade distribution at JMU actually looks like, to come up with specific recommendations for the Senate, and to distribute both the data and the recommendations to the Senate by year's end.

Joy McBride in the registrar's office provided the APC with distributions for all courses taught at JMU in every department, both upper and lower division. After reviewing this data the committee considered the following: a) it is plausible to conclude that students in upper division major courses will perform at higher levels than students in lower division courses, b) the data we reviewed was overwhelming -- while one could get a sense of what was going on in particular courses, it was more difficult to read the larger landscape at JMU, and c) it might be useful to consider structural explanations for grade distributions and ask that they be calculated into the equation (e.g., number of drops, number of repeat/forgives).

The second set of data we requested included a cover sheet that lists the average grade per college for the past two academic years, as well as the average for the university. That cover sheet is attached to this report. The rest of the data document includes the average grade, the number of drops and the number of repeats for every department/program, upper and lower division courses. The entire document is being made available on the [Faculty Senate’s] web for your perusal.

The APC is very concerned with issues of academic freedom. To that end, after reviewing this data, we are not making any recommendations with regard to how faculty members are evaluated with regard to their grade distributions. We are also not suggesting that faculty members change their grading policies. However, we are suggesting some middle ground that respects both those who see grade inflation existing and being problematic and those who do not.

We propose the following: in addition to the "real GPA" as presently calculated on the student's transcript a "relative" or "weighted" GPA be added. The weighted GPA would take into consideration the relative value of a grade in a class based upon overall grade distribution in that class. In courses where few As are given, those As would be more
heavily weighted than in those classes where many As are given. Moreover, the transcript would contain the distribution—in raw numbers—of grades in every course. That is, next to a student’s grade in a class, the transcript would list the number of As, Bs, and so forth in that same class. If the listing of the entire grade distribution would crowd the transcript too much, the mean grade for each class could be listed next to the student’s grade and the weighted or “relative” grade. The transcript would also contain the unqualified and relative (overall) GPA.

We also propose that the withdrawal period be moved up from approximately 8 weeks to 6 weeks for those in at least their second year at JMU (i.e., freshmen would still have the extended drop period). Students with low grades who normally drop the course late in the term would be forced to complete the course for a grade. This would result in a more accurate reflection of the class distribution at semester’s end. We further propose that students be limited to 4 non-medical withdrawals over the course of their college career.

Finally, we propose that faculty be routinely informed about grade distributions in their own departments/programs to aid in normalizing the grading process.

**Summary of Action:** In response to concern about grade inflation, we recommend adding a "weighted" or "relative" GPA to the transcript, moving up the withdrawal date, reducing the number of non-medical withdrawals a student is permitted, and routinely informing faculty of grade distributions in their departments/programs.
Table 1. Students' Median Grade Point Averages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>GPA Male</th>
<th>GPA Female</th>
<th>GPA Overall</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1984-85</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>2.75</td>
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<td>2001-02</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>2.96</td>
<td>3.06</td>
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Spring Semesters:
- 1984-85
- 1986-87
- 1988-89
- 1990-91
- 1992-93
- 1994-95
- 1996-97
- 1998-99
- 2000-01
- 2001-02

Legend:
- MALE
- FEMALE
- OVERALL
Table 2. Grades by College

**Academic Year 2000 - 2001**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>College</th>
<th>Number of grades</th>
<th>Grade points</th>
<th>Average grade</th>
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<td>University</td>
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**Academic Year 2001 - 2002**

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