Academic Policy Proposal:
Policy on Grade Grievances for Students in Boston University Courses
(12-1-15)

1. Rationale
The Undergraduate and Graduate Councils recommend the adoption of a Policy on Grade Grievances for Boston University courses to provide a means for students to seek review of final course grades alleged to be arbitrary. The policy provides uniform and clear guidance for both faculty and students about the grounds for appeals and a reasonable process to assure equity and efficiency. Most schools and colleges currently follow a process similar to that proposed in the policy; procedures at the department/program level vary and have been the cause of confusion and some sense of inequity for both students and faculty. The policy seeks to provide a reasonable, timely, and fair means of addressing grade grievances across the University. It seeks to balance the prerogative of the faculty to award grades and the need of the student for an equitable means of appealing grades alleged to be arbitrary. Recognizing the shared responsibility of the student, instructor, department/program and dean, the policy is designed to encourage resolution of disputes at the local department/program level with final appeal to the dean.

A survey of AAU institutions shows a variety of approaches to grading appeals: some do not address the issue, some leave it entirely to the schools/colleges to determine a process, and some take the way we have chosen as best for BU, which is to set an overall structure for handling appeals within the departments/programs and schools/colleges. A few universities allow appeal to the provost; we believe that grading appeals are most equitably handled by those who are closest to the instruction, and that two levels of appeal (department chair/program director, dean) are sufficient to assure knowledgeable but objective judgment. AAUP guidelines on grading and grade appeals were reviewed in the drafting of the policy. This proposed policy is in line with the Association’s recommendations.

2. Covered Parties
This policy covers all students enrolled in credit-bearing Boston University courses.


Policy on Grade Grievances for Students in Boston University Courses

1. This policy provides a means for a student to contest a final course grade received in a credit-bearing Boston University course when that grade is alleged by the student to be arbitrary. It is the shared responsibility of the instructor of record (hereinafter referred to as “instructor”), student, department or program (hereinafter referred to
as “department”), and school/college to resolve allegations of arbitrary grading.

Grading is the prerogative of the faculty and is based upon a student’s performance against a clearly articulated set of assignments, expectations, and standards. Arbitrary grades are defined as those:

- assigned to a student on some basis other than performance in the course; or,
- assigned to a student by resorting to unreasonable standards different from those which were applied to other students in that course or section of the course; or,
- assigned to a student by a substantial, unreasonable and unannounced departure from the instructor’s previously articulated standards.

Issues that do not meet one or more of these criteria of arbitrariness are not appropriate for a grade appeal under this policy. Only final course grades may be formally appealed. Grades that are the result of academic misconduct are not appealable. Only grades earned in Boston University courses, domestically or abroad, are appealable.

All grievances must be made in a timely manner. Unless there are extenuating circumstances such as prolonged hospitalization or debilitating illness, or other similar external inhibiting factors, the student must begin the process for contesting the course grade within six weeks of the official posting of the grade.

II. Before filing a formal appeal, a student is urged to resolve a grievance informally by meeting with the instructor responsible for the grading of the course to discuss the student’s concerns. If the grade in question was assigned by a teaching fellow, teaching assistant or a graduate grader, the student may opt to discuss the matter with the supervising faculty with the teaching fellow, teaching assistant, or graduate grader present.

The student is responsible for bringing copies of all relevant information to the meeting (i.e., course syllabus, assignment sheet, graded work). The student should be prepared to show evidence of arbitrary grading. The instructor is expected to discuss the student’s concerns and to explain the basis for determining the grade.

If the instructor has left the University, is on approved leave, or does not respond to the student after a reasonable effort, the student should contact the chair of the department offering the course, the program director or another appropriate academic administrator designated by the school/college if the course is part of a non-departmental program or division (hereinafter referred to as the “chair”).

With the student’s agreement, the chair may explore the possibility of an immediate resolution that is satisfactory to both the student and the instructor of record.

III. If the student and the instructor are unable to arrive at a mutually agreeable
solution, the student may file a formal appeal with the chair.

To begin the process of formal appeal, the student must submit to the chair a written statement that details the basis for the allegation of arbitrary grading, and presents adequate evidence that supports the allegation. Adequate evidence may include, but is not limited to:
- Syllabus for the course;
- Assignment sheet outlining requirements and expectations;
- Proof that requirements were met at a level necessary to exceed the assigned grade;
- Demonstrable examples of clear bias.

The chair and the student will discuss the process and the strength or weakness of the evidence the student has presented. If the chair finds no evidence of arbitrary grading, the appeal is dismissed. The student may appeal the chair’s decision to the dean. The dean may uphold the dismissal, thereby ending the appeal process, or return the case to the chair for panel review. The dean will inform the student of his/her decision in writing.

If the grievance is not dismissed and the student desires to continue with the appeal process, the chair will convene a panel of at least three faculty members from the school or college at a rank equal or superior to that of the instructor. At least one of the panel members must be drawn from outside the department in which the grade is being grieved. As appropriate within the academic unit, the panel may comprise a standing committee, with the addition of at least one faculty member from outside of the department, or may be appointed ad hoc.

At the start of the review, the panel shall provide a copy of the student’s written statement to the instructor with a request for a prompt written reply. Unless otherwise specified by the panel, the instructor must provide a written response within ten working days of the panel’s request. The panel must provide a copy of the instructor’s response to the student within five working days of its receipt.

The panel will review the case, including the student’s written statement and evidence and the written reply from the instructor. If necessary, the panel will interview the student complainant and the instructor. Throughout the process of formal appeal to the chair, neither party may be accompanied by a second party, except as necessary to accommodate a disability. Generally, students and instructors are expected to present their evidence and make their cases in front of each other so that each may hear the other. If specific circumstances make a face-to-face meeting with both instructor and student impractical, the committee may make reasonable accommodations in the interest of a fair and speedy resolution of the case.

If the opportunity for informal resolution of the dispute arises, the panel is authorized and encouraged to mediate such informal resolution.
The panel will report its determination in writing to the chair. If the committee finds that arbitrary grading has occurred, the report must include two or more alternative remedies to be implemented by the Chair. These remedies must represent the best interests of the student and must include one of the following:

- Regrading by another, qualified, disinterested member of the faculty.
- Presenting the panel’s finding to the instructor and allowing the instructor the opportunity to change the grade if s/he sees fit.
- Opening a new section of the class, transferring the student’s enrollment to it, and allowing the student to satisfy its requirements by examination, portfolio, or some other appropriate means, with the work evaluated by a qualified, disinterested member of the faculty.
- Opening a new section of the class, transferring the student’s enrollment to it, and awarding a grade of “Pass.” A “pass” that results from a finding of arbitrary grading does not count toward the maximum number of credits taken Pass/Fail allowed by the “Policy on Pass/Fail Courses for Undergraduate Students.” If this remedy is selected as in the best interest of the student, the “pass” that results from a finding of arbitrary grading will be permitted to count toward any and all degree requirements.

Other remedies may also be recommended.

No administrator may overrule the grade issued by an instructor without a finding of arbitrary grading by the panel. Only those remedies that were recommended by the panel are available to the chair. The chair and panel may communicate, but the chair is expected to respect the independence of the panel. If the chair prefers a remedy that was not suggested by the panel, s/he may request a revised report that includes that remedy. The panel, however, is free to decline the suggestion.

A formal appeal may not result in a grade lower than the grade being appealed.

The chair should communicate the findings of the panel, and the final decision, to the student and instructor in writing within ten days of receiving the panel’s final report.

A formal grade grievance must be settled as promptly as possible, and must be settled within six weeks of the filing of the formal appeal to the chair.
IV. The student may appeal the decision of the chair to the dean of the school/college in which the course is offered. The dean will render a final decision and notify the student and the instructor within two weeks of receiving the appeal.

Students who file an appeal under the policy must abide by the final disposition of the grievance and may not seek review of the matter under any other procedure within the University.

V. Every effort should be made to avoid conflicts of interest. Participants in the review process must identify and report potential conflicts of interest to the next higher administrative level. The next higher level administrator is responsible for ensuring that conflicts of interest do not compromise the appeal process, and for appointing substitutes as needed to ensure the fairness of the process. Under no circumstances may an instructor accused of arbitrary grading serve on the committee that evaluates the charge. If the accused instructor is the chair, then the student should consult with the dean. If the accused instructor is the dean, then the student should consult with the provost.

4. Effective Date

June 1, 2016 with the new Bulletin year, for courses taken after that date.

5. History

The proposed Policy on Grade Grievances was drafted by the Undergraduate and Graduate Councils (the Councils comprise associate deans of the undergraduate and graduate schools). It was endorsed by the Undergraduate Council on 12/01/2015.

6. Additional Consultative Bodies

In addition to the standard consultative bodies (Faculty Council, the Provost’s Cabinet and the Council of Deans), the Advising Network serves as a consultative body for this policy proposal.

7. Responsible Parties

The Office of the University Registrar and members of the Undergraduate and Graduate Councils will be responsible for the implementation of the new policy in the schools/colleges.

8. Implementation procedures, timeline and guidelines
Office of the University Registrar, Council of Deans, Undergraduate Council, Graduate Council, and the Advising Network will all be notified of the change shortly after its approval. The amended policy will be published in the Bulletin clearly marked with its effective date of June 1, 2016.

9. Related Policies and References

The Policy on Academic Misconduct should be revised to specify that a grade that is the result of academic misconduct cannot be appealed.

The Policy on Pass/Fail Courses for Undergraduate Students should be amended to specify that a “Pass” that results from a finding of arbitrary grading does not count toward the 8-credit maximum allowable under that policy.

It is recommended that a reference to the Policy on Grade Grievances for Undergraduate Students be inserted into the policy section on “Grades and Course Credits” in the Bulletin (http://www.bu.edu/academics/policies/grades-and-course-credits/).