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## School of Learning **Grading Distribution: Are we using it appropriately?**

Faculty are typically asked to submit course grade distributions as part of their RPT materials. Grade distributions are believed to provide evidence of the rigor of faculty's course requirements and grading methods. A focus on grade distributions represents a broader concern in higher education about "grade inflation." As grade distributions are skewed towards "A's" and "B's," the worry is that standards have been lowered. The accuracy of grades and the rigor of college courses is a viable concern, and while we believe that the grading distribution can be an indicator of this, we have to exercise caution in interpreting the grade distribution as the ultimate indicator of rigor or grade inflation.

First, we must examine grading distributions in the context of pedagogy and teaching philosophy. If faculty teaching the course has a high developmental focus rather than evaluative focus, students might be allowed to improve on their performance during the semester, and their final grade usually reflects their improved success in the course. In addition, we cannot ignore the role faculty plays in motivating students to perform at a higher level in his/her course. (Mostrom & Blumberg, 2012)

Furthermore, considerations of grade distributions and grade inflation rest heavily on the normal distribution assumption. However, does this assumption hold in all cases? For example, student performance in upper-level major courses is not likely to be normally distributed. This example represents just one of many potential problems with relying too heavily on grade distributions to assess faculty teaching effectiveness. In fact, research shows that the higher level courses, or the courses with a smaller number of students, have higher grades (ASHE, 2005).

In addition, the sole or excessive focus on grading distribution might lead to missing the main focus of learning and education. In higher education, the concern should not be whether the assignment of grades is lax, but whether the grade assesses student learning (Goodwin, 2011). As such, requiring faculty to ration grades, such as using a bell curve distribution, can be detrimental to students. In a strict grade distribution, faculty are required to grade the students against one another rather than on their own merit, distributing so many of each letter grade. This could mean a lower grade for a student who demonstrates high achievement but is outcompeted by fellow classmates (Sadler, 2009). Ideally, grading policies are designed to prevent grade inflation and optimize student learning (ASHE, 2005).

The point we are trying to make here is that grading distribution is a complex phenomenon, and it should not be viewed in one way or used in one way. The more we examine faculty's grading distribution in the context of his or her teaching, the more effective tool it will become.

Association for the Study of Higher Education (2005). Correlates of college grades. ASHE Higher Education Report, 30(6), 9–14.

Association for the Study of Higher Education (2005). Grading problems in higher education. ASHE Higher Education Report, 30(6), 1–7.

Basinger, D. (1997). Fighting grade inflation: A misguided effort. College Teaching, 45, 88–91.

Mostrom, A., Blumberg, P. (2012). Does Learning-Centered Teaching Promote Grade Improvement?. Innovations in Higher Education, 37 (4), 1-9.

Sadler, D.R. (2009). Grade integrity and the representation of academic achievement. Studies in higher education, 34(7), 807–826.

\*\*Explanation of Normal Grading Distribution: Typically a "normal distribution" assumption is applied to examining faculty grade distributions. This approach suggests that course grades should be distributed normally with few scores ("A's" and "F's") in the "tails" of the distribution and the majority of scores ("C's") falling in the center of the distribution. If the normal distribution assumption holds, then "C's" would be earned for "average" performance and would constitute the majority of grades earned in a course. The grade of "A" would be reserved for "excellent" performance and "B's" for students demonstrating above average performance.

# Faculty Speaks about Teaching Active Learning in NKU Hospital



*Mary Gers, a recognized simulation expert in the region, is the Director of Simulation and Technology in the College of Health Professions. She earned her undergraduate degree from Miami University in Ohio in 1990, and she received her MSN in Perinatal Obstetrics from the University of Cincinnati in 1995. She joined the Department of Nursing at NKU in 1997. Mary has graciously agreed to share a few of her thoughts about teaching and learning prior to her retirement at the end of this semester.*

## Active Learning in NKU Hospital

The College of Health Professions faces unique challenges related to teaching and learning. We not only have to teach theory in the traditional sense, but we also must teach application of the theory. Although many disciplines across campus face the same challenge, ours is intensified by the knowledge that misapplication of theory could cause patient harm or even death. This statement is clearly illustrated in a report from The Institute of Medicine (1999), which stated that 98,000 patients die each year in the hospital from preventable medical error.

Our college houses three different health care related disciplines. There is a clinical or hospital-learning experience attached to the training of all three of the disciplines. Students are permitted to perform specific “skills” in the hospital setting under the direction of a licensed instructor. Students never perform any skills independently without first checking with the clinical instructor. If a patient codes or has an emergency situation, the student becomes an observer. Rarely are students permitted to be active participants in the care of the patient in crisis, and rightfully so. It is our challenge to produce safe, knowledgeable critical thinkers that are able to function and communicate in the complex health care environment. How do we teach critical thinking? How do we teach a health care professional to think on his/her feet and to make life saving decisions in seconds? How do we teach them to communicate with other members of the health care team? Communication, verbal or written, must be timely and accurate. Watching someone else in an emergency situation just did not seem enough. Out of necessity we created The Simulation Laboratory aka NKU Hospital.

NKU Hospital is a fully equipped laboratory designed for active learning. Our patients range from newborn to pediatric to geriatric. Our patients can hemorrhage or even deliver a baby. Our patients are high fidelity human patient simulators. The simulators breathe, have heart and lung sounds, pulses and replicate many human functions. The simulators are willing teachers; they never complain and often die for the cause of the student learner. Like Lazarus, however, they can come back from the dead with a flick of the button on the computer.

The NKU Hospital provides a learner-friendly environment in which the student must think independently, and react quickly to the case at hand. If the student reacts appropriately and, quickly the patient very often improves. If the student does not proceed correctly or misses an important assessment parameter, the patient gets sicker and may even die. All simulations end in a debriefing session in which all actions are discussed in a non-threatening environment. It is actually in the debrief that most of the student learning occurs. We utilize lots of open ended statements designed to allow the student to self reflect, self identify, and ultimately self embrace correct critical thinking and actions.

This semester we ran our first ever Inter-professional simulation. It was a challenge to get all three disciplines in the same place at the same time, but the learning that occurred was invaluable for the students. They learned that they cannot exist in silos. They learned that they must interact and work with all members of the health care team in order to assure positive patient outcomes. This semester, we also ran a simulation in the HIT Lab in Griffin Hall. The experience allowed us to demonstrate the telehealth cart to nursing students. With the help of our friends from the College of Informatics, we were able to provide a simulation experience that linked nursing and technology. We consider ourselves truly blessed. Few schools are poised to present such rich learning experiences for their students. If you would like to know more about the active learning in the simulation lab, please check out this example of a simulation from NKU hospital. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW1Xo4xl9Wo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW1Xo4xl9Wo)

## TECHNOLOGY TIPS

Are you tired of being chained to your instructor's station? Leery of being locked into place at the front of the classroom? If so, consider downloading Air Sketch for your iPad. Produced by Qrayon, the app essentially turns your iPad into a digital, wireless whiteboard, allowing you to annotate PDF documents (such as exported PowerPoint or Keynote presentations) and images in real time. Boot up your Air Sketch app, open then specified URL from any compatible browser on the NKU network, and your photos and PDFs will appear on screen, freeing you to wander about the room, drawing, annotating, and telestrating to your heart's content.

Air Sketch is available from the iTunes store:<http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/air-sketch-free/id376796733?mt=8>

## TEACHING TIPS

This spring, TEEC offered a series of three workshops designed to highlight issues important to faculty. January's session focused on how we can become more effective and efficient graders by creating and using rubrics for our assignment and by encouraging our students to utilize the writing center. In March, participants learned how creative course design can increase student engagement and learned some practical tips for increasing engagement. The final workshop in April led participants through an interactive discussion of work-life balance. Participants discussed strategies for managing the many demands they have on their time.

If you missed a session, feel free to contact anyone on the committee and we'll direct you to the session leader to provide you with the information you missed. We are also looking for recommendations for next Spring's sessions so if you have an idea, please forward it to the committee!

## STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



My name is Katie Lynn Cox and I am a junior pursuing a Business Management major with a minor in Business Administration. I am from the east side of Cincinnati, where I attended Glen Este High School, and currently live in the traditional dorms with my best friend.

I came to NKU because my parents forced me to attend college. I chose NKU, above the rest, because it was close to home, and the small class sizes emphasized an "up-close and personal" interaction with my professors, which were aspects that were a "must" for me as a student.

Ever since I came here in August 2010, I have gotten really involved both inside and outside of the classroom. I made Dean's List both semesters of my freshman year and currently maintain a 3.2 cumulative GPA. I joined Theta Phi Alpha sorority, where I

have held both Executive and Minor offices. I joined Presidential Ambassadors, where I have served on the Executive Board this past year as the Merit Coordinator, and am now the President-Elect for the upcoming school year. I am a Senator in the Student Government Association and was appointed as the Student Rights Committee, Chair for the 2013-2014 academic year. I am also the Student Body Representative for the Strategic Planning Committee where I serve alongside President Mearns and other esteemed faculty, staff, and alumni. Our mission is to plan the next five years of NKU's future and I am privileged to have been selected to serve in this capacity.

For me, NKU started out as something I had to do, not necessarily a choice of what I wanted to do. I can now say with full certainty that I have been very blessed to be a member of the Norse Family. I am ever grateful for the education that I have received here; both from being a known individual by my professors in the classroom, and from having the opportunity to join several organizations, on campus, that helped me find myself and develop my leadership abilities. NKU is my home and I will miss it dearly when I graduate in May 2014. I love NKU.