MEMORANDUM

To: The RIT student and faculty community
From: Jeremy Haefner, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Subject: Progress towards implementing the Plus/Minus Grades
Date: 25 January 2010

This memorandum serves as ongoing communication to the RIT community on the consultation and implementation process for the addition of a plus/minus-grading schema to the existing whole letter grading structure at RIT. As you recall, during academic year 2008-2009, the Academic Senate studied the possible addition of plus/minus marks to existing whole letter grades and, in the spring of 2009, approved a proposal to change the RIT grading structure to include a plus and minus option. The recommended and approved system includes the marks of A-, B+, B-, C+, C-, and D+ in addition to the whole letter grades A, B, C, D and F.

As can be expected by such a change, there was a healthy campus dialogue around the new structure and there were many in the student and faculty community who voiced support as well as those who expressed concerns about the impact of such a change. Therefore, as part of a thorough analysis of the proposal, and to ensure interested parties had a voice, I consulted with Student Government and the Executive Committee of the Academic Senate. In addition, I formed a Plus/Minus Grading Taskforce, which consists of the provost, the registrar, students Nicholas Schneider and Teraisa Chloros, and faculty Matt Miri and Alejandro Engle. This taskforce has already provided valuable insights, observations and viewpoints and will continue to advise the campus as it implements the addition of plus and minus marks to the traditional letter grades A, B, C, and D.

Through this consultation process, several key considerations emerged:

- A plus/minus grading scheme would be advantageous to students searching for co-ops or jobs because their actual performance would have a greater chance of being more accurately reflected.
- Students and faculty wanted to ensure consistent use of plus/minus marks across multi-section courses: in other words, plus/minus marks should be used in all sections or they should not be used in any section. Thus, while the decision may be left to the departmental faculty as a whole to make, it is critical to students that know whether courses will be graded with the plus/minus marks. This should be clearly articulated in the syllabus. Students, faculty and administration wanted to reduce any adverse implications for students with scholarships and financial aid if the GPA were impacted. The recommendation was made to continue to study this impact.
- There was considerable dialogue about how plus/minus marks might impact retention and progress towards degree. As these represent critical strategic measures of institutional effectiveness, the recommendation was that the addition of plus/minus marks should not have an adverse affect on retention and graduation rates.
As a result of this consultative process, three overall guiding principles for the implementation of the plus/minus system were identified:

1. The addition of plus/minus marks shall offer faculty, who so choose to use them, a mechanism to assess student performance with greater refinement than the current whole letter grade structure provides.
2. The implementation shall have a minimal impact on retention, student’s ability to retain financial aid, and student’s progress towards degree completion.
3. The implementation shall be fair and consistent.

With these guiding principles in mind, RIT will introduce the plus/minus marks to the current letter grading system effective academic year 2010-2011. This initial year shall be considered a period of partial implementation in order to ensure that the guiding principles are met prior to full implementation. This period will also provide time to inform faculty members and students about plus/minus grading and to study the effects of adoption, particularly as it pertains to financial aid, retention, and progress towards degree completion. After this partial implementation, the Provost will report back to the campus community the findings that will, if necessary, allow modifications to the new grading structure. Full implementation is expected in AY 2011-2012.

As part of the transitioning process during the 2010-2011 academic year:

- Each department, through a fair faculty governance process, shall formulate guidelines on how the plus/minus grading will be used. In general, each individual faculty member will decide whether they will use the plus/minus marks. However, it is important that for courses with multiple sections, the adoption of the plus/minus scheme shall be consistent across all sections; each department shall develop specific policy language on the use of plus/minus marks in courses that have multiple sections. The Dean and the Provost shall review these policies.
- As a part of college and department planning, faculty who use the plus/minus marks will be required to inform students in their syllabus.
- Only base letter grades will be used to calculate grade point averages. Plus/minus marks will appear on transcripts and the institution will provide appropriate information with each transcript about the calculation of the grade point average.
- The grade of C- will be considered equivalent to the grade of C for those courses that serve as a prerequisite or co-requisite for other courses. Departments that have courses with prerequisite or co-requisite that require a C or better in any course will be instructed to accept the grade of C- as sufficient for these purposes. This action is being taken so that a student’s progress toward their degree is not interrupted.
- Communication about the implementation will be sufficient and informative.

The Plus/Minus Grading Taskforce will use data collected during the academic year 2010-2011 to measure the impact on student GPAs, the effect on students qualifying for financial aid, and the effect on students who remain academically qualified. This information, together with other implementation information, will be made available to the campus community and the Provost shall present this information to the Academic Senate and the Student Government in the spring quarter of 2011.

As I share with you this update, please know that the process and implementation of the plus/minus grading system will continue to be based on open communication, transparency of process, and keen attention to the academic success of our students.