

AN EVALUATION OF THE SATISFACTORY-UNSATISFACTORY GRADING OPTION AT FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY¹

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SUMMARY

Fifty-two users and 52 non-users of the undergraduate pass-fail option at Florida State University were interviewed. A variety of reasons were given for electing the pass-fail option. These are discussed. The overall evidence is favorable for continued use of the option.

INTRODUCTION

Florida State University (FSU) established an undergraduate satisfactory-unsatisfactory (S-U) grading option that became operational in September, 1967. The rules regulating use and operation of the S-U option when the evaluation was performed--the 1969-70 academic year were very similar to those of the typical pass fail option as reported by Semas (1971, p. 5). Courses taken on an S-U basis counted toward the minimum quarter hours of credit required for graduation, but were not included in computing a student's GPA.

Students taking physical education activity courses were not required to adhere to some of the following restrictions:

- 1) be a second quarter freshman or above,
- 2) have a (GPA) of at least 2.50,
- 3) take only one ungraded course per quarter,
- 4) have permission of the faculty advisor.

¹This manuscript reports selected findings from a Ph. D. dissertation in Educational Evaluation at The Florida State University (Nations, 1971).

Courses in the student's major or minor which were required by his college, school or department were not eligible to be taken on an S-U basis. In addition, of the 58 quarter hours required in Liberal Studies a maximum of six could be taken on an S-U basis, and these had to be courses at the junior or senior course number level. A maximum of 27 quarter hours--of the 180 needed for graduation--could be taken on an S-U basis. There were two general purposes for performing this evaluative study; to ascertain the characteristics of students who used the S-U option and to learn the reactions of both users and nonusers to the S-U option.

PROCEDURE

Four groups of students were selected for study:

- 1) All students who used the S-U option during the academic year 1969-1970 (N=1049).
- 2) Students who used S-U in the Fall (N=26), and Winter quarters (N=26).
- 3) A comparable group of nonusers (N=26).
- 4) A university-wide random sample of undergraduate nonusers (N=26).

Data were collected from student records to determine the characteristics of the users; and by interviewing the samples of users and nonusers, determine student reactions to the S-U option.

CHARACTERISTICS OF USERS

The data reveal that the total undergraduate enrollment decreased during the academic year, but the number of students using the S-U option increased. Similar increased use (across semesters) of the Pass-Fail option at the University of Illinois was reported by Stallings and Smock (1970, p. 3). The increased usage at FSU was explained by the increasing number of freshmen becoming eligible to use S-U; and the fact that past use of the S-U option led to further use. Users at FSU represented 1.9 per cent, 2.6 per cent, and 4.2 per cent of their respective quarterly (1969-1970) undergraduate enrollment.

TABLE I
Percentages of Users and Undergraduates by Class

Class	Quarter I		Quarter II		Quarter III	
	Users	Undergr.	Users	Undergr.	Users	Undergr.
Freshman	2.4	20.88	3.3	21.60	8.4	18.88
Sophomore	9.2	22.28	12.8	22.42	12.9	19.28
Junior	23.3	28.77	22.7	31.48	23.4	29.32
Senior	65.1	28.07	61.2	24.50	55.3	32.52
N	249	13,054	335	12,590	465	11,164

Table I contains data on the percentage of users and undergraduate students in each class for each quarter of the academic year. The percentages were computed within quarters, each of which had a different number of students. With respect to class size:

1) freshman and sophomore students consistently elected the S-U option much less than would have been expected, 2) juniors elected the S-U option at a level near expectancy and, 3) more seniors consistently elected the S-U option than would have been expected.

Several factors can explain freshmen and/or sophomores infrequently electing the S-U option. One, first quarter freshmen were ineligible to elect courses on an S-U basis; and two, at the end of the Fall and Winter Quarters the mean GPA for freshmen was below the minimum level needed to elect a course on S-U. These two factors meant that the average freshman was ineligible to use S-U for his entire first year at FSU. In addition, at least some freshmen and sophomores were unaware of the existence of the S-U option; thus were not able to use it.

The number of juniors who used the S-U option was in proportion to the size of the junior class.

Seniors consistently used the S-U option more than would have been expected on the basis of their class size. In two quarters, it was double the expected rates. A primary reason for this was that past use of the S-U option led to repeated use. The percentage of repeated users increased in each class from sophomore to senior. In the senior class, this amounted to 45 percent of the users. Other explanations for the seniors using the S-U option so often were indicated by the responses of the interviewed sample of users who were seniors. Among these reasons were: the opportunity to take a wider range of courses outside their major and/or minor; the opportunity to concentrate on other courses, specifically major/minor courses; and the chance to take a course in such a manner that it would not require as much work.

The GPA of users was investigated as a single characteristic and in relation to class, quarter and sex. There were no general trends across classes within quarters, or across quarters within classes. In general, the mean GPA of users was about half-a-grade point higher than the minimum of 2.50 necessary to use the S-U grading option. In addition, females had a slightly, but not significantly, higher GPA than males. There was no statistically significant association between electing S-U and sex of user. This finding was the same as that of another study (Stallings and Smock, 1970, p. 3).

Students who used the S-U option for the first time comprised about 61 per cent of all the users. This percentage was very stable across the three quarters. The frequencies indicated that students who used the S-U option once, liked it enough to use it again. The stability of the 6-4 ratio of first-time to repeated users also indicated that a sufficient number of students used S-U for the first time each quarter to make up for the repeated use of others.

The numbers of repeated users increased during the year for each class although it was the third quarter before this occurred in the freshman class. The number of users who kept taking courses on S-U increased every quarter, but the average number of courses having been taken per repeated user remained stable at about two and one-half. These two occurrences presented strong evidence that students who used the S-U option once, came back and used it again.

To summarize, use of the S-U option increased during the academic year, 1969-1970 even though the undergraduate population decreased. Users most often were majors in the College of Arts and Sciences and were electing the S-U option for their first time. About as many males as females elected to use the S-U option and their GPA's remained relatively constant. Finally, past use of the S-U option led to further use.

STUDENT REACTIONS

Ascertaining the reactions of students is an important part of evaluating any ongoing educational program because they provide valuable data for gauging the overall effects of the program. These reactions were obtained by interviewing three samples of students: users, comparable nonusers, and random non-users. Five general types of reactions will be discussed: student knowledge of the S-U option, reasons for using and not using the S-U option, activities related to S-U use, taking courses on A-F if S-U had not existed, and the positive and negative aspects of the S-U option as reported by users and nonusers.

During the interview, students were asked about their knowledge of the rules and regulations for using the S-U option. Their responses were recorded on a checklist of 14 points. Median scores on the checklist were 8.9, 4.5 and 2.0 for users, comparable nonusers and random nonusers, respectively.

These differences were accounted for by three factors. Users should have known more than nonusers because they had gone through the process of electing a course on an S-U basis. The comparable nonusers were more experienced students than the random nonusers because less than eight percent of them were freshman or sophomore students. Finally, 21 of the 52 nonusers listed ignorance or never thinking about the S-U option as one reason for not using it.

Users were asked to give their reason(s) for electing a course on an S-U basis. Forty percent of the 52 interviewed users reported they used the option because you "don't have to worry about grades." Twenty-five percent reported "protect GPA" as one reason for using the S-U option. Similar results were reported by both Hales et al (1971, p. 5) and Karlins et al (1969). These results led to the conclusion that use of the S-U option reinforced or perhaps even increased grade consciousness on the part of some students, at least in their courses not taken on an S-U basis.

Other reasons for using the S-U option were also reported. "Can learn what you want or what interests you" was reported by 36 percent of the users as was "can take a course outside of your major/minor, take a wider range of courses." A related reason, "take a course you would not have taken on an A-F basis," was reported by 21 percent of the users. These three reasons indicated that some students explored new courses; a conclusion similar to that reported by Sgan (1969, p. 144) and Stallings and Smock (1970). Finally, 21 percent of the 52 users reported, "don't have to study or work as hard" as one reason for electing a course on S-U.

Of the 10 different reasons reported for not using the S-U option, the five reasons representing the overwhelming majority of responses will be discussed. Two of these five reasons were related to the restrictions on using the S-U option. Nearly 41 percent of the nonusers reported they could not use the S-U option because all their courses thus far had been required. Not having the required GPA of 2.50 was reported by 15 percent of the nonusers. Thus it was concluded from these two reasons that the restrictions on using the S-U option prevented many undergraduate students from electing to use it.

Forty percent of the nonusers did not use the S-U option because they did not know enough about it or had never thought about using it. This confirmed the fact noted earlier that the amount of knowledge possessed by nonusers concerning the S-U option was relatively small. These data also indicated that more publicity probably would have led to increased use of the S-U option.

Finally, the last two of the five reasons cited most frequently were related to not wanting or needing to use the S-U option. They were: "can't use grades for building up GPA;" and "no incentive to do well in elective courses." No matter what the inducements were, some students still would not have taken a course on an S-U basis.

Nearly 81 percent (42) of the users reported changes in one or more in-course or out-of-course activities related to their use of the S-U option. "Didn't work as hard, would have put forth more effort if taken course on A-F" was reported by 20 users. This was followed by "having extra time to devote to required courses," reported by 16 users; and "studied less," reported by 13 users. A total of 114 changes in activities were counted in the responses given by the 81 percent of users reporting.

Twenty-eight of the 52 users reported that they would have taken the same course on an A-F basis had the S-U option not been available. Twelve of these users "just wanted to learn the material/skills covered in that particular course," and one user "wanted to learn to speak the language" taught in the course she took. This reflected one of the most often stated reasons for using the S-U option, "take a course outside of your major/minor or take a wider range of courses." Of the remaining eight reasons reported, only three were reported by as many as three of the 28 users. These three reasons were: "heard it was an easy course with not too much work involved," reported by five users; "needed some course for the hours credit," indicated by four users; and the "course might help in the future" stated by three users.

Twenty-four of the 52 users said they would not have taken the same course on an A-F basis had the S-U option not existed. Five different reasons were reported by these users. Being "scared of obtaining a low grade in the course, had no background for the course, or the course might hurt their GPA" was the reason stated most often; in fact, it was reported by 17 of the 24 users. This reflected two of the most often stated reasons for using the S-U option: "take a course you would not have taken on an A-F basis"; and "don't have to worry about a grade or can protect your GPA." Six users stated that the "course would have required too much effort to get an A or B grade," and two users would have taken another course in their major had the S-U option not existed. The remaining two reasons were reported by only one user each.

More positive than negative aspects of the S-U were reported by the interviewed students. A majority of users and comparable nonusers reported that the S-U option "reduces emphasis upon a grade, can't hurt GPA." This was the positive aspect reported most often. Next, students reported that the S-U option allowed them to "take a wider range of courses in new areas." Finally, the third most frequently reported positive aspect was to "remove or lessen pressure to perform, to compete, to get high grades." Considering only the courses taken on an S-U basis, it was implied that the second aspect, and at least parts of the first and third, was intended to be considered positive by students because the S-U option was to encourage students to liberalize their education and focus on learning. If one considers the effects of the S-U option in the courses not taken on an S-U basis by these students, then perhaps the first and third aspects reflected an increase in grade consciousness which was not an intended outcome of the S-U option.

Four of the five negative aspects reported most often were related to possible unfavorable effects of using the S-U option. These were: "student can slack off in a course too much if he's not interested in learning"; "some students use S-U to just get by"; students "don't get as much out of the course, or don't learn as much"; and, students "can make a good grade but only get an S, can't help GPA, and receive no quality points." The fifth negative aspect was the "red tape and/or various rules and regulations for using S-U." It was implied that the first three aspects were intended to be considered negative because students were to focus on learning.

To summarize, users were aware that S and U grades were not to be computed in their GPA's. The reasons listed most often for using the S-U option were related to grades, usually to protect their GPA. Nearly 41 percent of the fifty-two users reported they did less work and/or put less effort into the course they took on an S-U basis. Much

of the extra time resulting from this reduced effort or work was reportedly put on the courses they took on an A-F grade basis. This supported the conclusion that grade consciousness was increased in some users. On the other hand, over a third of the users listed "take a course outside your major/minor or take a wider range of courses" as one reason for using the S-U option. A total of 46 percent of the users would not have taken the same course on an A-F grade basis. Nonusers were less knowledgeable than users about the S-U option. Restrictions on use of the S-U option, and ignorance about the S-U option, were the two reasons listed most often for nonuse.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Eleven conclusions are made on the basis of the collected data.

1. Students had diverse reasons for using the S-U option.

Student responses to why they elected a course on the S-U option included not worrying about a grade, taking a course they would not have taken on an A-F basis, not working as hard in the course, and putting extra time in on required courses.

2. Past use of S-U led to further use.

Use of S-U increased during the academic year, and the number of repeated users increased as well. Data showed that over half of the interviewed students remaining on campus expected to use the S-U option in the future.

3. Use of the S-U option increased with class levels.

In every quarter, freshmen used the S-U option least and seniors most. The disproportionality between use rates of classes decreased during the academic year. However, seniors still used S-U twice as often as any other class.

4. The S-U option was often used to take a wide range of courses.

Students took courses in all except two divisions. Over a third of the users reported that a reason for using the S-U option was to "take a course outside of the major/minor," or "take a wider range of courses."

5. The S-U option was not attractive to some students.

Some students reported that they did not want to use the S-U option because they wanted to work for and receive a high grade. A similar finding was reported by Priest (1971, p. 123). Thus for these people, using the S-U option probably would not have been a satisfying experience.

6. A majority of the users reported that electing a course on an S-U basis influenced some of their in-course and out-of-course activities.

These activities included such diverse, and sometimes contradictory, ones as studied less, studied more carefully, attended class less frequently, worked harder, didn't study as much for final examination, and devoted extra time to required courses.

7. Some students would have taken courses liberalizing their education even if the S-U option were not available.

Twenty-eight of the 52 interviewed users reported they would have taken the course they took on an S-U basis on an A-F basis if the S-U option had not been available. Their main reasons for doing so were because they wanted to learn the materials, skills, or language taught in that particular course.

8. Some students did not put forth as much effort, or study as much, in the course they took on an S-U basis as they would have for a course taken on an A-F basis.

While some users did report working as hard or harder in the course(s) they took on an S-U basis, over 40 percent reported putting forth less effort or doing less work. The extra time resulting from this practice was used to participate in a variety of activities. Among these activities were pursuit of leisure activities, using free time constructively, and achieving a broader background of courses.

9. Most nonusers possessed little knowledge of the S-U option.

The median scores on a 14 point checklist of rules concerning the S-U option was 4.5 for comparable nonusers and 2.0 for random nonusers, revealing little knowledge of the rules. Ignorance was also a reason listed for not using the S-U option.

10. Use of the S-U option reinforced or increased grade consciousness on the part of some users in their courses not taken on an S-U basis.

This was concluded from data related to reasons for using the S-U option and the effect of the S-U option upon the in-course and out-of-course activities of users. This was an unintended outcome.

11. In general students wanted the S-U option to continue.

This is similar to the findings of Sgan (1969, p. 143) and Priest (1971, p. 122). Both users and nonusers reported more positive than negative aspects of the S-U option.

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