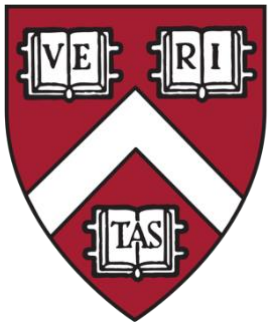

Report on Grading at Harvard College

February 17, 2023

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview and Charge

In May 2022, in response to growing concerns among the Faculty over rising grades, Dean Rakesh Khurana commissioned the Office of Undergraduate Education (OUE) to compile a report on grading at Harvard College to present recent grade data and possible approaches to addressing Faculty concerns.

The working group, comprised of members from the OUE and the Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, reviewed data from Institutional Research and interviewed faculty, students, and staff at Harvard to understand their perceptions of grading and its purpose, as well as the impacts of rising grades on faculty and students. We also interviewed staff at peer institutions to learn about their approaches to grading. Grade inflation, or, more precisely, grade compression, with grades compressing at the top end of the grading scale, is a national phenomenon (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002). Peer schools have tried to address grade compression in various ways, from grade quotas to presenting median course grades on transcripts, generally finding that such policies lead to negative unintended consequences. We can learn from their experiences, recognizing that Harvard College will have to adopt measures that are appropriate for our own institutional context and that reflect our values as educators.

Assessment is a fundamental element of teaching. Grading, therefore, is fully within the purview of the faculty, and faculty are rightly invested in their freedom to assign grades as they see fit. Assigning grades, including overseeing TF grading, is also one of the greatest responsibilities of a faculty member. Grades not only evaluate a student's work but also communicate feedback from instructor to student about what a student is learning and how to improve.

Harvard College should be able to articulate and stand behind its approach to grading to ensure that we are measuring and rewarding what we value. We hope the information in this report will give the FAS Faculty the tools to act and to affirm an approach to grading that will reflect our shared commitments to academic freedom and transparent grading standards.

1.2 Scope of Work

When Dean Khurana commissioned this report in the spring of 2022, he asked the working group to summarize recent trends in grading at the College and provide a briefing on the measures that selected peer institutions had taken to address concerns about grade compression.

It is important to note that the report is not exhaustive. For example, while the working group benefited from conversations with individual faculty and staff members, the working group's charge did not extend to a survey of the full faculty. Also, it was not within the scope of this report to determine why grade compression is occurring and whether it is linked to grade inflation. Understanding the causes of grade compression would require further research.

1.3 Evidence Collected

The working group collected a range of evidence to inform the report. Institutional Research provided reports on grading trends at the College, medical school admissions, and undergraduate grade point averages. We reviewed internal memos and reports from past discussions of grading trends.

We reviewed documents about grading at peer institutions, including internal reports, and held conversations with colleagues at MIT, Brown, and Princeton. We reached out to colleagues at Ivy Plus and COFHE institutions to learn more about grading practices at peer institutions.

We interviewed 20 FAS colleagues. To better understand the impact of grade compression on selection processes for postgraduate opportunities, prizes, and fellowships, we interviewed the Director of the Office of Undergraduate Research and Fellowships, the Director of the Office of Career Services, the Dean for Academic Programs at the Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, and the Secretary of the Faculty. We spoke with two former Faculty Deans about the medical school admissions process. We interviewed five FAS faculty members about their approaches to grading as well as the Assistant Dean of Science Education. The Sosland Director of the Harvard College Writing Program and the Associate Director of the Harvard College Writing Program met with us to share the approach to assessment in Expository Writing 20, Harvard College's only required course. The First Year Experience Office offered their perspective on the impact of current grading practices on first year students. Finally, we discussed

the topic of grading with the students and faculty on the Committee on Undergraduate Education.

2. Grading at Harvard College

In recent years, the Office of Undergraduate Education has received reports of grading practices at Harvard that do not reflect the grading guidelines described in the Information for Faculty (see Appendix B). Among the distortionary pressures cited by faculty are:

- concerns about the correlation between high scores on course evaluations and grades,
- concerns about enrollments and/or interest in attracting concentrators to a department,
- a desire to be judged favorably by students, and
- concerns that the grades they assign will negatively impact students' academic or professional trajectories and/or eligibility for prizes.

These pressures are part of a broader landscape where concerns over student well-being and mental health are on the rise, further complicating the act of assigning grades.

Over the course of our work, we frequently confronted differing views about who and what grades are for. In fact, grades often serve multiple purposes and audiences. Primarily, they are a means for faculty to communicate to students how well they have demonstrated proficiency in the learning objectives of the course. However, they may also be seen as an incentive to motivate students to engage more deeply with their academic work.[1] Because grades appear to be an objective metric, they are often the sole means used to rank and sort students for prizes and honors, including Latin honors for graduating students. Clearly, if grades are used as a sorting mechanism, then the compression of grades in the "A" range makes that sorting more difficult and leads to greater numbers of students being eligible for and receiving prizes. Grades also are a way to communicate with external audiences, such as future employers or medical and other graduate school admissions. These various uses and audiences for grades are in tension with each other and tend to obscure what should properly be seen as the primary purpose of grades, that is, as a tool for instructors to provide feedback to students on their learning.

[1] Research has shown that in fact, grades may discourage student effort; see Pulfrey et al, 2011 and Chamberlain et al, 2018.

The 2013 report from the faculty on Yale's Ad Hoc Committee on Grading identified five alleged "costs" of grade compression, all of which are echoed by Harvard faculty in 2023. These range from concerns that high grades are a disincentive for students to engage fully with their courses (judging from workload reports) to concerns about how to distinguish truly outstanding students from others for both internal and external audiences:

A. To the extent grades provide information, grade compression degrades that information. An excellent or outstanding performance is hard to flag if so many A's are given. High grades given for less worthy performances may mislead students as to where their strengths lie.
B. Grade compression also muddies the effectiveness of grades as signals to outside organizations. Excellence may drown in the sea of abundant A's.
C. Students may feel that their work is not taken seriously if most of the time they get at least an A-. Perhaps more seriously, students may put less effort into course work if it is easy to get a high grade. A recent NBER report found that students worked an average of 40 hours in 1961 on class work and an average of 27 hours in 2003. Put another way, the reward for doing excellent work versus good work may be less when grades do not distinguish between the two, and students may respond to this by simply working less on courses.
D. The cost of wide differences across departments is that they may distort student choices. If a student would really like to take class 1 over class 2 but chooses class 2 because it is graded more generously, this is a serious distortion. Even more serious is if a student would really like to major in A but chooses B, because the major grades more generously.
E. When grades are compressed, the inevitable noise in the grading systems, the random fluctuations, the effect of an individual instructor whose grading habits are significantly different from the average, either higher or lower, can have a much larger effect on relative grade point averages. Under Yale's current scheme, this can effect [sic] selection for graduation honors (Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Grading, 2013).

These hidden "costs" reflect underlying concerns that our current grading practices may in some way be rewarding the "wrong" students while obscuring worthy academic performance of others, as well as concerns that students may not be receiving clear information about their strengths

and weaknesses that they could use to make decisions about future coursework or academic pathways.

Although a survey of the full faculty was not within the scope of this working group's charge, conversations with FAS colleagues underscored the presence of these concerns at Harvard. Colleagues cited the challenge of awarding honors, since grade compression makes it difficult to identify the truly outstanding students. Grade compression means that a single A- grade can have a significant impact; aware of the stakes, students can choose classes strategically in order to maximize their chances of getting A grades (e.g., Bar, Kadiyali, and Zussman, 2009). Most concerningly, grade compression compromises the quality of the information students are receiving from faculty about their performance.

Despite these concerns, our working group found many examples of promising grading practices at Harvard College. Many FAS Faculty members make course learning outcomes explicit and design assessments based on those outcomes. Some faculty members give students rubrics ahead of an assignment so that students can understand the criteria for doing excellent work in a class. When faculty members and their teaching teams use rubrics to grade assignments, they communicate clear, consistent information to students about their performance and how they can improve. There are classes, such as Expository Writing 20, where students receive feedback and revise their work before receiving a grade. Practices such as these are likely not only to reduce grade compression but also to ensure that assessment achieves its primary goal: to improve student learning. For more on effective grading practices, visit the appendix.

2.1 Key Findings

Based on data provided by Harvard College Institutional Research in September 2022 (see Appendix A), we can summarize the following key findings:

1. **Mean grades at Harvard College have risen over time (Fig. 1).**

   It is indisputable that grades at Harvard College have increased over time. In academic year 2002–2003, the mean grade for undergraduates was 3.41 on a four-point scale. In 2020–2021, the mean grade was 3.80. The percentage of A grades given to undergraduates has risen steadily over time: 60% in 2010–2011, 70% in 2018–2019, and 79% in 2020–2021. Further, concerns about rising grades are not new. Our working group reviewed materials from a

Faculty Council discussion in 1996 about grade inflation. Those materials included an excerpt on grade inflation from an 1894 report.

2. **The proportion of A grades has increased over time in all divisions (Figs. 2.1-2.4).**

The proportion of A grades has increased across all divisions. In 2020–2021, the percentage of A grades by division was as follows: Arts and Humanities, 73%; SEAS, 60%; Science, 65%; Social Science, 65%. In 2002–2003, the percentages were lower in each division: Arts and Humanities, 30%; SEAS, 24%; Science, 25%; Social Science, 21%.

3. **There is some variability in grades by course type, especially in SEAS and the Science Division (Fig. 2.1–2.4).**

Lecture courses tend to have the lowest mean grades overall and across the divisions. Grades in lecture courses have risen over the past 20 years, although they remain lower than grades in tutorials and other types of courses. In Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences classes, grades are more compressed by course type than in the Science Division and in SEAS, where there is a wider range of grades between course types.

4. **Differences in grading by faculty rank are small (Fig. 3 and 4.1–4.4)**

Institutional Research explored whether faculty rank might correlate with average undergraduate course grade and found that differences in grades assigned by faculty rank are small. In 2002–2003, average course grade by faculty rank were as follows: tenured faculty, 3.38; tenure track faculty, 3.42; non-ladder faculty, 3.48. In the intervening years, those averages have risen, and the differences in average grade by faculty rank have diminished. In 2020–2021, the average undergraduate course grade assigned by tenured faculty was 3.79; by non-ladder faculty, 3.81, and by tenure track faculty, 3.83. Disaggregating by division, again, reveals a more complicated picture, but overall, the differences between course grades assigned by faculty rank remain quite small.

5. **There is an inverse correlation between grades and perceived workload.**

We do not have a reliable index of the actual hours of work that students spend per class, but we do have students' self-reports as an indicator of their perceptions of how much time they spent per week on each class. According to Q guide data, between 2014 and 2021, there was an inverse correlation between the number of hours students reported spending on a class and their grade in the class. For courses with a mean grade of A, the mean workload was 5.64

hours of work. For courses with a mean grade of C-, the mean workload was 9.23 hours of work per week.

6. Compression is not necessarily evidence of inflation.

It is important to note that while grade *compression* is undeniable, grade compression is not in itself evidence of grade *inflation*. It would be difficult to prove that work that would have received a B grade 20 years ago would now receive an A grade. The higher proportion of A grades could be due to improved teaching and students achieving at higher levels rather than to lower standards (Kohn, 2002).

7. Peer institutions have adopted policies to reduce student stress around grades.

In the course of our work, we heard many concerns about student wellness, mental health, and the pressure students experience to attain top grades. Peer institutions have adopted measures such as an ungraded first year (see section 3.4, below) and flexible late drop and pass/fail policies. Measures such as these are meant to reduce student stress so that they can focus on genuine academic exploration.

At Harvard, CS50 shifted to SAT/UNSAT as the default grading scheme in 2017 to encourage academic exploration without fear of failure. This change led to an increase in the number of enrolled students who described themselves at the outset as less comfortable with coding, and to historically high enrollment numbers for women. Notably, students who took the course SAT/UNSAT performed similarly to students taking the course for a grade, and they spent more time on the course than their graded peers (Malan, 2021).

8. Grades may not measure what we believe they measure.

Our review of the national research on grading revealed the key insight that in many cases, grades are not measuring what we believe they are measuring (Brookhart et al., 2016); instead, they can often reproduce existing inequities in our nation's educational system (Feldman, 2019). This is particularly true when course grades are based on only a few, high-stakes assignments, when grading criteria are not transparent to students, and when grades are viewed as a mechanism for sorting and comparing students to one another rather than as a direct reflection of student mastery of course material. Research has also shown that cheating is more pervasive in environments that focus on grades (Anderman & Koenka, 2017).

2.2 Impact on Prizes, Fellowships, and Distinction

Many committees, departments, and offices rely on grade point average (GPA) to determine eligibility for prizes and fellowships. In fact, the terms of some awards refer specifically to distinction and grade point average. The Freund prize, for example, is awarded to "the student graduating summa cum laude who has the highest grade point average." This award was clearly intended to recognize the achievement of just one student. However, in the spring of 2021, twenty-nine students graduated with a GPA of 4.0 together with the distinction of summa cum laude. As a result, each of these twenty-nine students was awarded this prize. The Wendell Prize for the sophomore identified as "the most promising and broad-ranging scholar in his or her class" similarly uses a GPA to determine applicants' eligibility and has had to raise the GPA cutoff to 3.953, with 472 students eligible to apply for the prize. The number of students eligible for the Detur Prize, awarded to students after the third semester and based solely on GPA, has similarly sharply risen.

Grades have also been central to the selection process for Phi Beta Kappa, which rewards "excellence, breadth, and depth in the liberal arts." However, grade compression has forced GPA cutoffs to increase year over year, making it difficult to distinguish one student from another solely on the basis of grades. What is more, with such little grade variation among students, a single poor grade can have a significant impact on a student's future opportunity for distinction. In turn, students may avoid pursuing intellectual risk, stunting the development of intellectual curiosity. At Harvard, the Phi Beta Kappa officers have been working with Institutional Research and the OUE to better recognize other aspects of the prize criteria, such as intellectual breadth, in the selection process and to invite a broader pool of nominations.

Peer institutions such as Berkeley, Columbia, and Princeton use multiple measures to select students for their highest academic honors, including personal essays, letters of recommendation, and consultations with departments about the depth, breadth, and rigor of courses students have chosen (University of California, Berkeley, 2023; Columbia College, 2023; Princeton University, 2023). We note that external fellowships and prizes such as Rhodes Scholarships have their own selection criteria—often involving GPA—that Harvard must follow, complicating the process of nomination.

2.3 Medical School

It is a commonly held belief that medical school acceptance requires a near-perfect GPA. Students despair that a B+ grade on an assignment in their first year will sink their medical school applications. Data on GPA and medical school admission tell a more nuanced story; in fact, a near-perfect GPA is not necessary for medical school admission. Harvard College Institutional Research analyzed GPA data for Harvard students applying to medical school in Fall 2019, Fall 2020, and Fall 2021 and found that while acceptance rates are higher for students with higher GPAs, there are some students with lower GPAs who gain acceptance and some students with high GPAs who do not (link here; report is available upon request).

While some Harvard students apply as College seniors (21.9%), many more apply as alumni (78.1%). The medical school acceptance rate is 86.1% overall: 94.9% for seniors and 83.6% for alums. In the past three admission cycles, 99 Harvard College undergraduates received no acceptances (8 senior applicants and 91 alumni applicants) out of a total of 712 Harvard College applicants.

GPA is only one aspect of medical school admissions, and a high GPA does not guarantee admission. Successful Harvard senior applicants have an average GPA of 3.84, and the average GPA of successful Harvard alumni applicants is 3.72. These are descriptive data that do not take other admissions criteria into account, but it is noteworthy that these successful students did not all have straight A grades. It is also important to note that of the eight unsuccessful senior applicants, five had a GPA of 3.8 or higher. Seven alums with GPAs higher than 3.8 were not accepted. Conversely, a lower GPA does not make medical school admission impossible. For example, from 2019–2021, three alumni were accepted to medical school with GPAs between 2.68 and 3.0.

Thus, the conventional wisdom that near-perfect grades are necessary for medical school admission is not supported by the data. They are also a reminder that near-perfect grades are not sufficient to obtain medical school admission. Faculty and students alike should be reassured that a B grade will not destroy a student's dreams of becoming a doctor. The Office of Career Services should continue their efforts to collaborate with and train pre-med tutors to ensure that tutors are giving advice based on data.

3. Practices at Peer Institutions

Grade compression is not unique to Harvard. Peer institutions have adopted policies designed to reduce grade inflation and improve the quality of the information that grades provide. Institution-wide policies such as capping the percentage of A grades or publishing median course grades on transcripts tend to lead to unintended negative consequences. Our research suggests that the most effective way to improve grading is for the institution to provide departments with the resources they need to develop a common approach to grading informed by research-based best practices.

3.1 Capping the percentage of A grades

In 2004, Princeton adopted a grading policy that attempted to standardize grading across departments and communicate clearly to students about the quality of their work. The policy recommended that the faculty should, over time, aim for A-grades to account for no more than 35% of overall grades for course work, and 55% of overall grades for junior and senior independent work.

In 2013, Princeton's president asked an ad hoc faculty committee to review Princeton's policies for evaluating student work. The committee found that the policy did achieve more cross-department consistency in A-range grades. It also appeared to temper grade inflation. There were, however, significant downsides to the policy. Although some students shared that the policy encouraged them to work harder, students expressed concerns that the policy discouraged collaboration. One student shared with the committee that friends would not help other friends understand concepts from class out of fear that the students they were helping would earn higher grades. Stakeholders expressed concerns that the policy might be dissuading students from attending Princeton and that the policy disadvantaged students applying to fellowships, graduate and professional schools, and other post-graduate opportunities. There was also a strong perception in the community that the grading policy increased anxiety among students (Princeton University, 2014).

The majority of Princeton faculty and students applauded the goal of curbing grade inflation, but the committee found that the cost of implementing such targets was significant. In particular, the policy brought so much attention to letter grades themselves that it detracted from the purpose

of grades as providing feedback for learning. The committee recommended removing the numerical targets from the grading policy. Instead, they suggested that departments should be charged with adopting their own grading standards and that the dean of the college continue to monitor grading trends and share information about grading with departments.

In 2014, Princeton adopted the practice of requiring departments to articulate grading standards, which is described on the College's "Grading at Princeton" website: "The University's grading policy charges each department and program with articulating well-defined and meaningful grading standards for work within its discipline. Faculty, grading in accordance with those standards, shall use grades and substantive feedback to give students clear and detailed information about the quality of their work." A Faculty committee periodically reviews departmental standards and offers feedback to ensure that the standards are consistent with Princeton's commitment to integrity in grading. In a recent interview, the Senior Associate Dean of the College confirmed that the reflective practices Princeton have been successful in promoting a university-wide conversation about grades and in developing a common understanding about the purpose of grades and what they represent.

Wellesley College adopted a policy of capping the number of A grades in Fall 2004, stipulating that the average grade in introductory and intermediate level courses with over 10 students should not exceed a B+ (Butcher, McEwan, & Weerapana, 2014). Instructors were able to make exceptions if they wrote a letter to the administration explaining why the quality of the students' work in a given class merited a higher average grade.

Butcher and colleagues (2014) analyzed transcripts from Fall 1998 to 2008 and found that the policy had an immediate effect of reducing grades in high-grading departments, though faculty did not increase their use of the lowest grades on the scale. In some departments where faculty had to adjust their grading to comply with the new policy, the grade gap widened. African-American students and students with low initial test scores were disproportionately represented in the lower grade categories. There was evidence that the policy, unpopular among students, led to lower faculty ratings on course evaluations. Students and alumni expressed concerns about the disadvantages they could face competing for external opportunities by a systematic reduction in grade inflation.

Wellesley's Committee on Curriculum and Academic Policy and Academic Council reviewed the policy during the 2018–2019 academic year. As a result, the faculty voted to rescind the 2004 grading policy. Two other changes resulted from the review. All departments and programs are now required to discuss their approach to grading and report on those discussions in their annual report, and at least once per year the Committee on Curriculum and Academic Policy reviews and reports on grades from the previous year (Wellesley College, n.d.).

3.2 Publishing course median grades on transcripts

In 1996, the Cornell faculty voted to publicly share course median grades and report course median grades on students' transcripts. The intention of the policy was to give students "more accurate recognition of performance," "encourage students to take courses in which the median grade is relatively low," and let others looking at the transcript understand a student's grades in context of the rest of the students in the class (Bar, Kadiyali, and Zussman, 2009, p. 94). Reducing grade compression was not a stated goal of the policy. Bar and colleagues (2009) studied the impact of the policy and found that enrollment increased in more leniently graded courses, albeit not for high-ability students (who continued to opt for less-leniently graded courses). The mean grade in undergraduate courses rose during the time the policy was in place, from 1990 to 2004. This correlation does not imply causation; there could have been other causes, such as an improvement in the academic aptitude of the student body over time. Cornell's current policy is to publish median grades on transcripts but not release them publicly (Cornell University Registrar, 2017).

Dartmouth College publishes median grades and course enrollment for courses with more than 10 students on transcripts (Dartmouth Office of the Registrar, 2023). Several recent articles in *The Dartmouth* have criticized departments' enforcement of maximum median grades. Capone (2022) claims that enforced medians dilute the purpose of a college education and incentivize students to choose classes based on grade prospects rather than academic interest. Lane (2022) argues that enforced medians undermine a culture of collaboration.

3.3 Yale's Review of Grading Policies

The dean of Yale College asked a faculty committee to review Yale's grading policies and practices in 2012–13. The committee found a trend of grade compression at Yale. They expressed concern that grade compression was lowering the quality of information provided to students about their performance and presenting problems to outside organizations attempting to evaluate Yale students. In their words, "Excellence may drown in the sea of abundant A's." Grade compression may also cause students not to work as hard or to impel students to take classes with instructors who are perceived to be more lenient graders (Yale College, 2013).

The committee recommended sharing departmental grade reports across the institution, issuing annual departmental reports on grading practices, adopting a 60–100 scale rather than letter grades, and suggesting (but not requiring) university-wide grade distribution percentages for departments Only the first two policies were endorsed by the faculty, and now department chairs are prompted to have an annual conversation with their departments about grading practices. Yale has not yet conducted a follow-up study to determine the effect of these measures.

Overall, we have learned from our peer institutions that while our peers share our concerns about grade compression, it is not clear how to reduce grade compression without inviting a host of unintended consequences. Capping the percentage of high grades raises concerns about student well-being, collaboration, and success. Switching grading systems, for example to numerical grades, does not solve the underlying problem. Sharing information about the median grade in a course does not seem to have an impact on grade compression, and may even result in more imbalance, as students may choose courses with higher median grades over courses with lower median grades. One clear lesson from our peers is that regular discussion among faculty within departments and divisions is important to clarify the purpose of grades and to maintain some consistency and clarity.

3.4 First year grading

Our working group also explored practices related to grading in the first year. Several peer institutions have implemented credit/no credit policies in the first semester to ease the transition to college and encourage academic exploration. Although the policies differ slightly, Caltech, MIT,

Swarthmore, and Wellesley all have a version of an ungraded first semester. At MIT, the grading scheme is pass/no record; in other words, if a student receives a passing grade, a 'pass' appears on the transcript. If the student receives a failing grade, no record appears. Caltech students are graded pass/fail for the first two quarters. First semester students at Wellesley and Swarthmore receive a pass/no pass (Wellesley) or credit / no credit (Swarthmore) on their record but are notified of the 'shadow grades' they would have received if they were graded. Proponents of an ungraded first semester claim that it helps students from a wide range of high school backgrounds adjust to college coursework. Faculty still give feedback and grades on assignments and exams during the semester, so students see how their work measures up to college expectations without the pressure of a final grade. This policy may encourage students to explore new fields of study and take intellectual risks. In some cases, students are able to uncover their shadowed grades to apply for internships or fellowships.

The ungraded first semester may also have drawbacks. In 2017, Johns Hopkins University ended the covered grades policy had been in place for first semester students since 1971. They discontinued the policy because of concerns that it negatively impacted students' performance in subsequent semesters. In particular, the covered grading policy may have delayed students in seeking help with the study skills they needed to thrive in subsequent semesters, creating an unnecessarily long transition period to college (Ginsberg, 2016). The policy may also have frustrated high-achieving students who wanted course grades counted toward their GPA to help them attain internships, fellowships, and other opportunities (Ginsberg, 2016). Princeton considered a shadow grading system and decided not to pursue it (Princeton University, 2014).

Formal research on this type of policy is limited. Two studies (McMorran, Ragupathi, & Luo, 2017; McMorran & Ragupathi, 2020) explored perceptions of an ungraded first semester at the National University of Singapore. Through this policy, students received letter grades but could choose to replace any grade with a grade of Satisfactory / Unsatisfactory at the end of the term, and students with failing grades could drop the class from their transcript. Students' perceptions of this policy were more favorable than those of the faculty. Both faculty and students shared that the policy improved student attitudes and behaviors toward learning, encouraged risk-taking, and reduced stress, leading to a smoother transition to university. Faculty reported, however, that the policy led to decreased effort and increased absenteeism by first year students. It was

problematic to have group projects with first-year and upper-level students in the same group because first-year students put in less effort.

4. Conclusion

Grade compression is a national phenomenon that may well be the result of our success as educators: the rise in median grades may indicate that students are benefiting from improved pedagogy and advances in learning science, more clearly defined course objectives and better course design that supports them in meeting those goals. We are successful when students meet the goals we set for them. Nonetheless, there is a "cost" to such compression when we use grades primarily as a sorting mechanism, and such compression is concerning if it represents grade inflation or other distortions in grading practices.

We have learned from research and from other institutions' experiences that institution-wide policies capping the number of A grades or publishing median course grades tend to yield negative unintended consequences. There are steps, however, we can take as an institution to help individual instructors to be more transparent and consistent in the awarding of grades, to allow grades to fulfill their essential purpose of giving students meaningful and diagnostic information about their learning, and to ensure that our approach to grading reflects our institutional values. These steps are outlined in the recommendations below.

5. Recommendations

1) Each year, the OUE will provide data to departments about median grades for courses in their department and across their division to guide departmental conversations.
2) Faculty should engage in annual discussions of grading criteria and norms in their discipline and department. Each department should publish their approach to grading on a departmental website.
3) Instructors should define their grading criteria for assignments based on learning objectives for their course and share the criteria with students.
4) HUIT, Institutional Research and the Registrar's Office should collaborate on a grading dashboard in the Student Information System to allow faculty to readily access grading data across the FAS.

5) The OUE and FAS will work with prize offices to expand prize criteria to include additional criteria beyond the GPA.
6) OCS and URAF should offer clear guidance and tutor training so as not to perpetuate myths about the role of grades in hiring and graduate school applications.
7) The FAS should review the Q questions and the role that quantitative scores play in high- stakes processes at the University, including reappointment, promotion, and tenure. There is a direct correlation between expected grades and Q ratings that may be contributing to trends towards higher grades.
8) The OUE and Bok center will retire teaching awards based solely on Q ratings for TFs and non-ladder faculty in favor of more substantive awards of teaching based on multiple measures.
9) The Bok Center will offer workshops on assessing student work and training for teaching teams on effective grading (See Appendix C).
10) Finally, the faculty may wish to request further research to determine why grade compression is occurring, such as a survey of faculty and a review of assignments and grading in individual classes across the FAS.

Appendices

Appendix A: Institutional Research data on grading trends at Harvard College

Figure 1

Undergraduate Student Course Grades by Course Type

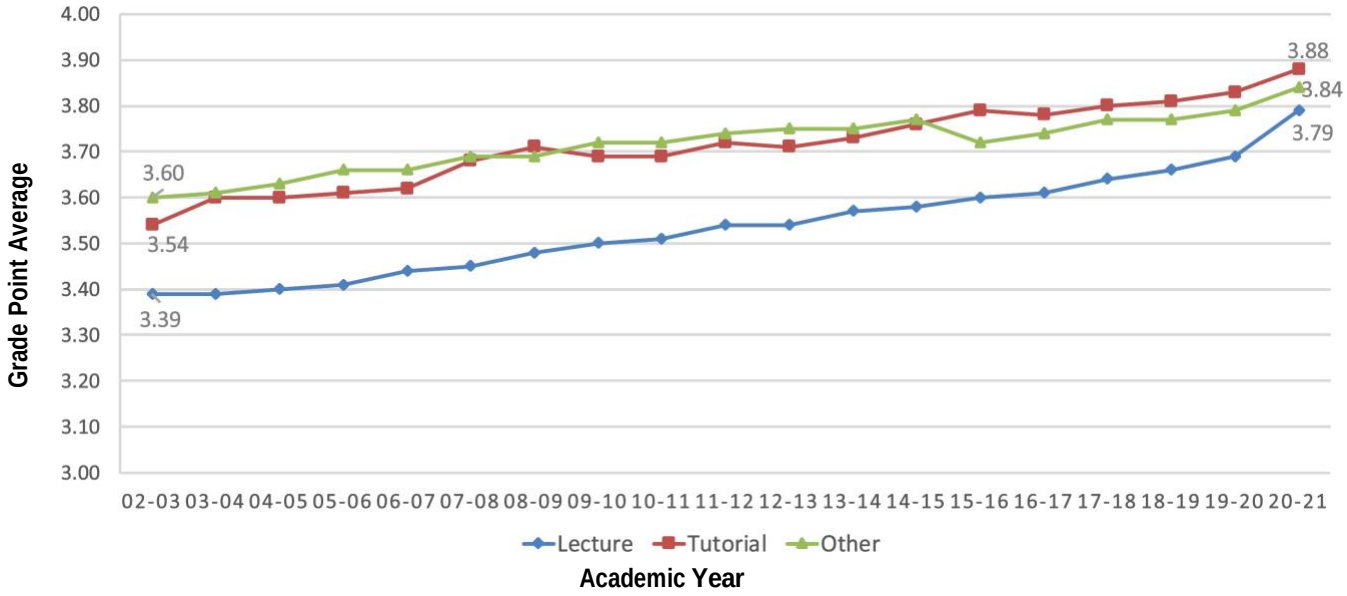

Figure 2.1

Average Undergraduate Grades by Course Type for Arts and Humanities Course Division

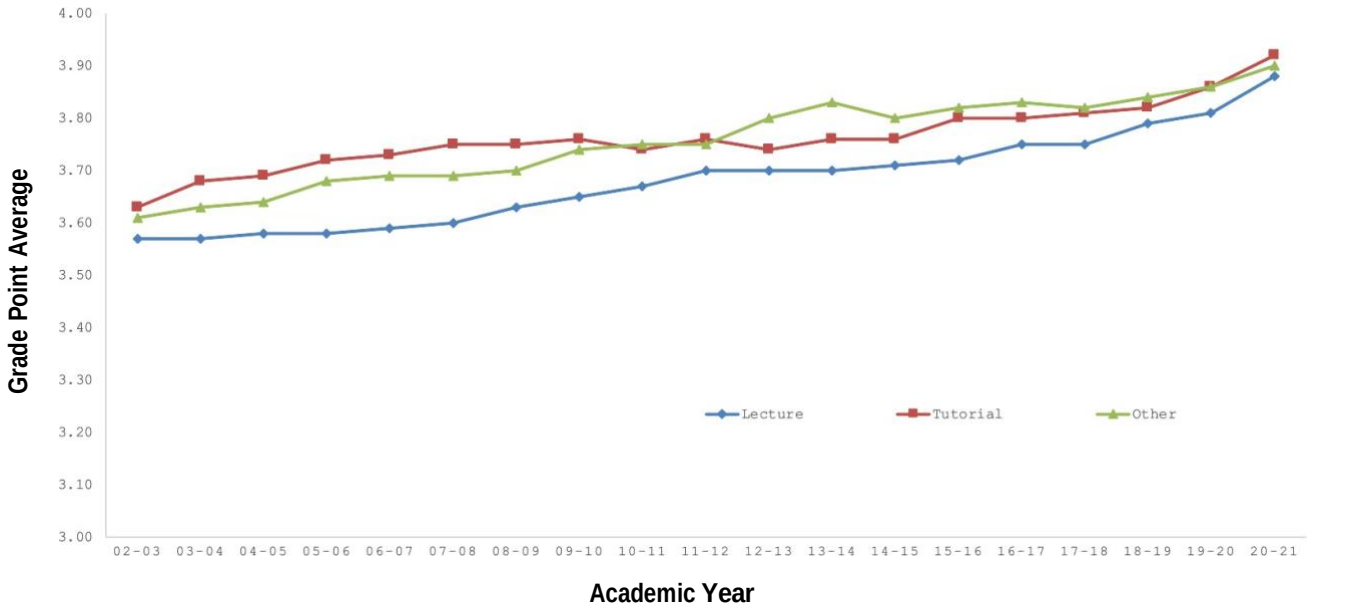

Figure 2.2
Average Undergraduate Grades by Course Type for SEAS Course Division

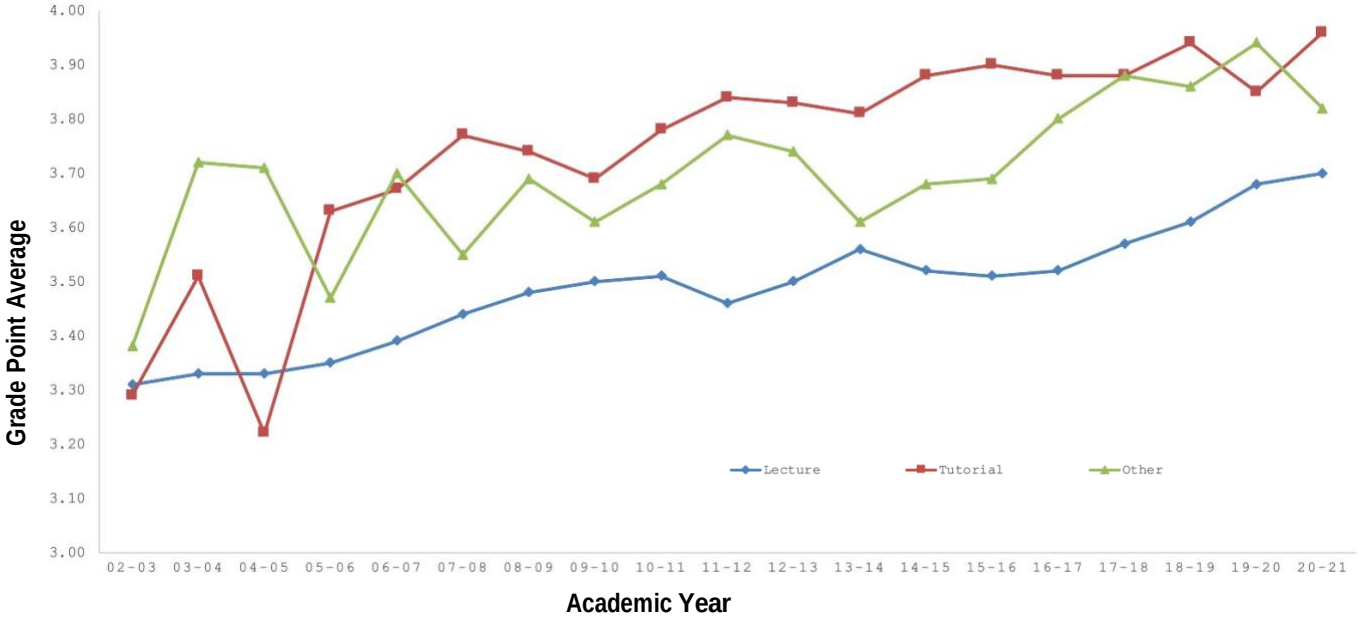

Figure 2.3
Average Undergraduate Grades by Course Type for Science Course Division

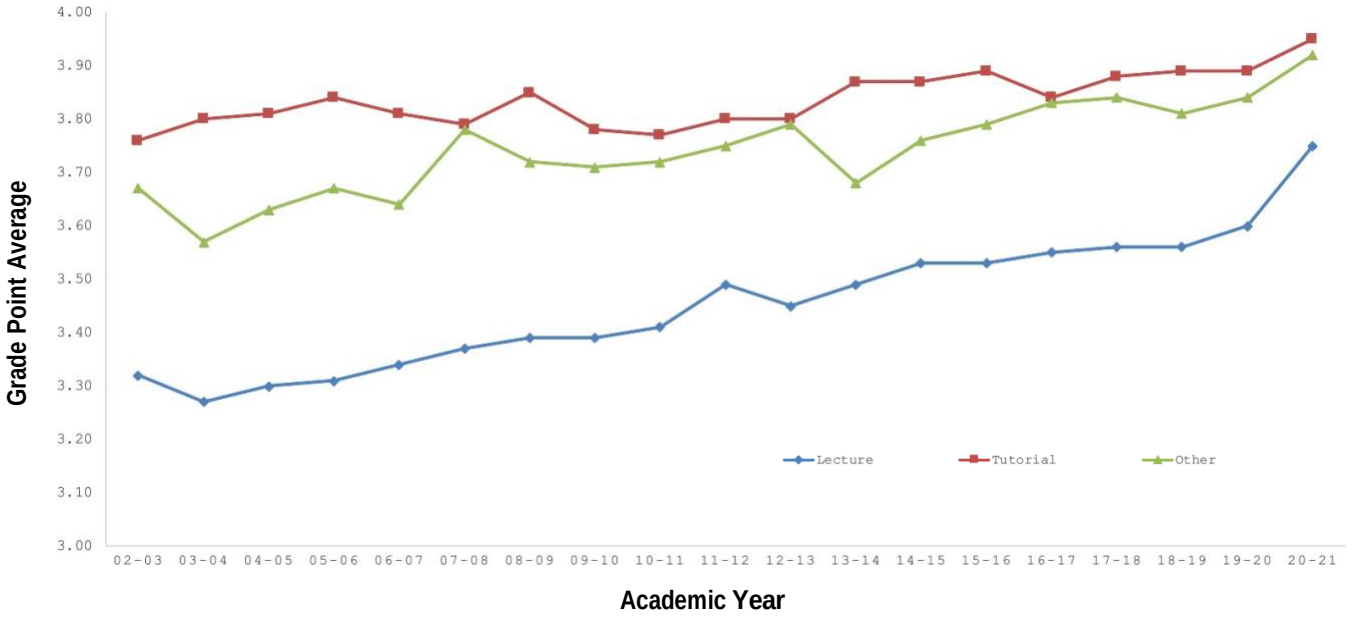

Figure 2.4

Average Undergraduate Grades by Course Type for Social Science Course Division

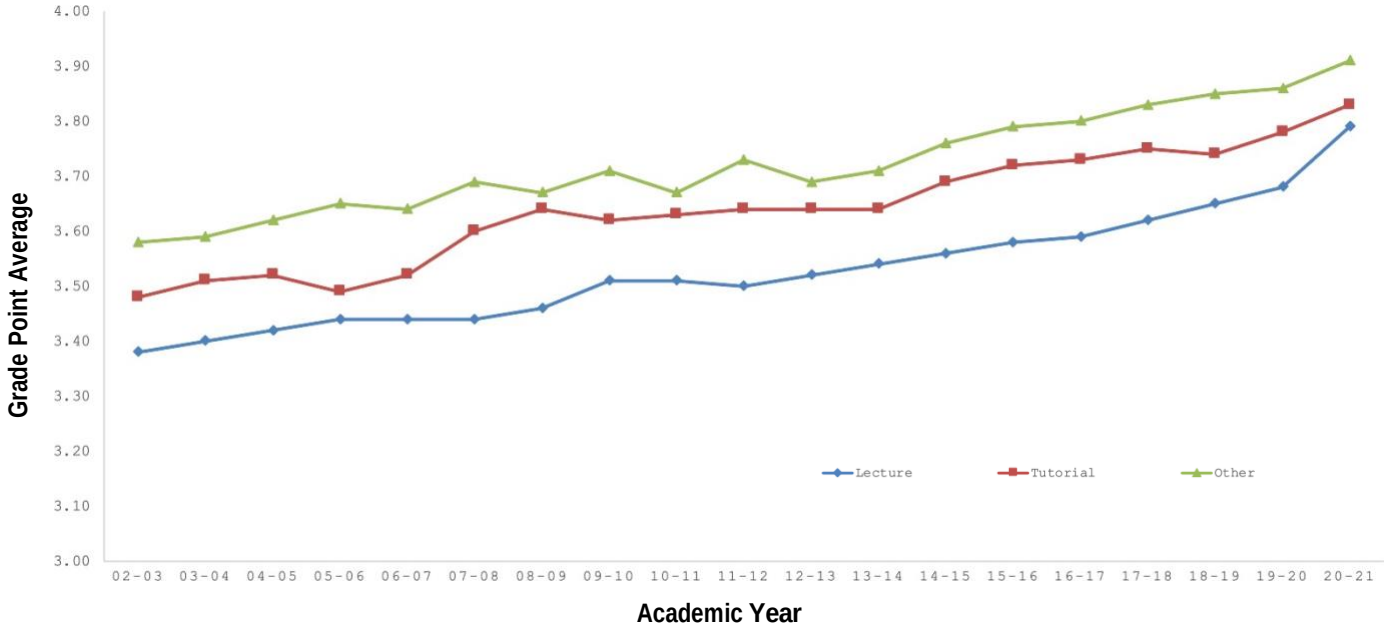

Figure 3

Average Undergraduate Course Grade by Faculty Rank

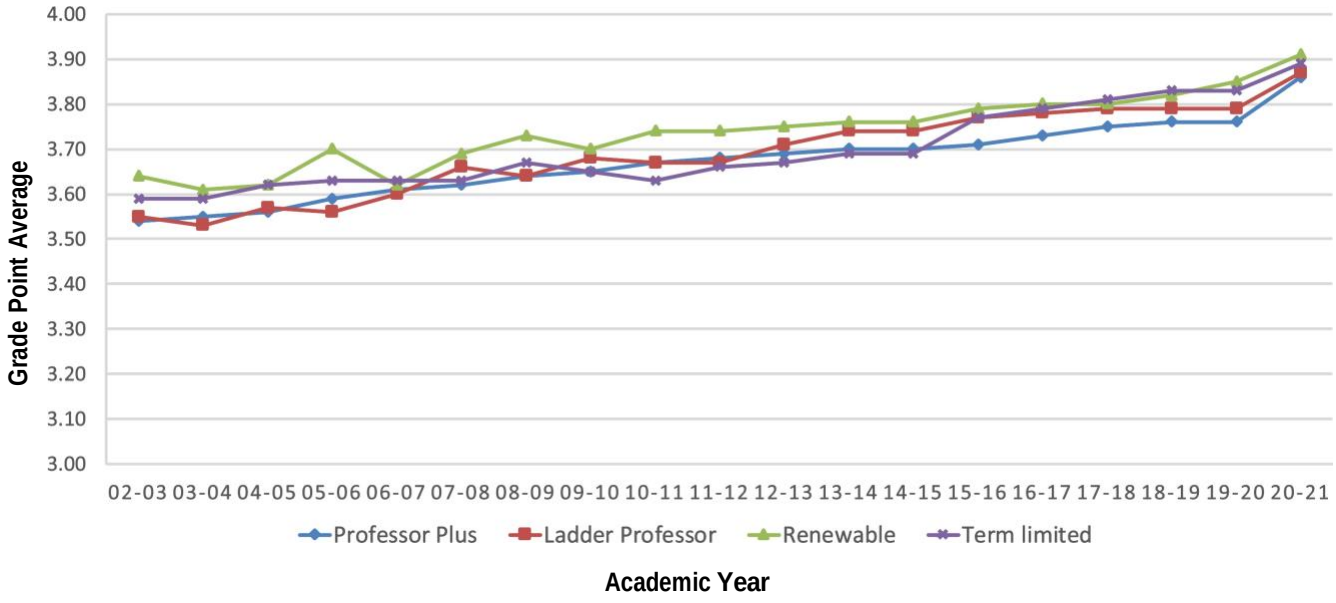

Figure 4.1

Average Undergraduate Course Grade by Faculty Rank for Arts and Humanities Course Division

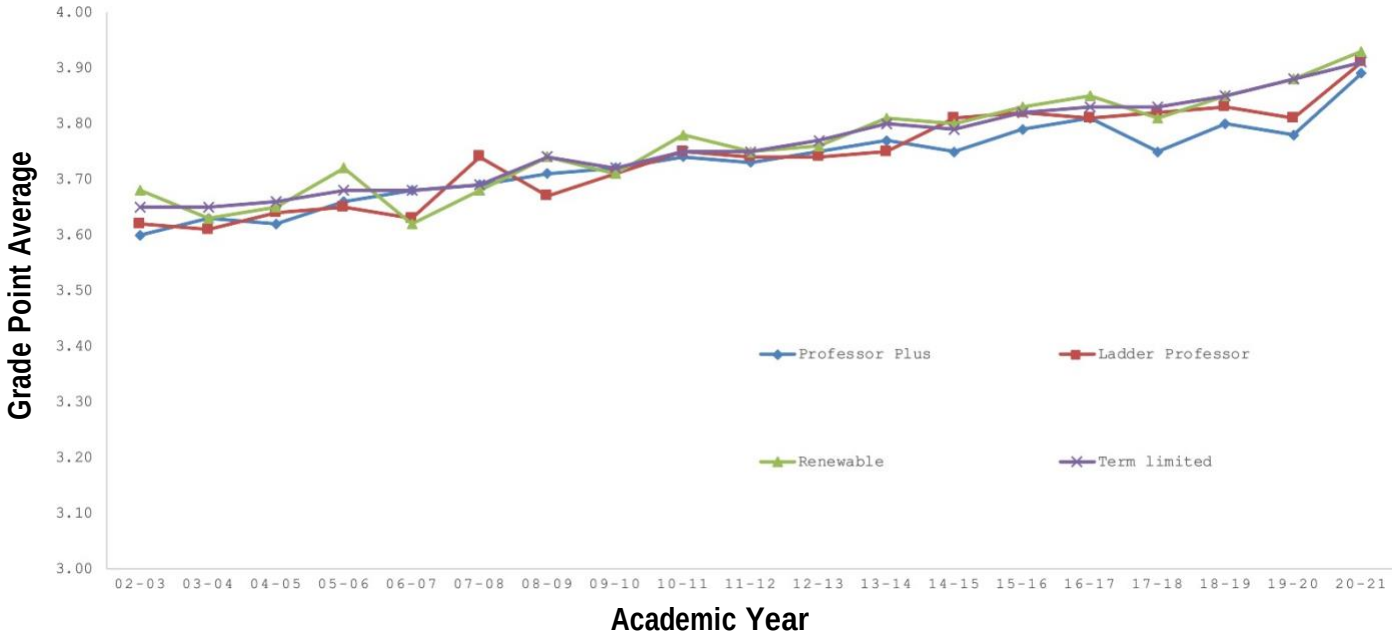

Figure 4.2

Average Undergraduate Course Grade by Faculty Rank for SEAS Course Division

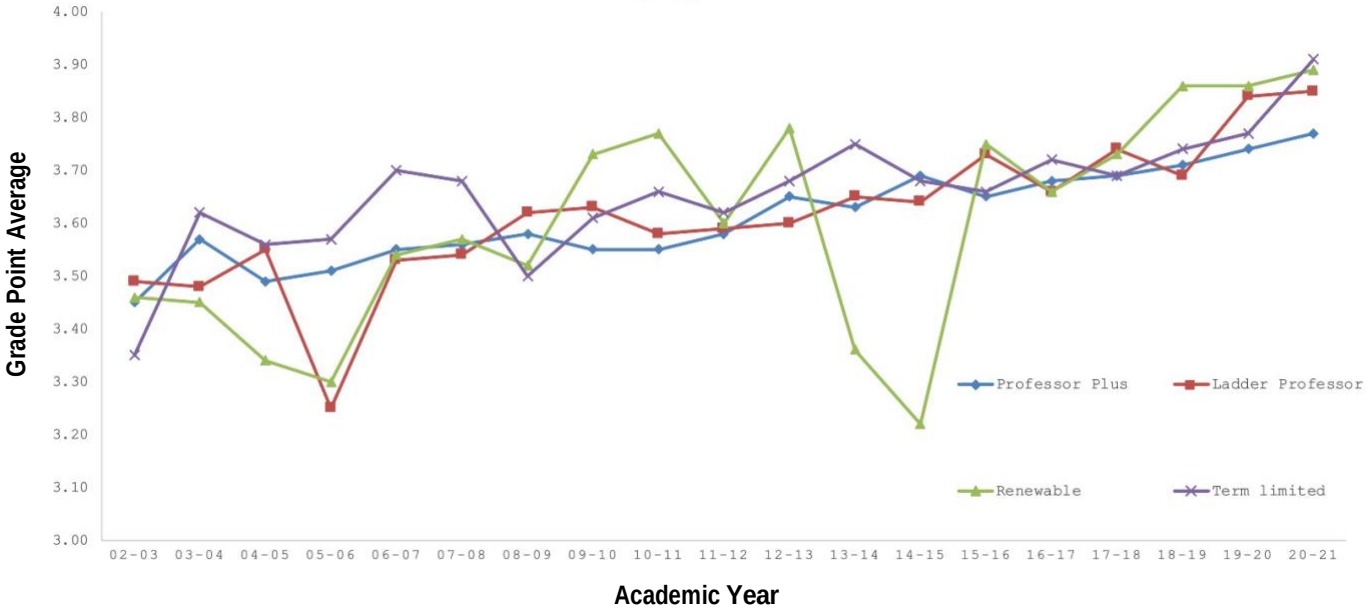

Figure 4.3
Average Undergraduate Grades by Faculty Rank for Science Course Division

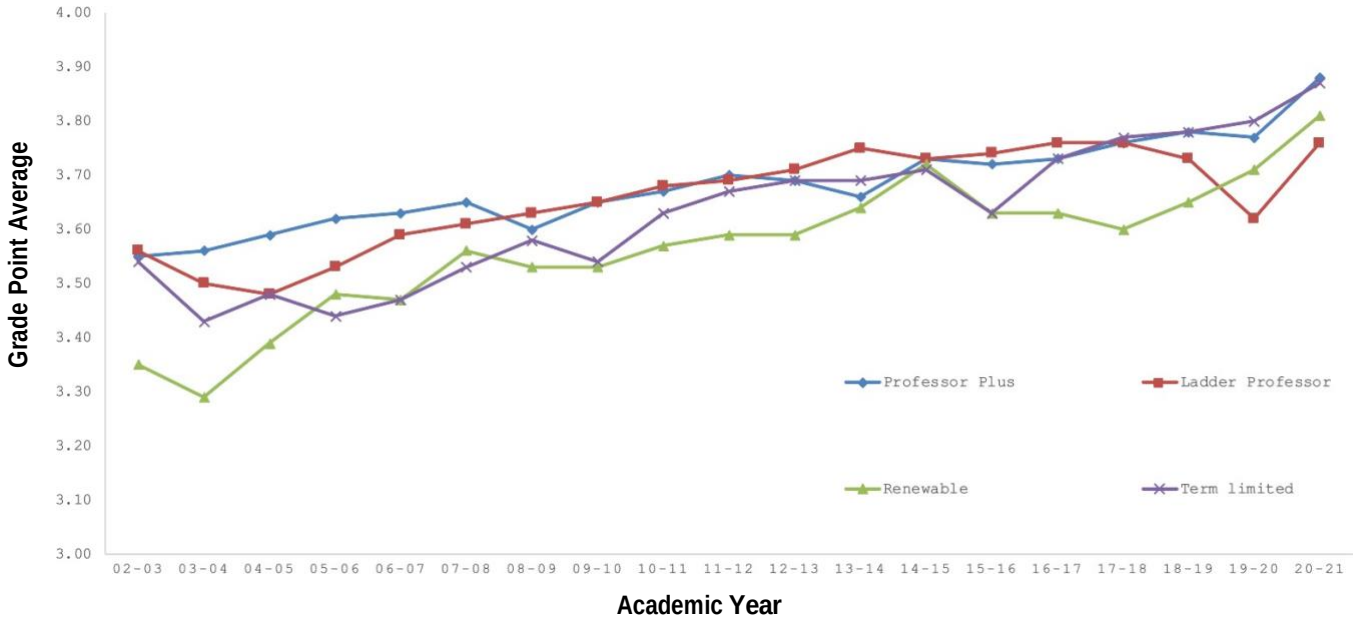

Figure 4.4
Average Undergraduate Grades by Faculty Rank for Social Science Course Division

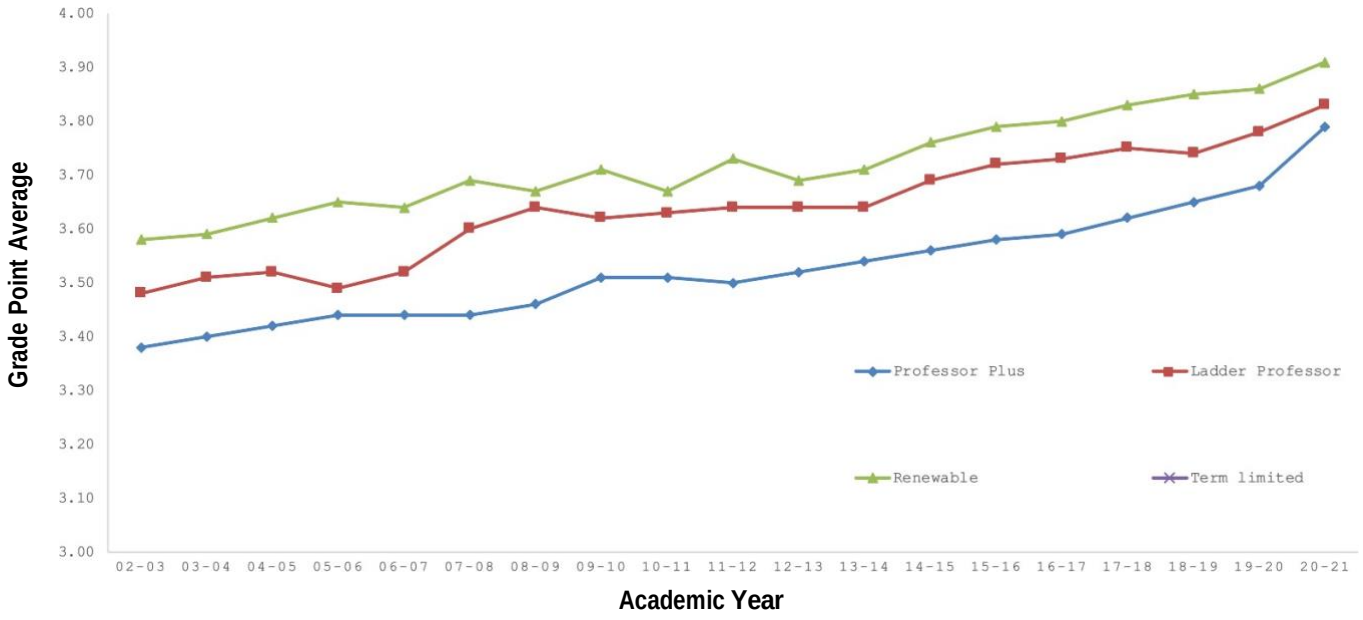

Table 1
Counts of Faculty by Faculty rank, by Course Division

		02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21
Arts and Humanities	*Professor Plus*	238	232	233	223	258	266	278	308	298	291	283	293	260	265	227	215	246	118	209
	Ladder Professor	125	150	131	152	134	103	109	99	77	74	70	55	64	63	74	95	82	37	64
	Renewable	133	142	144	136	119	144	133	123	128	143	165	146	137	131	159	164	160	78	142
	Term limited	220	216	213	233	240	204	235	234	234	242	229	232	254	264	274	264	312	151	290
Science	*Professor Plus*	166	151	156	164	182	186	150	148	158	159	166	155	164	187	182	165	166	81	176
	Ladder Professor	47	50	48	58	61	61	70	78	83	76	74	63	74	60	58	50	38	16	37
	Renewable	10	11	12	9	11	13	12	15	15	24	29	27	24	39	46	44	42	23	45
	Term limited	30	28	29	30	28	51	61	59	59	66	71	82	74	61	58	53	84	50	84
SEAS	*Professor Plus*	45	57	54	58	50	53	59	62	51	58	75	61	71	88	82	84	87	37	90
	Ladder Professor	30	27	29	34	34	30	29	23	30	29	23	31	30	35	30	38	31	16	26
	Renewable	2	2	2	1	2	3	3	9	7	12	11	11	10	12	7	13	14	5	11
	Term limited	5	7	6	7	9	11	11	3	10	10	16	29	27	24	31	27	33	17	25
Social Science	*Professor Plus*	223	256	252	240	283	278	260	262	256	273	243	264	243	233	241	230	245	133	253
	Ladder Professor	127	127	106	122	110	104	118	88	83	74	78	66	89	84	73	71	74	28	72
	Renewable	10	11	12	30	21	44	43	85	76	79	81	77	69	60	66	95	94	52	76
	Term limited	89	83	91	96	93	85	106	112	140	126	134	155	143	142	145	157	142	74	139

Table 2
Counts of Grades by Course Type, by Division

		02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	08-09	09-10	10-11	11-12	12-13	13-14	14-15	15-16	16-17	17-18	18-19	19-20	20-21
Arts and Humanities	*Lecture*	9,630	9,762	8,439	8,897	8,831	8,098	8,999	8,956	8,248	8,846	7,213	6,946	6,938	6,956	6,717	7,144	6,527	2,944	4,136
	Tutorial	1,082	1,158	1,072	1,143	1,098	1,038	999	864	828	832	806	708	639	678	704	1,024	1,080	489	685
	Other	1,932	2,030	1,842	1,764	1,779	1,896	2,219	1,996	2,402	1,936	2,092	2,113	2,191	2,392	2,594	2,565	2,777	1,410	2,163
Science	*Lecture*	7,892	7,616	7,958	8,304	8,814	9,019	8,934	9,550	9,737	10,389	10,343	10,335	10,443	10,146	10,355	10,103	9,975	5,316	8,696
	Tutorial	168	390	416	543	546	531	590	634	686	703	672	662	567	516	561	608	573	284	420
	Other	685	516	419	408	420	459	425	416	379	424	470	503	368	640	712	861	858	262	480
SEAS	*Lecture*	1,373	1,337	1,241	1,252	1,400	1,544	1,826	1,871	2,577	3,124	3,725	4,230	4,464	4,502	4,634	4,586	4,818	2,376	3,117
	Tutorial	14	32	17	76	87	54	71	93	129	158	221	207	206	244	253	352	295	152	217
	Other	200	133	117	78	64	84	69	116	113	166	163	155	181	194	174	359	350	267	910
Social Science	*Lecture*	9,025	9,866	9,742	10,318	10,194	10,734	9,836	9,577	10,184	9,745	10,409	10,807	10,511	10,316	10,801	10,446	10,641	5,254	8,132
	Tutorial	1,818	1,861	1,895	2,036	1,929	1,673	1,764	1,575	1,602	1,513	1,504	1,395	1,269	1,257	1,290	1,814	1,924	749	1,440
	Other	1,875	2,005	1,948	1,948	2,178	1,878	2,060	1,803	1,746	1,764	1,756	2,204	2,312	2,359	2,443	2,129	2,232	1,108	2,036

Appendix B: FAS Information for Faculty: The Grading System

The Grading System

The Registrar is authorized to obtain from instructors reports on the performance of students in the form of the grades established by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Online grade entry forms are available to instructors and must be submitted by the indicated due dates (See the Due Dates charts for fall and spring later in this chapter). The Faculty of Arts and Sciences uses the following system of letter and non-letter grades to evaluate undergraduate student work:

Letter Grades: Undergraduate Students

- **A, A-** Earned by work whose excellent quality indicates a full mastery of the subject and, in the case of the grade of A, is of extraordinary distinction.
- **B+, B, B-** Earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities.
- **C+, C, C-** Earned by work that indicates an adequate and satisfactory comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and participating in class activities.
- **D+, D, D-** Earned by work that is unsatisfactory but that indicates some minimal command of the course materials and some minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
- **E** Earned by work which is unsatisfactory and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.

Non-letter Grades: Undergraduate Students

Incomplete (INC) cannot under any circumstances be given to undergraduates.

- **ABS** Students who miss a regularly-scheduled final examination scheduled by the Registrar's Office during the Final Examination Period are given a failing grade of Absent (ABS) which will be changed only if the student is granted and takes a makeup examination. Unexcused absences are counted as failures (See Final Examinations). No other grade can be accepted. Final assessments not scheduled by the Registrar's Office, including take-home examinations and special final projects, are not "regularly-scheduled" examinations; therefore, ABS cannot be used in these cases. If, after an absence from a regularly scheduled final examination, a student is granted a makeup examination by the Administrative Board, the appropriate grade is then submitted after completion of the examination.
- **EXL** A notation of Excluded (EXL) indicates that the student was not permitted to continue in the course by vote of the Administrative Board of the College and received no credit. Exclusion from a course is equivalent in all respects to failing it and in and of itself makes the student's record for the term unsatisfactory.
- **EXT** Instructors may allow students extensions of time to complete course work up to the last day of the Examination Period. After that date, only the Administrative Board may grant extensions of time for undergraduates to complete course work (See Late Work and Extension of Time for Course Work). Until the date of extension set by the Board, a final grade should not be reported by the instructor; instead, the designation EXT (Extension) should be reported on the grade sheet. EXT is only a temporary notation. When the allowed time for late work has passed, or if additional time is not granted by the Administrative Board of the College, the instructor should officially inform the Registrar of

the final grade. Students who miss a regularly scheduled final examination scheduled by the Registrar's Office must be given an ABS (Absent), not an EXT.

- **PA/FL** The grade of Pass represents letter grades of A to D-; the grade of Fail represents the letter grade of E only. Students admitted to a course on a PA/FL basis are so identified on the grade sheet. For such students, only a grade of Pass or Fail can be accepted by the Registrar. Independent Study is always graded PA/FL.
- **SAT/UNS** The grade of Satisfactory includes letter grades from A to C-; the grade of Unsatisfactory represents work below C- and is considered a failing grade. No students enrolled in courses graded SAT/UNS may receive letter grades in those courses.

Appendix C: Sample Rubric (Harvard College Writing Program)

Harvard College Writing Program Grading Rubric

Grades are based on the overall quality of the work submitted, not on the effort or time spent on the work or on the amount the essay has improved between draft and revision. For any given assignment, you will prioritize the Elements you have taught in that unit (for example, if in Unit 1 you haven't yet taught a lesson on structure, then that assignment's rubric should not include that criterion).

This rubric addresses essays written in the course, not capstones (a separate rubric for capstones will be developed with preceptor consultation).

A grade of A means that the essay is excellent in all the criteria of the assignment (which isn't the same as perfect) and complete (it has a fully realized beginning, middle and end). The essay

- addresses the questions that it raises
- skillfully expresses an argumentative thesis
- provides a context for its own complex thesis
- grapples with interesting, complex ideas in the source(s)
- insightfully analyzes well-chosen evidence
- develops its argument with a clear and logical structure
- pays attention to alternate interpretations or points of view
- acknowledges and cites sources appropriately
- uses with precision the language and stylistic conventions that have been discussed in class

A grade of A- means an essay that accomplishes many of the things that an A level essay would but possesses one or two minor areas that could be improved. For example, the essay might contain one or two of the following features: It might

- convey stakes that are little underdeveloped or not fully related to the thesis
- contain a thesis that uses a key term imprecisely
- contain a claim with insufficient evidence or offer a moment of evidence that is not fully analyzed
- contain an occasional moment of repetition, digression, or confusing order
- insufficiently address counterargument (perhaps the objection is not quite strenuous enough, or the response to the objection is not sufficiently elaborated)

If the paper contains **several** of these features, that paper is no longer an A- paper.

A B range grade means that the essay has succeeded in many significant ways but falters either in **several areas** or in **one very substantial area**.

A grade of 'B+' means the essay might have a weakness in one area or a couple of weaknesses in less significant areas. For example,

- the thesis is arguable but not complex
- the essay is otherwise very strong but does not engage in counterargument
- the essay presents some uneven work with evidence (some insightful analysis as well as some more obvious explanation)
- some of the evidence it presents is weak
- the essay moves beyond a 5-paragraph structure but sometimes proceeds by example rather than by developing claims

A grade of B means that the essay has more substantial weaknesses in the B+ areas above. For example,

- the thesis is more descriptive than arguable
- the essay frequently uses weak evidence
- much of the analysis is superficial
- The essay has several problems with structure (some paragraphs bury their lead claims or are unfocused, or the sequence of paragraphs is occasionally not logical)

A grade of B- means the essay is lacking significant necessary elements of argument. For example, the essay

- has no thesis
- only summarizes or describes evidence
- does not offer analysis, or offers consistently superficial analysis
- has numerous paragraphs that are burying their lead claims or are unfocused
- advances in a five-paragraph structure or uses no discernible logic for its structure

A C range grade means that the essay fails to address or complete the assignment in numerous ways. For example, the essay

- has no thesis
- engages in no real work with evidence; might not use the sources at all
- discusses the topic but not engage with actual argument
- lacks a sense of completion—it begins exploring an idea or question that never gets resolved
- is significantly under the expected page requirement

A D range grade is for the essay that is severely truncated (just a few paragraphs); the student may have tried to begin an essay but was unable to complete even a partial argument.

Appendix D: Effective Grading Practices

The primary function of grades is for instructors to provide feedback to students on their learning. While there are many effective approaches to grading (some of which are described on the Bok Center's website), all have core features in common that should be incorporated into the design of courses. These features include:

- Clear alignment between course learning objectives and the kinds of assignments students are asked to do.

  It is helpful for instructors to articulate what is most important for students to know and be able to do after completing a course. Course assignments—and grades—should reflect these goals. Read more about learning objectives.

- Clearly scaffolded and sequenced assignments that build from retention and comprehension to higher order practices that are more analytical, evaluative, and/or creative.

  Ideally, course grades incorporate a range of smaller assignments that help students build the skills they need for more complex work, as well as larger assignments or assessments. Read more about scaffolding as a component of assignment design.

- Regular opportunities for feedback and revision.

  A major exam or paper should not be the first time that a student receives feedback about how well they understand the course material. We recommend providing opportunities for students to engage with concepts in a low-stakes manner—through drafts, problem sets, in-class activities, and peer workshopping—in advance of high-stakes assessments. In addition to offering students valuable opportunities to receive feedback and further develop their knowledge and abilities, these low-stakes activities can help instructors avoid the dilemma created when students err in unanticipated ways on a high-stakes assignment, which we believe is one of the scenarios in which instructors are most likely to feel pressured to assign grades that do not accurately reflect their students' achievement.

- Transparency about the rubrics and grading standards used by instructors.

  We recommend developing rubrics at the same time as developing an assignment prompt, and when possible, sharing rubrics with students as they undertake an assignment. Read more about rubrics.

  If your course includes non-traditional assignments, see the Bok Center's guidance on assessing non-traditional assignments.

- Guidance for TFs/TAs on how to give feedback on student work, including interpreting a rubric and applying consistent standards.

  We recommend that teaching teams engage in discussions—and practice—about grading and giving feedback in advance of responding to student work. The Harvard Writing Project is available to lead grade norming workshops for TF teams about writing assignments. Additionally, Gradescope is a useful tool for instructors to provide effective and equitable grading in many disciplines. Read more about consistency and equity in grading.

For more information, please visit:

- Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning: Online resources about grading
- Gen Ed Writes: guidance for faculty on aligning assignment prompts and rubrics and giving students feedback at different stages of assignments. While the site is a resource aimed at writing assignments in Gen Ed courses, the site's advice and models are applicable to a broad range of assignment types across disciplines.
- Harvard Writing Project

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