

Students Voice Concerns About Switch to Pass/Fail Assessment in UPEI's B.Ed. Program

by Tara Stewart-Stanley

Beginning with this academic year, the UPEI Department of Education has changed their marking system to a pass/fail assessment.

Dean of Education, Graham Pike, says this change will help students to develop those qualities important to teachers. He says it's important for the students to be more involved with how well they do in their courses.

"You have to develop a sense of both responsibility for what you're doing," he says, "but, also a kind of self-criticism."

"What we're trying to do through this system is to introduce a range of different assessment processes that help develop those skills and that kind of mind-set."

First year education student, Jenn Campbell, is pleased with the change.

"I think it's a great system because when you're in first year,

coming into the education program, there's a lot of stress. You're worried about your practicums, you're worried about how everything's going to run. I think it's going to take a lot less stress off getting that mark."

The returning students aren't as quick to agree with the new format.

"As I understand," says second year education student Roxanne Hall, "a lot of people are unhappy about it in second year, because we started with marks, and therefore we want to end with marks. We just got our packages a few weeks ago that answered our questions, but when you hear about it in May and you have all these questions and you're curious, you kind of want answers right away. We didn't know how it was going to affect us."

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Dean Pike explains they had three focus groups with the first year students near the end of last year. He says there were a few unhappy students, but the majority were either enthusiastic or indifferent to the change.

"Certainly the majority was for it," Pike says. "We certainly didn't want to do anything that would be detrimental to students."

Student Union President, Chris Power, is concerned with the way the changeover took place. Power, who took over as president May 1, says he attended a senate meeting May 2. Even though he was then Student Union President, Power was told it was the previous president who still held the vote on the senate, so he sat in on the meeting as a non-voting observer.

Power later returned from a trip to discover a package from the university waiting for him in the mail.

"It's the minutes from another meeting they had afterwards," Power says, "on which I was listed absent, along with all the new incoming councillors."

"We certainly didn't want to do anything that would be detrimental to students."

The pass/fail issue was settled and passed at this meeting. Power had been told there wouldn't be another meeting until September and he was frustrated there had been no student presence.

"That was entirely due to the time of the year that it got to the senate," Dean Pike explains. He says an effort was made to reach as many members as possible.

"It was the end of the year, attendance tends to be fairly poor at that time, not only from students," Pike says. "It would have to be done through e-mail, it wasn't the best situation."

Both Power and Hall say they've heard concerns from students worrying about getting into Master's programs.

"I talked to a professor and he reassured me that we wouldn't be affected by the pass/fail. The Master's programs looked at reference letters, etc," Hall says. "We weren't really sure and after I talked to my professor about it, I was O.K., we just needed to be talked to about it."

Pike says most marks are just one indicator of a student's abilities. He says marks from an undergraduate degree are a better indicator, since a masters program is much more like an academic undergraduate program, rather than a professional B.Ed. program.

An information sheet written by Dean Pike, was circulated to the education students prior to the begin-

ning of the university year. It stated there had been much consultation with both students and faculty. It summarized various reasons for the switch to pass/fail.

"Success in getting a job as a teacher," he states, "depends upon a wide range of interconnected factors, of which the most significant are your previous experiences in a teaching situation (including practicum), your references, your level of competency displayed in the interview and your suitability for the past in question. Course grades from a professional program are of little importance to a hiring committee."

Chris Power says, despite his concerns, he'll support the decision.

"I stand behind the university in their efforts to improve this program. But also, I think that the students should be involved in all the process and in this instance it clearly wasn't the case. I'm still not informed enough to form an official opinion on it. We're making our students guinea pigs without actually giving them a lot of input."

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Dean Pike defends the decision to switch from a standard marking method to this new system.

"The whole idea behind this is to increase standards and therefore we need to recognize excellence where it happens, so we're thinking of a whole new scheme of awards, and maybe also a new way of assessing who goes on the Dean's List, so that we can recognize the students who do make that special effort."

Dean Pike says the department hopes to announce the specifics within the next couple of weeks.



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