

Report on the effects of adopting a revised grade recalculation policy at Kent State University

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In Spring Semester 2008, Kent State University implemented a new policy for “forgiving” grades in repeated courses. The primary impetus for creating a new policy was the adoption of the Banner student information system and its inability to automate application of the policy in its previous form. However, during the discussions leading to a new policy, it became apparent that the old policy not only was difficult for students to understand but also gave rise to inequitable application. Even if Banner had not been adopted, it is likely that the policy would have had to be revised anyway.

The new policy was developed by a subcommittee of the Associate and Assistant Deans Committee, presented to several campus committees for discussion and approved by the A & A Deans Committee for submission to the Educational Policy Council. Included with the policy proposal was a pledge by the A & A Deans to review the new policy after it had been in place for three years and to report on the effects of changing the policy. This report is the fulfillment of that pledge.

Background

Provisions of the Prior Policy

The grade recalculation policy in effect prior to Spring 2008, although officially called the “Rule for Recalculation of First-Year Grade Point Average,” was referred to colloquially as “Freshman Forgiveness.” The intent of that policy was to provide a way for students who were unprepared for the rigors of college study to repeat courses taken early in their college career in which they had earned poor grades. The policy allowed students to replace the poor grade earned in the first attempt with what was expected to be a better grade in a second attempt. The rules of eligibility for Freshman Forgiveness were:

- Any course could be repeated for forgiveness as long as the course had been taken before the student had attempted 30 semester hours. The second attempt of the course must have been taken before the student had attempted 60 semester hours. Thus, the main rule for eligibility was student-based: When in the student’s program of study did the student take the course? The justification for this rule was that, after attempting 30 hours, a student should have become accustomed to the rigors of college study and should no longer be eligible for a policy intended to help freshmen.
- Only courses in which the student received a grade lower than C were eligible for forgiveness.
- The grade for the second attempt of the course remained in the calculation of the student’s cumulative GPA and the grade for the first attempt was removed (forgiven). This held true even when the grade for the second attempt was lower than the grade for

the first attempt. This part of the policy was intended to serve as an incentive for the student to do whatever was necessary to succeed the second time around. The grades for any additional attempts of the same course also counted in the student's GPA along with the grade for the second attempt.

- Students were required to apply for Freshman Forgiveness after completing the second attempt at a course. That is, only after a student applied for and was approved for Freshman Forgiveness was the policy applied to that student's record.

Provisions of the Current Policy

When Banner was adopted as Kent State's student information system, the decision was made to automate as many procedures as possible in order to take advantage of the system's capabilities. Banner was not capable of automating a policy that required inspection and evaluation of each individual student's record for all the parameters of the forgiveness policy then in effect. It became necessary to move to a course-based policy rather than a student-based policy: Which courses are eligible to be repeated for a recalculated GPA? However, with regard to other parameters of the policy, Banner offered several options. After multiple discussions with stakeholder groups, the following rules of eligibility were adopted for the new policy, which was known informally as "Retake for Recalculation":

- All lower division courses (10000 and 20000 numbers) may be retaken for recalculation of cumulative GPA except those courses that may be repeated for additional credit. The original attempt and the retakes may occur at any time during the student's college career.
- Any grade may be forgiven, up to and including A-.
- There is no limit to the number of times a student may retake the course. Only the highest grade achieved in all attempts is used in the calculation of the student's GPA. The grades for all other attempts are forgiven.
- The policy is applied automatically to all retaken courses at the end of every term.

Concerns about the new policy

The rules of the new policy were not really chosen by consensus, but rather were arrived at as a sort of midpoint between the preferences of some stakeholders who wanted more stringent rules and others who wanted more lenient rules. They also were a response to a large number of stakeholders who disliked the complexity of the old rules and wanted a policy that would be easier for faculty and advisors to explain and for students to understand.

Some concerns expressed at the time the policy was adopted were:

- Students will take the same course over and over to achieve better grades. This will extend their time to completion and may cause their financial aid eligibility to expire before graduation.

- Students who are overly concerned about GPA numbers will repeat courses they have successfully passed just to move from an acceptable grade to one that is marginally higher.
- A large number of students registering for courses as repeaters will fill the courses before other students who want to take the course for the first time are able to register.

The pledge to examine the effects of the policy was a response to these concerns.

Methods

The Kent State University office of Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE) was contacted to provide raw data on cases meeting criteria for inclusion in the repeat for recalculation policy. RPIE was extremely helpful in understanding the exact nature of the data being requested and worked through several iterations of the request to ensure accuracy. The office also created a special indicator variable in the data very similar to the Banner I-Included or E-Excluded code.

The unit of analysis in the dataset used for this analysis is the individual class attempt. Personal identification of the student was limited to the Banner ID number. Academic information regarding the student such as college, major, catalog year, class standing, GPA before and after the class attempt, and academic status before and after the class attempt was included. Information relating to the course such as campus, CRN, section number, course number and name, college, department, semester offered, midterm grade (if applicable), final grade, and included/excluded indicator were also provided. Data were provided for five semesters before the implementation of the new policy and five semesters after the implementation.

Classes that were repeatable for credit were removed from the data. Similarly, cases in which one or more attempts fell outside of the time frame being studied were also removed. The resulting data set included 115,018 individual class attempts. For those cases in which a series of attempts spanned the old and new policies, the entire series was coded as having taken place under the new policy.

Findings

The number of students using the recalculation policy

Total Number of Students Using the Recalculation Policy	
Old Policy	5,536 (20.7%)
New Policy	21,252 (79.3%)
Total	26,788

A total of 26,788 students had grades recalculated under either policy. The new policy saw an increase of 284 percent over the old policy. Some of the increase is due to our counting of cross-policy cases in new policy cases.

The number of instances of grade recalculation

Total Number of Grades Replaced	
Old Policy	13,546 (24.8%)
New Policy	41,169 (75.2%)
Total	54,715

A total of 54,715 grades were changed in the entire 10 semesters under study. Three-quarters of those grade changes took place under the new policy. The new policy saw an increase of 224 percent over the old policy, but again, some of the increase is due to counting cross-policy cases in new policy cases. Students averaged 2.45 grade changes per student under the old policy. This number fell slightly to 1.94 grade changes under the new policy. In other words, more students are taking advantage of recalculation under the new policy, but each student is using it for fewer courses.

The average number of attempts replaced per incidence of replacement

Average Number of Retakes per Incidence of Replacement			
Number of Retakes	1	2	3+
Old Policy			
Frequency	19,864	2,265	388
Percent	87.7%	10.0%	1.7%
New Policy			
Frequency	33,836	4,028	652
Percent	87.5%	10.4%	1.7%

The average number of course attempts was 2.15 (1 initial attempt and 1.15 retake attempts). This value did not vary significantly under either policy.

For each grade replaced under the old policy 87.7% of students made only one attempt. Ten percent of students attempted two retakes and 1.7% attempted three or more. Those figures remained remarkably consistent under the new policy (87.5%, 10.4%, and 1.7% respectively).

Academic status of students using the recalculation policy before and after the term of recalculation

Academic Status of Students Using the Recalculation Policy Before and After the Term of Recalculation

		Frequency	Percent
Old Policy			
Standing Remained the Same	GS to GS	4,679	34.5%
	AP to AP	2,861	21.1%
	SW to SW	458	3.4%
Academic Standing Improved	AP to GS	1,318	9.7%
	SW to GS	1,232	9.1%
Academic Standing Worsened	GS to SW	900	6.6%
	GS to AP	1,412	10.4%
		Frequency	Percent
New Policy			
Standing Remained the Same	GS to GS	16,199	39.3%
	AP to AP	8,657	21.0%
	SW to SW	1,721	4.2%
Academic Standing Improved	AP to GS	4,551	11.1%
	SW to GS	4,118	10.0%
Academic Standing Worsened	GS to SW	2,837	6.9%
	GS to AP	1,887	4.6%

Note: Percentages do not total 100% due to missing data

A slightly higher proportion of students (21.1%) improved their academic standing after the term of recalculation under the new policy than under the old policy (18.8%). The new policy also saw an increase in the number of students whose academic standing did not change after recalculation. A higher percentage of students actually moved to a lower academic standing after recalculation under the old policy.

GPA of students using the recalculation policy before and after the term of recalculation

GPA of Students Using the Recalculation Policy Before and After the Term of Recalculation

	Before	After	Change
Old Policy	1.74	2.14	.40
New Policy	2.03	2.28	.25

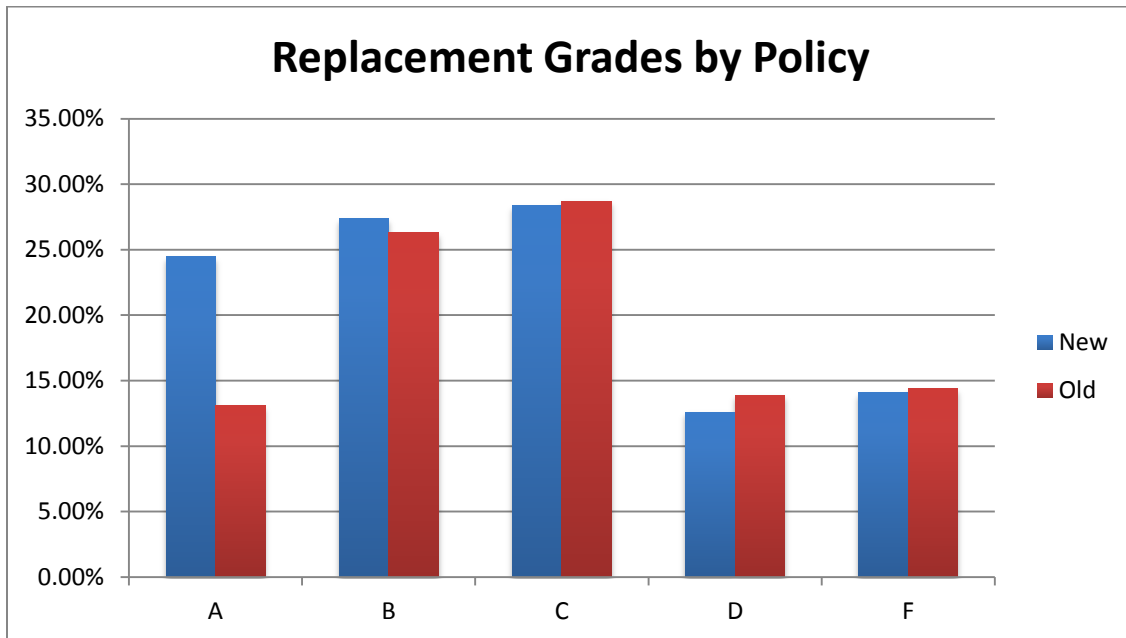
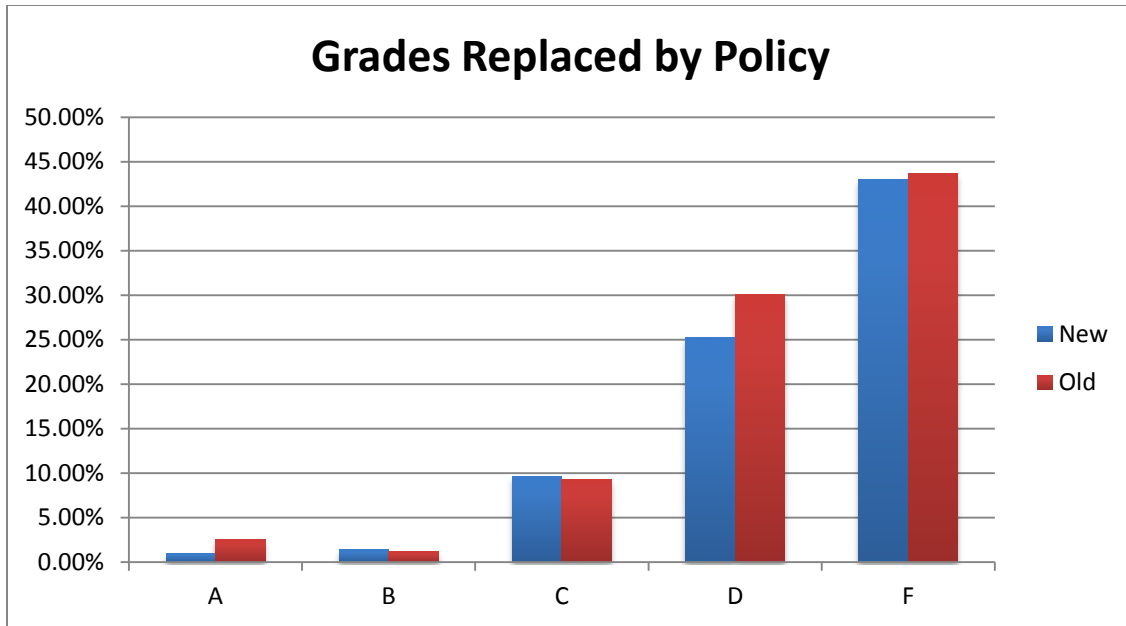
The average cumulative GPA of a student increased by .40 after the term of recalculation under the old policy. Under the new policy the average cumulative GPA increase was one-quarter of a point. The data in this table may not reflect actual circumstances because Banner does not preserve original GPAs. If a student had multiple recalculations over several terms, the GPA before a later recalculation may have been adjusted for a previous recalculation.

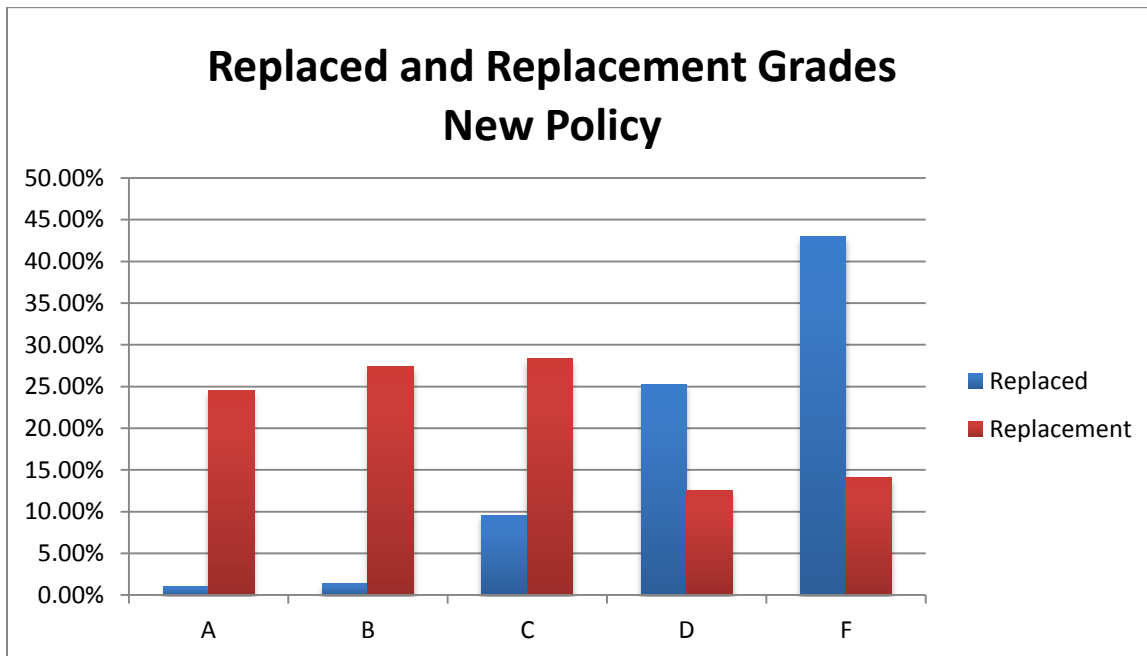
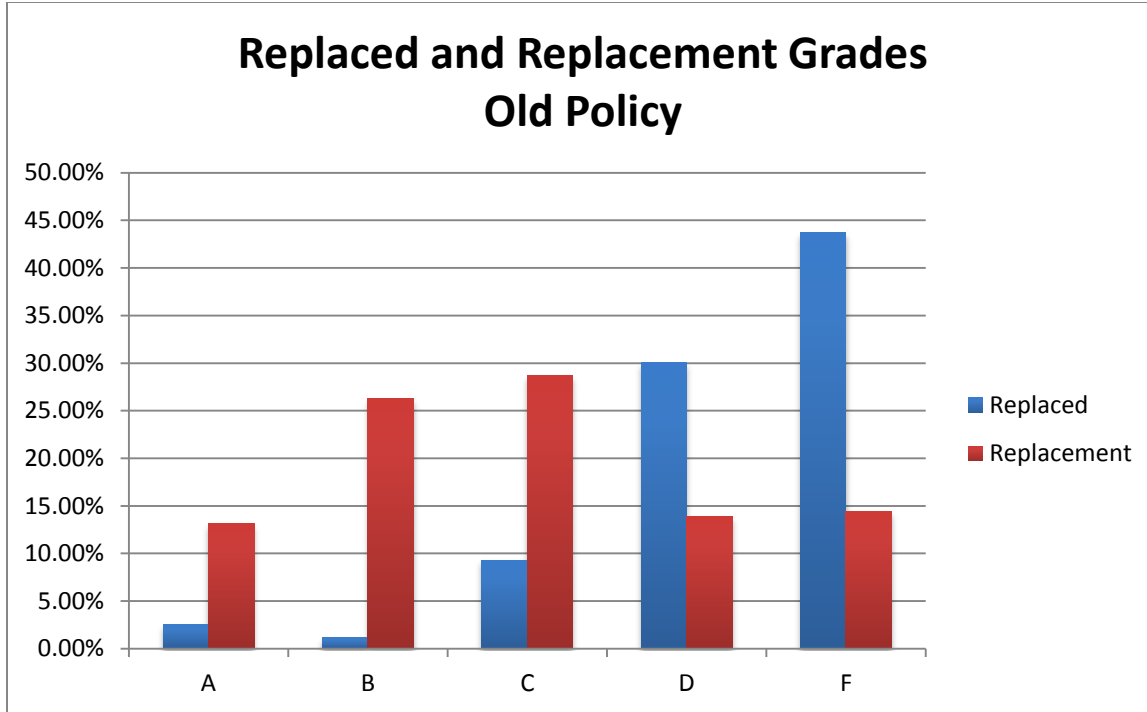
Distribution of replaced grades by replacement grades

Distribution of Initial Grades by Replacement Grades

Old Policy		Frequency	Percent
	Initial (Replaced) Grade		
	A	555	2.5%
	B	276	1.2%
	C	2,089	9.3%
	D	6,800	30.1%
	F	9,869	43.7%
	Other	308	1.4%
	NF/SF	2,633	11.6%
	S-U	207	0.9%
	New (Replacement) Grade		
	A	1,785	13.1%
	B	3,563	26.3%
	C	3,892	28.7%
	D	1,886	13.9%
	F	1,956	14.4%
	Other	52	0.6%
	NF/SF	231	2.0%
	S-U	181	1.4%
New Policy		Frequency	Percent
	Initial (Replaced) Grade		
	A	379	1.0%
	B	479	1.4%
	C	3,643	9.6%
	D	9,475	25.2%
	F	16,220	43.0%
	Other	475	1.1%
	NF/SF	6,334	16.8%
	S-U	90	0.2%
	New (Replacement) Grade		
	A	5,952	24.5%
	B	11,289	27.4%
	C	11,698	28.4%
	D	5,192	12.6%
	F	5,796	14.1%
	Other	95	0.1%
	NF/SF	1,014	2.4%
	S-U	86	.2%

Note: +/- grades collapsed into whole letter grades





Number of recalculated grades by course level

Number of Recalculated Grades by Course Level		
Old Policy	Frequency	Percent
10000 Courses	9,957	74.5%
20000 Courses	2,496	18.4%
30000 Courses	706	5.2%
40000 Courses	387	2.9%
New Policy	Frequency	Percent
10000 Courses	28,701	69.7%
20000 Courses	9,420	22.9%
30000 Courses	2,073	5.0%
40000 Courses	975	2.4%

Summary

Many more students—almost four times as many—are using the new policy than used the old policy. This is most likely due to the facts that the new policy can be used at any time during a student’s attendance and the policy is applied automatically. However, the number of grade recalculations per student has fallen slightly.

Under the old policy, only slightly more than 10 percent of students repeated courses more than once for recalculation. That percentage has stayed almost exactly the same.

The new policy has enabled more than three times as many students to improve their academic standing as did under the old policy. The number of students whose academic standing fell under the new policy is larger than under the old one, but that is because the overall number of students using the policy is larger. The percentage of students whose academic standing fell is actually smaller under the new policy.

For Further Analysis

Data used in this analysis are stored in an SPSS file which can easily be converted to other analysis platforms. The data will be housed with the Research, Planning & Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE) office at Kent State University.

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