

## **Proposal to Change the Grading System for Pharmacy Practice Experience Courses**

**Submitted by:**

**Office of Experiential Education  
Office of Education Advancement  
College of Pharmacy**

### **Background:**

The Department of Pharmacy Practice and Science adopted a grading policy on August 5, 2005 <sup>(1)</sup> specifying that grades in experiential education course work in the professional curriculum (i.e., Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experiences, APPE) should be assigned on the following basis:

- **Pass with honors** - Represents exceptionally high achievement in all course requirements as a result of aptitude, effort, and intellectual initiative. Credit hours under this grade will count towards graduation, but will not be used in calculating grade-point averages.
- **Pass** - Represents high achievement as a result of ability and effort and reflects student competence in all course requirements. Credit hours under this grade will count towards graduation, but will not be used in calculating grade-point averages.
- **Fail** - Represents a marginal or unsatisfactory level of achievement in any of the course requirements. Credit hours under this grade will not count towards graduation but will be used to calculate grade-point averages.

The Office of Experiential Education and Department faculty agreed that the new grading system for experiential courses would be phased in as part of the implementation of the new experiential curriculum for students graduating in May 2012 (Curriculum 2012). The new advanced pharmacy practice experience courses (APPEs) began in May 2011. However, the new grade type was not recognized by the University Senate until April 2011. This delayed grade change implementation as time was insufficient to edit course manuals and provide training of preceptors by the start of the 2011-2012 rotation year.

This proposal is to move the 6 APPE courses (PPS 991, PPS 992, PPS 993, PPS 994, PPS 995, and PPS 996) to the Pass with Honors/Pass/Fail grading designation.

### **Rationale for new grade:**

Historically, the College has utilized the letter grade system for assignment of grades to the advanced practice experience courses. Due to the nature of the clinical rotations and the difficulty associated with evaluation of clinical practice, coupled with the fact that many of the evaluations are conducted by off campus, voluntary faculty preceptors, little discrimination in grading occurs in these courses. In fact, the lack of grade discrimination has basically defaulted these courses to a dichotomous scale – A for everyone whom is performing satisfactorily (including those performing at an exceptionally high level) and B for those who are performing less satisfactorily. Because the advanced practice experience courses comprise approximately 25% of the curriculum, the overwhelming number of A grades and

associated quality points disproportionately inflate cumulative GPAs while not differentiating those who perform at an exceptionally high level. This issue is not unique to the University of Kentucky. Faculty from Virginia Commonwealth University recently described their approach to development of a competency-based assessment process for APPEs. In the article, the authors state “the supervising faculty members were not discriminating between grades sufficiently and were assigning students unreasonably high grades in the APPE program.”<sup>(2)</sup> To address this, many practice experience courses in Colleges and Schools of Pharmacy across the country, including Virginia Commonwealth University, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Iowa, and University of California at San Diego, have all moved to the Pass/Fail or Pass/Fail/Honors grading scale. For an example of how competency-based assessment rubrics are applied to Honors/Pass/Fail courses, please review pages 211 – 250 of the Professional Experience Program manual of the UNC School of Pharmacy.<sup>(3)</sup>

One potential problem identified by our faculty for utilizing a Pass/Fail option as currently recognized by the University is that the lack of anything other than a Pass grade may provide disincentive for students to perform at their highest level. The addition of Honors to the Pass/Fail grading option would encourage top students to strive for this highest level of achievement.

**Abbreviation and explanation of new grade type:**

The Pass with Honors grade could be abbreviated PH, and would represent an exceptionally high level of achievement in a course taken on a Pass with Honors/Pass/Fail basis. As indicated above, credit hours successfully completed under this grade will count towards graduation but will not be used in calculating semester or cumulative grade point averages.

**Courses that will use new grade:**

All advanced practice experience courses (APPEs), will use the new grade. The majority of these clinical practice experiences are off-campus where students work under the supervision of community-based faculty preceptors.

These courses currently are:

- PPS 991 – Advanced Community Pharmacy Practice (6 hours) now graded A,B,C, E.
- PPS 992 – Advanced Hospital Pharmacy Practice (6 hours) now graded A,B,C, E.
- PPS 993 – Ambulatory Care Pharmacy Practice (6 hours) now graded A,B,C, E.
- PPS 994 – Acute Care Inpatient Pharmacy Practice (6 hours) now graded A,B,C, E.
- PPS 995 – Patient Care Pharmacy Practice Elective (6 hours) now graded A,B,C, E.
- PPS 996 – Non-Patient Care Pharmacy Practice Elective (6 hours) now graded A,B,C, E.

**Feedback from PEAC, PPS Department, and Curriculum Committee on the new grade structure:**

- From historical perspective, the request for P/F/PH grading system was suggested by students who were serving on the Curriculum Committee in recent years.
- Based on conversations with preceptors about the use of the current scale of *Exceeds Expectations – Meets Expectations – Needs Improvement – Unsatisfactory*, many preceptors thought that another choice was needed between Meets Expectations and Exceeds Expectations to prevent grade

inflation. When a student was better than *Meeting Expectations*, the only choice was to give them the highest designation of *Exceeds Expectations*. The decision was made to add an additional evaluation category of *Above Expectations*. Therefore, the *Exceeds Expectations* category has been replaced with *Above Expectations* and *Outstanding* to be able to discriminate in the evaluation of students doing work above what is expected and those students that are truly outstanding.

- There was some concern among PPS Department members that a student with evaluation of all *Needs Improvement* would result in a passing grade of 70. It is highly unlikely that this situation would exist due to the use of Midpoint Rotation Evaluations in which student performance is discussed with a focus on items for improvement. Any time a *Needs Improvement* rating is received, it serves as a flag to watch for improvement in subsequent rotations. Counseling of the student will be complete as needed by the APPE Course Director.
- Preceptors will suggest/recommend grade; if “Pass with Honors” is recommended, preceptor must describe student performance that justifies the grade. EE will assign grades and clear up any discrepancies between item rankings and suggested grade. EE will continue to refine to numerical correlation of PH; current data suggests that 94 and above (see attached bar graph) should be used in determination of the PH grade, along with preceptor supporting comments.
- Student GPA will not be affected by the P/PH grade; it will appear on the transcript. Students can list ‘PH’ on their CV for rotations where they occur. Preceptor feedback to support a PH grade may suggest good source for future recommendation letters. Based on University standards, a grade of Fail will provide 0 credits and 0 quality points; thereby affecting the GPA. Also, an additional rotation will need to be taken for graduation.
- Students will be able to see evaluations, immediately available in “Rx Preceptor.” Other feedback will depend upon preceptor—some will provide one-on-one review. EE will serve as intermediary if a student challenges an assigned grade, rather than going directly to preceptor.
- Need additional preceptor training as new grading system is implemented; “Rx Preceptor” program allows posting of videos, voice-over slides and other materials. Dr. Policastri will provide a 1-page email noting and describing changes as a quick reference for preceptors.
- Preceptors should hold UK students to the same high standards and encourage high expectations, regardless of timing of rotation (May vs. March). Midpoint feedback can address any perceived deficiencies and encourage improvement.

1. Policy on Grading/Evaluation in the PharmD Program, Department of Pharmacy Practice and Science Courses adopted August 5, 2005.

2. Hill LH, Delafuente JC, Sicat BL, Kirkwood CK. Development of a competency -based Assessment Process for Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experiences. *Am J Pharm Education*. 2006; 70 (1) 1-10.

3. <http://pharmacy.unc.edu/programs/the-pharmd/professional-experience-program/preceptors/pepm-anual>; accessed 9-15-10.

### APPE Evaluation Scores (90 - 100) Blocks 1, 2, 3 (N = 319)

