

UNIQUE EVALUATIONS WILL BE
TWEAKED, NOT TERMINATED

UCSC to keep system, despite controversy

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By Ken McLaughlin

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Mend it. Don't end it. 2008

That was the resoundingly clear message sent by University of California-Santa Cruz professors Monday regarding the school's groundbreaking "narrative evaluation" system.

Students cheered wildly after about 200 faculty members in the Academic Senate voted not to ditch its controversial system of evaluating student performance. Instead, the professors settled on a compromise that some predicted would soon become a model for the nation's top universities.

In essence, the system will encourage teachers to streamline their evaluations, depending on the type and size of their classes — and how well they know their students' work. The evaluations will range from "simple summary statements" accompanied by a letter grade to "multidimen-

al evaluations" accompanied by a letter grade.

To make sure that student transcripts aren't loaded with verbiage, professors will be asked to keep their evaluations under 150 words. In the past, UCSC transcripts have often looked more like an anthology of essays.

Proponents of the compromise argued that many other colleges are envious of UCSC's evaluation system because grade inflation has made it so hard to distinguish truly extraordinary students from others with high grade-point averages.

"Our decision today can provide national leadership," said psychology Professor Barbara Rogoff, a main proponent of the compromise. She said that several other universities are considering adopting similar sys-

See UCSC, Page 4B



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Mari Gilmore, a junior at the University of California-Santa Cruz, holds a sign supporting student evaluations as professors enter an Academic Senate meeting in Santa Cruz on Monday to vote on a grading system.

UCSC | School to keep evaluations

Continued from Page 1B

tems, although she declined to name them "because of confidentiality."

Two professors had proposed making the narrative evaluations optional. After a spirited two-hour debate, the Academic Senate voted overwhelmingly to kill the proposal by voice vote.

The decision to adopt the alternative system, also approved on a resounding voice vote, followed an earlier decision — made in February and reaffirmed earlier this month — to make letter grades mandatory in three-quarters of classes at the stunning, redwood-studded campus.

Most students who have attended meetings on ending evaluations have strongly opposed grades, saying they were drawn to UCSC by its unorthodox style and that the narratives are more helpful to them. Monday was no different.

Professors being asked to kill mandatory evaluations were greeted with students carrying signs that read, "I'd Give Evals an A+," "Don't Let the Santa Cruz Evaluations Go the Way of the Santa Cruz Redwoods," and "Somewhere, a Slug is Crying."

The last sign referred to the cuddly school mascot, the banana slug.

The narrative system "motivates students to excel in a different way," said junior Susie Vilayvanh.

When she came to UCSC as a freshman, she said, "it was a refreshing change from high school grades."

Vilayvanh said there was less pressure to get A's, but "my motivation did not diminish. . . . It was learning for its own sake."

Manuel Schwab, a senior majoring in both politics and literature, agreed. Ending narrative evaluations to reduce the work-

load of faculty, he said, would sacrifice the quality of the evaluation system "in the interest of expediency."

But Manfred Warmuth, an associate computer science professor who was one of the main proponents to end mandatory evaluations, emphasized that his proposal "is not an abolition."

"We see this as a return to the non-coercive philosophy of the Sixties," he said, explaining that when the school opened in 1965 professors "could petition not to write evaluations."

Warmuth called mandatory evaluations an "issue of academic freedom."

But other professors argued that written evaluations offer a clear advantage to students seeking graduate placements, jobs and prestigious fellowships. UCSC is 14th in the country in the proportion of undergraduates who go on to get doctorates, outperforming

all UC campuses except Berkeley, Rogoff said.

Earlier this year, UCSC faculty members voted overwhelmingly to require that undergraduates receive letter grades for the first time in the campus's history. Many teachers felt that by not requiring traditional letter grades, the university had garnered a less-than-serious reputation that hurt students' chances for scholarships and graduate education.

UCSC, with more than 12,000 students, is the largest U.S. university to use narrative evaluations extensively. Others include Evergreen State College in Olympia, Wash.; New College in Sarasota, Fla.; and Johnston Center at the University of Redlands. Reed College in Portland, Ore., uses both but de-emphasizes grades.

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