MEMORANDUM

To: Mark Morvant, Chair - Academic Affairs, Faculty Senate
From: Jan Haswell, Director - Honors Program
Date: April 6, 2005
Subject: Grading Honors Courses

In 1996, when I first came to teach at TAMU-CC, I was told that our innovative core curriculum was designed to make us something more than Gray State University. In our 10th year of teaching lower-division students, we are now adding an Honors Program, which we will hope will further distinguish our university. As we plan how to articulate learning objectives and assess student outcomes, the issue of grading and the existing four-point scale has continually resurfaced. Why would we design a program and create challenging courses for highly motivated students, then measure their learning or performance by an inexact letter grade that does not discriminate degrees of excellent and discourages that extra effort we seek to spark? For many honors faculty, it feels like pouring new wine into old skins.

We are aware of student concerns that their GPA will suffer with this change. I’m attaching two supplementary reports. The first is a copy of what several faculty members submitted in 1997 to the Faculty Senate. At that time the proposal was for a university-wide change and was voted down by the Senate. The second report is from Clemson University, which recently studied the plus/minus system. This report concludes that with a plus/minus system, 20% of students would gain in terms of GPA, 60% would lose. But that loss is only −0.045 grade points. I should also note that the plus/minus system produced more “A” grades during its two years of study as compared the previous two years that used a four-point scale. How Clemson students differ from ours is a variable impossible to calculate at this time.

Our first cohort of honors students is meeting April 22 and I will ask for their views about a more discriminating grading scale. It may be that becoming honors students is a dramatic enough change and they would prefer not to add another “unknown” We will also be meeting as an honors faculty in May (once spring 2006 courses are proposed and approved), and I will seek input here as well.

Is it be possible for Academic Affairs to place on its agenda this issue of implementing a plus/minus system in Honors classes in these final weeks of the semester? Or if not now, very early next fall? If you cannot consider the issue now, could you at least outline a process that needs to be followed?