Fairness in Evaluation
A White Paper

Dalhousie University is committed to academic integrity in its teaching and research. Academic integrity in the instructional role of the university consists of providing well designed courses of study to students, that are taught at high standards by qualified faculty, that have fair processes of evaluation of student learning and that are responded to with intellectual honesty by the students. This document is intended to address the University’s role in ensuring fairness of evaluation.

Background

The University has developed a policy on Intellectual Honesty:

**Intellectual Honesty**

A university should be a model of intellectual honesty. Failure to meet the University’s standards in this regard can result in an academic offence. The length of time a student has attended university, the presence of a dishonest intent and other circumstances may all be relevant to the seriousness with which the matter is viewed.

Violations of intellectual honesty are offensive to the entire academic community, not just to the individual faculty member and students in whose class an offence occurs.

Instructors are responsible for setting examinations and assignments as part of the learning process and for evaluating those examinations and assignments, including ensuring that any rules stated for the procedures used in an examination or assignment are followed. Any violation of such stated rules which could result in a student gaining advantage may be considered to be an academic offence.

This University policy characterizes intellectual honesty as a responsibility shared by students, faculty and the institution. Since it is the evaluation process, designed by professors, to which students are expected to respond with intellectual honesty, it follows that the University has a responsibility to ensure that evaluation processes are fair, and that breaches of intellectual honesty are dealt with justly. As the University and the broader public has the right to expect intellectual honesty from students and professors, so to do students and the broader public have the right to expect fairness in evaluation from the University.

Policy Statements:

1. It is the responsibility of the University to ensure fairness of evaluation in all classes offered at Dalhousie.
2. The University’s responsibility is exercised, for the most part, through its Faculties. It is the responsibility of each Faculty to adhere to University policies to put in place policies and practices that ensure fair assessment procedures.

3. In order to ensure that Faculties are following their responsibilities, the Dean of each Faculty shall be required to submit a report to the Vice President Academic at the end of each Academic Year on the actions that the Faculty has taken to ensure fairness of evaluation. This report should include quantitative and qualitative indicators of success in meeting the goals of fairness in evaluation.

4. The Vice President Academic shall prepare a report to Senate annually on the state of fairness of evaluation within the University.

**Time Scale of Fairness**

5. Fairness issues arise in both short and long term time scales. *Immediate unfairness* involves a short-time scale with individual classes, individual instructors and particular academic terms. Every effort should be made to minimize immediate unfairness, but in a system involving human beings, these will inevitably arise. *Long-term unfairness* issues arise when the Faculty and University allow short-time scale issues to persist over time. A failure to deal with long-term unfairness brings into question the University’s credibility.

6. Immediate unfairness issues involve individual courses and instructors. These are best dealt with by having clear policies that encourage fairness, by ensuring that instructors and students are aware of and engaged in these policies; and through direct leadership by Department Heads and Deans, with intervention where necessary.

7. Long-term unfairness involves situations where evidence is, or should be available, that a problem exists over time. Such evidence could include class averages that are significantly higher or lower than normal, class marks that have significantly lower variance than normal. In the case of multi-section classes, such evidence could also include situations where there is a significantly high variance in expectations or grades between class sections. It could also include persistent patterns of student complaints, either directly or through class course evaluation processes.

**Differing Academic Disciplines**

8. Academic disciplines differ and the details of the evaluation process must reflect these differences. This policy should not be interpreted as prescribing a particular evaluation mechanism. Both Faculties and individual courses may differ in their evaluation procedures and mechanisms, while still upholding evaluation practices that are clear, accurate, and consistent, and that contribute to student learning.

**Understanding Fairness**
9. Fairness in evaluation means an evaluation process consistent with the learning objectives of the class that accurately measures student success in meeting those learning objectives.

10. Fairness requires that students be aware of what the learning objectives of the class are and how they will be evaluated. Students must be provided with a class syllabus at the beginning of each class term and an evaluation plan for the class. The syllabus must be consistent with the approved Calendar description and objectives for the class. Quizzes, tests and examinations should be valid and reliable.

11. Fairness requires that all sections of a class be consistent in their evaluation. Consistency means consistency between sections in a given academic term. It also means consistency between terms in the academic year. Consistency requires an evaluation that measures the students’ achievements against the learning objectives of the class. All sections of a class as described in the calendar and approved by the University must have the same learning objectives and the same method of evaluation.

12. Fairness in evaluation requires fair evaluation of group work, in those classes where group work is a part of the evaluation process. In the end, it is the individual student who receives the grade. If individual students’ contributions to group work differ, there should be mechanisms in the evaluation process to detect and reflect these differences.

13. Fairness in evaluation requires that the evaluation process evaluate the learning actually achieved by the students. It is unfair to those students who are rigorously upholding the University standards of intellectual honesty if the class evaluation process is not successful in detecting academic dishonesty by those students who violate intellectual honesty. Faculties and individual instructors must ensure integrity in their evaluation processes by following procedures that prevent, detect, and respond to academic dishonesty.

14. Fairness in evaluation means an evaluation consistent with University grade policies. University grades are described in detail in the Academic Regulations 17.1. These policies place responsibility on the instructor to evaluate whether student achievement are Excellent, Good, Satisfactory, Marginal Pass or Fail. Faculties are responsible to ensure that instructors have been clearly informed on grade definitions and of their responsibility for their evaluations to reflect these definitions.

15. Fairness in evaluation requires consistency within a class, between classes within a course program and within a Faculty and between Faculties. Evaluations appear on student transcript and affect student career possibilities, admission to graduate schools and eligibility for scholarships. This aspect of fairness is difficult to
maintain within a diverse academic community and requires diligent efforts by University leadership.

16. Fairness in evaluation requires evaluation conducted in circumstances and at
times that enable students to demonstrate their learning. This implies adequate
space for writing quizzes, tests, and examinations in an atmosphere with
reasonable standards of quietness and comfort. It also implies writing quizzes,
tests and examinations within scheduled class times and scheduled examination
periods.

Roles and Responsibilities

17. Students have a responsibility to understand the requirements for each class, the
meaning of University grades and the University requirements for intellectual
honesty. Students bear the responsibility of understanding the learning objectives
of the class and of achieving those objectives.

18. Assessing student performance and awarding the appropriate grade is the
responsibility of the instructor. Instructors need to know what grades mean (see
14) and take responsibility for applying the professional judgment to assign
grades that are consistent with these meanings. Instructors have a responsibility to
devise evaluation processes that enable them to identify excellent, good,
satisfactory and marginal learning achievement and to identify failing learning
achievement. Testing modalities should be valid and reliable.

19. Instructors must have clearly specified and well designed methods of assessment
and ensure that students are aware of requirements. This includes i) learning
objectives for the course, ii) the material to be covered, iii) the number of
quizzes/tests, the date of quizzes/tests and the weight given to these quizzes/tests
in the overall assessment, iv) the number of assignments and projects and the
weight given to assignments and projects in the overall assessment, iv) the nature
of the final examination (if any) and the weight given to the final examination.

20. Instructors have a responsibility to ensure that the material being evaluated is at
the right level for the particular stage of the academic program. Material that has
limited intellectual challenge, or material that is beyond the level of knowledge
that students might reasonably be expected to deal with, are both inappropriate.

21. Instructors and students do have a right to expect that registration, and faculty pre-
requisite and promotion procedures have ensured that the students registered in
the course can reasonably be expected to have the background preparation that
will permit them to take advantage of the learning experience of the class. The
Faculty and the University have the responsibility to ensure that students
registered in the class have the appropriate background.
22. It is the responsibility of the Faculty and the Faculty administration, to ensure that instructors are carrying out their responsibilities. Instructors need to understand the University’s grade policies and the learning objectives for their class. It is not enough just to inform the instructor. The syllabus provided to the students by the instructors should be reviewed and analyzed against the approved class description. Grades need to be reviewed and analyzed. Classes in which the grades are either very high or very low have the potential to be seen as unfair. Class evaluation procedures need to be designed to allow students to report on the fairness of evaluation and the evaluations regularly reviewed and analyzed.

23. Faculties have the responsibility to detect and correct problems of fairness. This may involve requiring the instructor to improve choice of material, level of the material, teaching methods, assessment methods and/or marking methods. Some long-term problems may not necessarily be problems of assessment or teaching. They may be problems of admission or problems with the level of pre-requisite courses. It is unacceptable for a Faculty to allow problems to remain undetected and uncorrected.

24. It is the responsibility of the Faculty to ensure that evaluation processes within the Faculty produce evaluations that represent consistent levels of academic achievement within the Faculty.

25. It is the role of the University to ensure that Faculties are carrying out their responsibilities of fairness in evaluation. This will involve requiring Faculties to submit annual reports to the University on the fairness of their evaluation procedures and reviewing. It also involves the University reviewing and analyzing these reports to produce an assessment of overall University success in fairness of evaluation.

26. The University has a responsibility for evaluation procedures that represent University standards. Students and the broader public have a right to expect that similar grades represent similar levels of achievement across the University. This is, and will continue to be, a significant challenge in a large and diverse University. It is a challenge that must be addressed on an ongoing basis.