HARVARD COLLEGE
Office of Undergraduate Education

"A Proposal for Updating Grading Policies"
Key Points for Deliberation

What problems is this proposal designed to solve?

- Ensure that Harvard courses are intellectually challenging and engaging.
- Ensure that grades provide meaningful feedback and guidance for improvement.
- Ensure that grades accurately reflect mastery of course material.
- Ensure that A grades reflect "extraordinary distinction," per the Student Handbook.
- Ensure that grades are more uniform across courses and concentrations.
- Ensure that Harvard grades are meaningful to outside audiences.
- Ensure that Harvard grades are meaningful internally for determining honors and awards.
- Encourage a culture of teaching and learning that promotes both excellence and resilience.

Why a cap on A's?

- The recent super-linear rise in A's does not reflect improved student performance.
- Instead, it is the result of a collective action problem, produced by misaligned incentives for students and faculty.
- To solve this collective action problem, we need agreed-upon limits, uniformly applied.
- Recommendations are not enough. Without enforced limits, the problem will reemerge.
- Limits protect grading integrity, especially for untenured and non-ladder faculty.
- Capping only A's is the least restrictive means to solving the collective action problem.

Why a cap of 20% +4 A's?

- Currently, over half of the grades given to Harvard undergraduates are flat A's.
- A 20% cap restores meaning to the Student Handbook's standard of "extraordinary distinction" for A's.
- Reflecting the widespread sense that students often do their best work in smaller courses, the +4 provision gives smaller courses a higher proportion of A's (e.g. 2 + 4 = 6 A's for a class of 10).
- Based on current course sizes, this translates to ~35% flat A grades across all courses.
- This standard is workable: About 60% of courses currently comply, and this approximates the proportion of A's across all courses in the early 2010s.

Will the cap force faculty to arbitrarily lower student grades?

- The line between A and A- grades should not be drawn between nearly perfect performances. (For example, a student with a 97% average in a course should not receive an A-.)
- Instead, courses should be calibrated to be suitably challenging, such that an A- reflects full mastery and an A reflects exceptional creativity, originality, or depth of learning.
- Courses aimed at more uniform learning outcomes may opt for SAT/UNSAT grading.
- The Bok Center can help faculty design more challenging coursework as needed.

Why use average percentile rank (APR) for internal purposes?

- APR provides a more useful metric for inherently comparative decisions (honors & awards).
- Percentile ranks for students within a course will be calculated by the registrar using letter grades or numerical grades. Instructors may provide numerical grades at their discretion.
- Percentile ranks will be provided to instructors and made available to honors and awards bodies within the university, but will not appear on transcripts.

What about the academic freedom of the faculty?

- Many faculty report that they currently feel unfree, as they face strong pressure to inflate grades.
- Resisting grade inflation can lower course evaluations and drive students away from a discipline.
- This proposal balances freedom to select grades with freedom from inflationary pressure.
- Faculty with different pedagogical goals can opt out with SAT/UNSAT grading.

Will this hurt our students' post-graduation prospects?

- Admissions deans at top graduate schools see Harvard grade inflation as a serious problem.
- A law school dean observed, "It would be flippant to say that [Harvard] grades are useless, but they're almost useless."
- The proposal aims to help students by making their grades more meaningful.
- Students can more effectively distinguish themselves through academics.
- The new policy would be widely advertised and highlighted on transcripts.
- By capping only A's (rather than all A-range grades, as done by other universities), the effects on GPAs should be moderate and keep Harvard students eligible for GPA-limited opportunities.

Will this further disadvantage students from less advantaged backgrounds?

- Internal research indicates that this policy, had it been implemented over the last three years, would not have disproportionately affected students from under-resourced high schools.
- Internal research also finds that students from such schools tend to get lower grades early on but improve over time.
- Grade compression in the later years magnifies the effect of these early lower grades, making it harder for initially disadvantaged students to catch up and receive honors.
- A broader distribution of grades normalizes variation for all students, providing stronger learning signals and feedback for improvement.
- Giving employers and admissions officers more meaningful transcripts avoids their reliance on networking, extracurriculars, or standardized tests, which currently disadvantage students from less-resourced backgrounds.

Will this promote unhealthy competition?

- The proposal's goal is to reset our learning and teaching culture.
- Even the strongest students should expect to be challenged and receive a range of grades.
- Comfort with imperfect GPAs and more uniform grades across classes will free students to take risks and follow their curiosity.
- The current system shifts competition to extracurriculars and creates anxiety around "losing" a perfect 4.0.
- We note that few students believe that they *themselves* would sabotage classmates for an A.

Didn’t other schools try this and fail?

- This proposal learns from past mistakes. Improvements include: leaving A- grades uncapped, applying the A-grade cap uniformly, and having clear responsibility for implementation.
- This proposal’s innovative structure uses the lightest possible touch needed to solve the problem.

We urge all faculty and students to read the full proposal.