To: The Faculty Senate  
From: The Educational Policy Committee  
Re: The resolution from the Educational Policy Committee concerning median grades, which is being offered to the  
Faculty Senate for consideration on 13 May 2009  

The resolution being brought to the Faculty Senate concerns the removal of the median grades from the Cornell Website. We know that, in April 2006, Professor Ann Lemley, Textiles and Apparel, and Chair of the Educational Policy Committee, proposed removing the median grades from the web and that her proposal was voted down.  

However, new information has emerged that indicates that the median grades are being used in ways that are not helpful to the students or Cornell. In September 2007, Talia Bar, Vrinda Kadilya, and Asaf Zussman published paper [1], which reports on a study done using the median grades on the Cornell website, along with some surveys of students. The study examined a large data set covering the period 1990–2004, and the abstract of the paper says that “our study provides evidence consistent with these predictions:  

“(1) students will tend to be drawn to leniently graded courses once exposed to grade information;  
(2) the most talented students will be less drawn to leniently graded courses than their peers;  
(3) the change in students’ behavior will contribute to grade inflation.”  

For these reasons, the EPC believes that it would be better not to publish median grades, especially since they are now being placed on transcripts. More information on article [1] can be found on the next page, and the paper itself is available on the web at http://ssrn.com/abstract=1019580.  

We present some of the information from article [1]. [1], which is based on all students attending Cornell A&S courses over a 15-year period, has a lot more detail and interesting analyses and interpretations. The two figures on this page are taken from [1].

Besides the median grade data found on Cornell’s website, the study used some surveys as well as individual SAT scores of students. The use of individual SAT scores allowed them to study which students will be more attracted to leniently graded courses.

The figure to the right shows the number of daily visits to the Cornell median-grade website over a 2.5 year period (Fall 2002 – Dec 2004). Students visited the website a lot more during pre-enrollment periods than at other times, indicating that the median grades were of interest to them while they were selecting their courses.

Fig. 4, to the right, shows the mean grade in Cornell A&S courses from 1990 to 2004. The first median-grade report for Cornell appeared in Spring 1997. Fig. 4 shows that the mean grade actually went down from 1995 to 1997, but there was a sharp increase in 1997 and a strong general upward trend from then on until 2004.

One question is: how much of the rise in mean grade was due to the existence of the median-grade website? [1] has an analysis that suggests that “grade-driven course selection is likely to have had a large influence.”

[1] discusses two other explanations for a grade inflation: a change in faculty composition and increase in the quality of students.

[1] argues that a change in faculty composition did not contribute to grade inflation.

[1] estimates, based on their analysis, that an improvement in the quality of students accounts for about one third of the increase in grades. SAT scores were used as a basis for measuring student quality.

[1] provides an interesting discussion of the effects of grade inflation. Basically, grade inflation leads to grade compression and a resultant loss in information.

[1] makes the point that a student can increase their GPA and thus their ranking relative to their peers by taking leniently graded courses. By studying the data for Cornell’s Department of Economics, they showed that such a “ranking bias” occurred.