

UCSC's lesson in letters

Faculty votes to require grades, ends founding university tradition



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photo

Members of the UCSC Academic Senate vote on a motion Wednesday related to the grades issue. Below, sophomore Michael Kershner was among a cadre of students who urged the university to retain its tradition of essay-like evaluations.

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Further discussion scheduled on fate of narrative evaluations

By **ROBIN MUSITELLI**
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SANTA CRUZ — UC Santa Cruz professors on Wednesday embraced an unorthodox concept that may be the most radical experiment yet in the nontraditional campus' 35-year history — mandatory grades.

Despite student protests, the Academic Senate voted to end the university's optional grade policy and require letter grades for all new students beginning in the fall of 2001.

The vote doesn't necessarily mean the end of a distinguishing UCSC tradition: the narrative evaluation. That discussion will be taken up this spring, when faculty members are scheduled to discuss whether to modify or dump the system.

But unless Wednesday's 154 to 77 vote is overturned in a mail ballot later, narrative evaluations now will be used only in conjunction with letter grades.

"They want to homogenize us to be like every other university," complained Michael Kershner, a sophomore in community studies who opposed the mandatory grade proposal. "It's just so patronizing."

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— Michael Kershner

The grades debate has been an emotional, divisive issue on the hilltop campus, pitting professors, alumni and students against their colleagues.

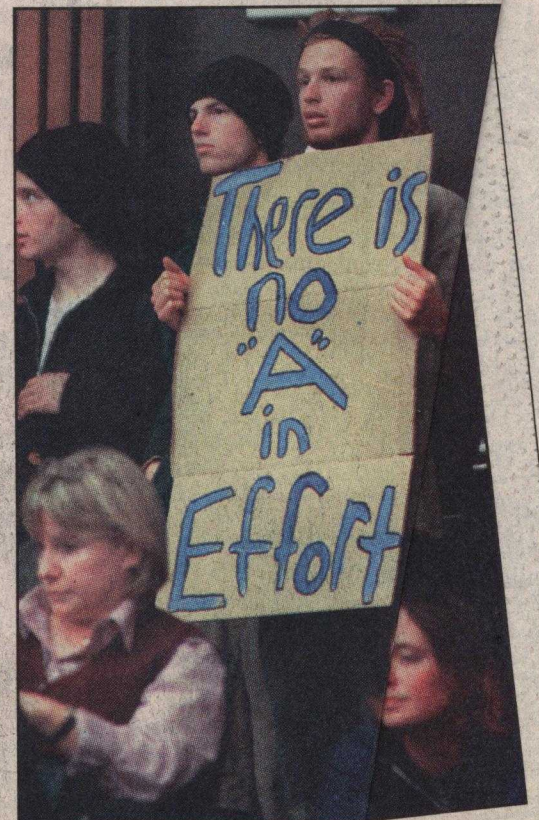
Unlike past votes, which have been more informal, Wednesday's vote was done by written ballot after passionate arguments and debate on arcane procedural points.

Students filed out in protest, upset by the closed ballots and that debate was stopped after only two students were allowed to speak.

"We're coming here because we care," Kirti Srivastara, chair of the Student Union Assembly, told the faculty. "You are killing the essence of narrative evaluations. You are processing us like we're on the assembly line. Respect our right to speak."

If requested by at least 25 professors, a mail ballot may be conducted among the 588 Academic Senate members, said university spokesman Jim Burns. Given the controversy, Burns said a mail ballot is likely.

Opponents of mandatory grades said having optional



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grades was at the core of the university tradition emphasizing learning over grades.

For the past two years, students have been able to get grades if they want them, but last year only one in three of the 11,000 students took that option.

"There is something radically wrong with trying to take what I want to teach and what I want students to learn and making the reduction of that to a grade," said Peter Euben, a professor of politics. "I would like the opportunity to teach without grades."

The nontraditional, grade-free option was part of the "progressive" politics that Kershner and other students said attracted them to the liberal school — along with no ROTC military training and no football team.

But critics said the university has outgrown its granola and no-grades roots.

Many professors complained that narrative evaluations take too much time, and make it difficult for students to compete with others when they apply for graduate schools, scholarships or jobs.

Prospective employers and other institutions find the narrative evaluations too difficult and cumbersome to deal with, said Tony Trumba, a math professor.

"By not having a (grade point average,) we're denying them many opportunities," he said.

"The problem with ideals is that they remain fixed," Robert Ludwig, a biology professor, said of the university tradition. "Reality keeps changing."

The mandatory-grade debate took off in November when 187 faculty members asked the Academic Senate to drop narrative evaluations altogether.

They recommended grades be mandatory in at least 75 percent of an undergraduate's classes.

By a one-vote margin, the senate in December voted to move the matter to its Committee on Educational Policy and Graduate Council for consideration.

The move shocked students and alumni, who have since attended forums, retreats and a convocation on the narrative evaluation system.

Chancellor M.R.C. Greenwood, a member of the Academic Senate, declined to disclose her position before the vote was taken, but said the debate itself was an indicator of UCSC's "uncommon commitment" to education.

The policy adopted Wednesday requires mandatory grades in at least 75 percent of an undergraduate student's courses applied toward graduation. It was modified somewhat from the December proposal to allow a "C-minus" to be a passing grade, rather than have the cut-off at "C," a modification applauded by students.