Grade Inflation at UNC - Chapel Hill

A Report to the Faculty Council

Prepared by

The Educational Policy Committee

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Introduction

The following exchange may sum up the state of grading and student grade expectations at UNC as we enter the new century: A faculty colleague recounts his meeting a former student who was manning the cash register at Foster's Market:

> "I took your course last year and it was the worst experience of my life."
>
> Oh?
>
> "Well, I mean, I enjoyed the course and I learned a lot, but it just about destroyed my GPA."
>
> [Fearing the worst] What grade did you receive?
>
> "A ***B*+.** "

This report continues an inquiry that was begun two years ago when the Educational Policy Committee was asked to examine the routine posting of the Carolina Course Review (CCR) on the World Wide Web for all to see.[1] That inquiry demonstrated quantitatively that factors ostensibly tangential to the rating of instructors' performance did indeed have a large and significant impact on student ratings. The CCR report showed that "mean expected grade" as reported by students in their Spring '97 CCR responses was 3.18 (not counting +/- grades), which implied an instructor approval score of 69.91 percentile points. If the expected grade were reduced by one standard deviation (0.415 points) the approval rating of the instructor would drop to 54.83, all other determinants of approval rating held constant. On the other hand, courses in which the expected grade average was one standard deviation higher led, *ceteris paribus*, to an approval rating of 87.2. In other words instructors who awarded an average grade of roughly 2.7 suffered, holding all else constant, a 32.37 percentile point disadvantage in student approval compared to those who awarded an average grade of 3.6.

We were somewhat surprised by the high level of student grade expectations and consulted official University records where we found that student anticipations were not unfounded. Indeed, tracing semester grades back in time, we found that UNC Chapel Hill is in the midst of its second major grade inflation of the past three decades. Figure 1 shows the undergraduate GPA level for each semester, starting in Fall, 1967. One sees a steady and rapid rise in grades from Fall, 1967 to approximately the Spring semester of 1976. Probably not coincidentally, the first inflationary period coincides with the period of the United States' most heavy involvement in the Vietnamese war as well as the rapid expansion of the University.

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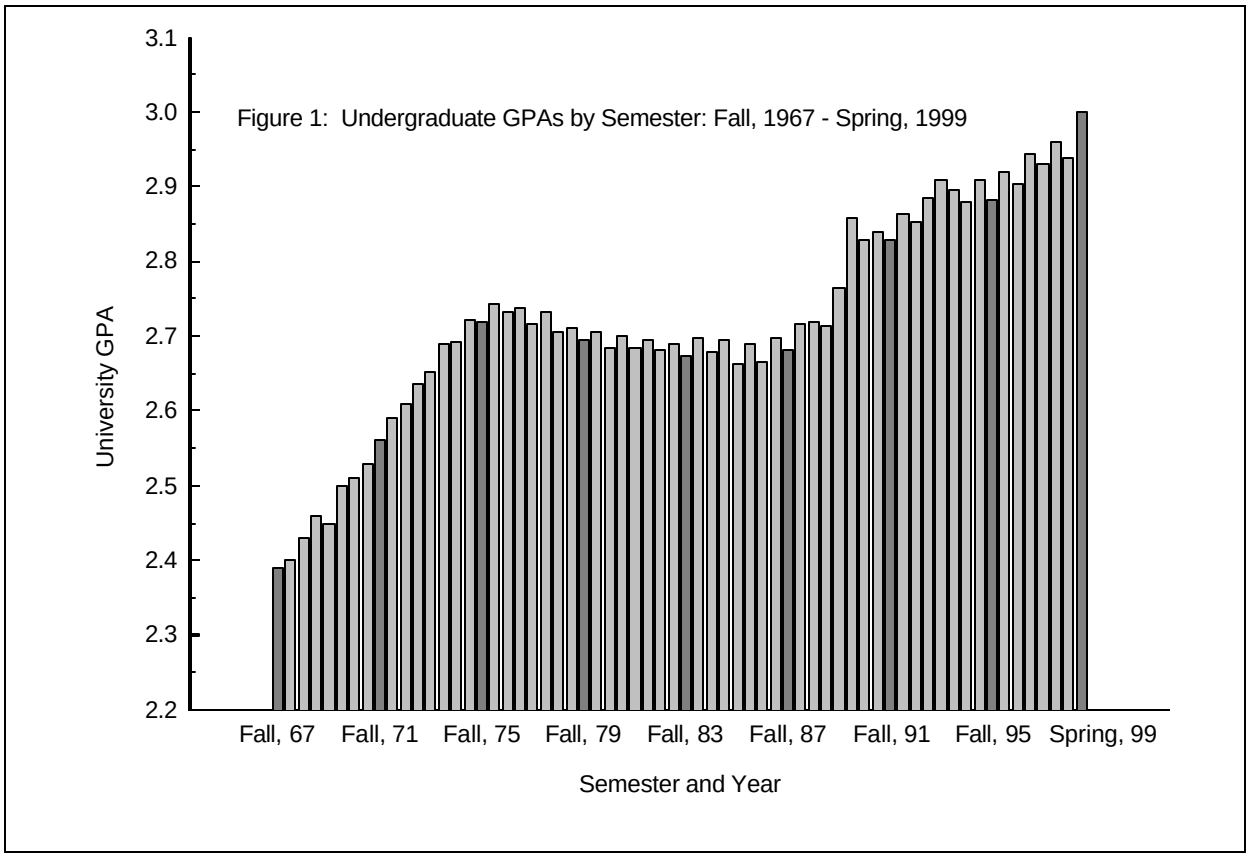
[1] Educational Policy Committee (1998).

The early to mid-1980s was a period of modest retrenchment, followed in the late 1980s by another bout of inflation that continues to the present. The Spring 1999 semester GPA showed that the average undergraduate at UNC sported a 3.00 grade average.



The rise in grades was not restricted to a few departments. Figure 2 shows average GPA by department[2] in the 1987 and 1999 spring semesters. This figure bears some study because it shows a variety of things:

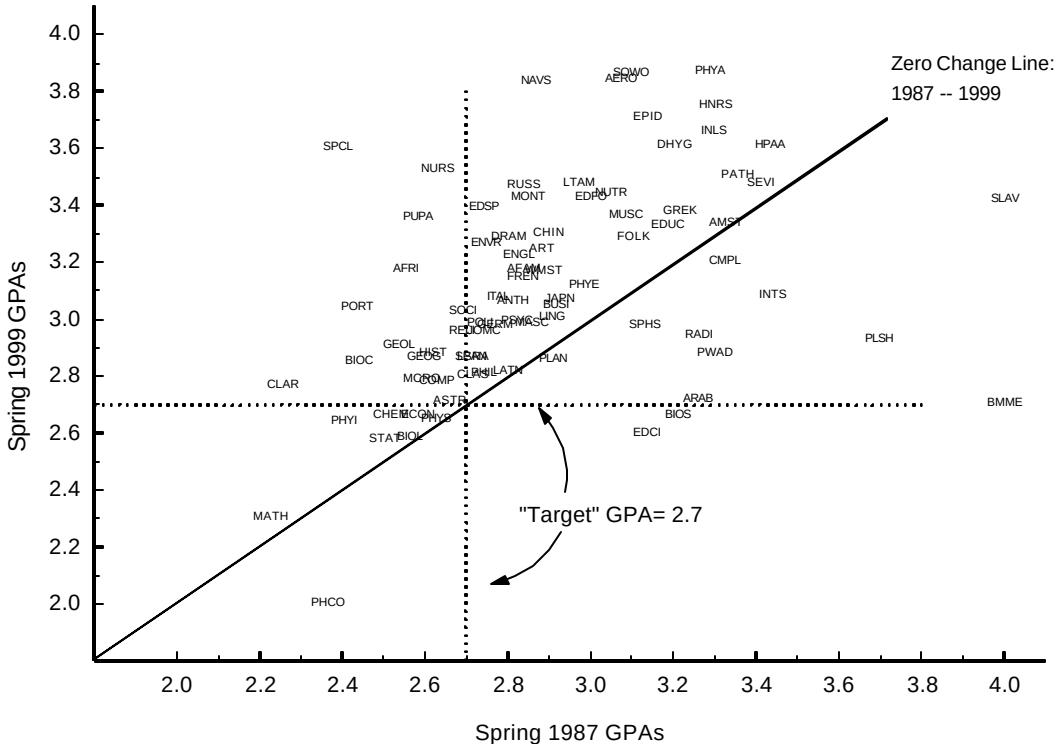
- It shows how departmental GPAs changed between the two semesters. Departments appearing on or near the diagonal line showed little change over the twelve year period. For example, American Studies (AMST) and Mathematics (MATH) exhibited almost no change, while Naval Science (NAVS) and Nursing (NURS) showed large increases in overall grade averages as measured by the vertical distance of the department from the diagonal line. A few departments actually show large declines, although these usually represent anomalous situations in which very few grades are being awarded in one or the other semester.

- The horizontal scale value shows the GPA in 1987, and the vertical dotted line represents a sort of "ideal" grade average (2.7) that will be discussed below. The vertical scale represents GPA values in 1999 and the horizontal dotted line again represents the "ideal" GPA of 2.7. In 1987 a sizable

[2] See Appendix A for a list of abbreviations for departments and schools and Appendix B for raw data. In some cases a department may appear more than once, e.g., Classics-Greek, and Classics-Latin.

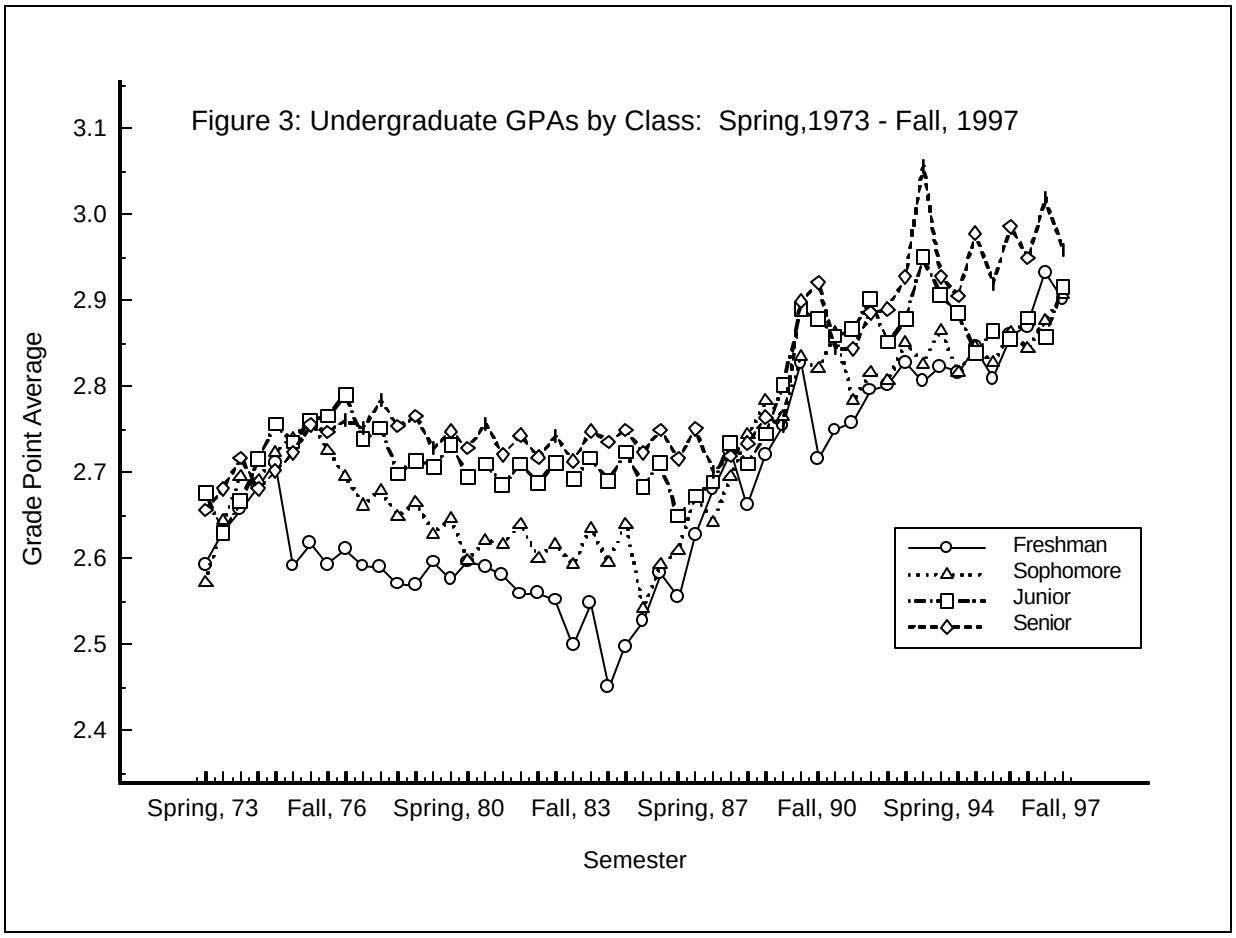
number of departments exhibited GPAs of 2.7 or below (departments to the left of the dotted vertical line), while by 1999 hardly any departments remained that were grading at 2.7 or below (reference the horizontal dotted line). If anyone believes that a 2.7 GPA is harsh grading, he or she should recognize that grades this high were first seen only in 1974. Generations of Carolina undergraduates managed to complete their degrees during the era when GPAs averaged scarcely 2.4.

Figure 2: Departmental GPAs: Spring 1987 and Spring 1999

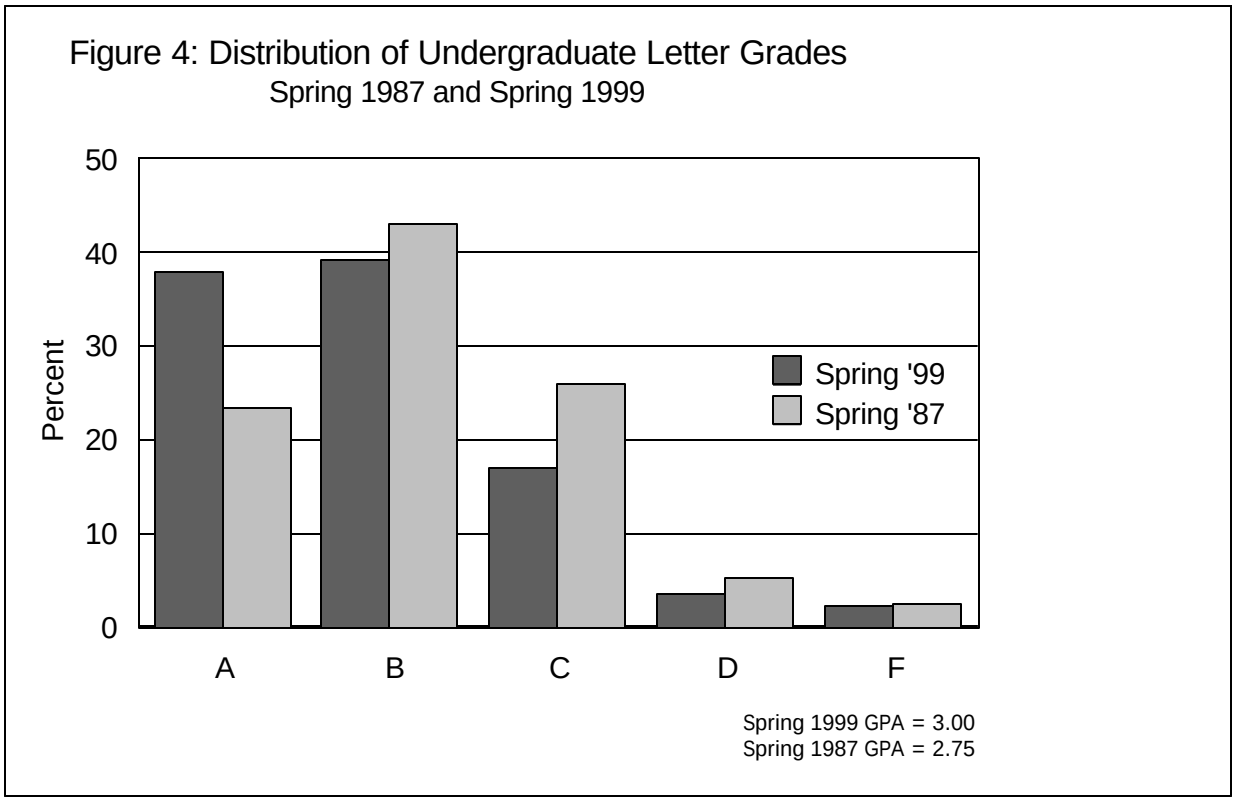


- The figure also shows that highest grades come from a variety of sources, including professional schools (Public Health, Nursing, Social Work, and Education), physical activities classes, and Arts & Sciences departments (foreign languages, Naval, Military, and Aerospace Sciences, humanities [Music, American Studies, Drama, Art, and English], and social sciences [Public Policy]). The natural sciences tend to grade the lowest, while the social sciences and humanities grade higher.

Another feature of grade inflation is that it leads to compression of GPAs among the four classes. Figure 3 shows that in the early 1970s and late 1980s, when GPAs were rising rapidly, there was very little difference between the GPAs of seniors and freshmen. In the retrenchment period of the mid-1980's the data show a spread between general college and upper division students. The spread reappears, although not to such a great extent, during the 1990s. By the fall of 1997, the GPAs of freshmen through juniors were virtually indistinguishable, while seniors exhibited slightly higher grades.



Average GPAs do not show the entire picture. More telling is the distribution of letter grades. Figure 4 shows the distribution of letter grades in the spring semesters of 1987 and 1999. Note that, although 1987 is not particularly low by historical standards, it still represents a marked difference in the distribution of letter grades as compared to 1999. In 1999 the "A" grade accounted for 38 percent of permanent letter grades awarded, "B" grades for 39.2 percent, "C" grades for 17.1 percent, "D" for 3.5 percent and "F" for 2.4 percent. Compare with the respective percentages for 1987: 23.4 percent, 43.0 percent, 26.0 percent, 5.1 percent, and 2.5 percent. 77.2 percent of all undergraduate grades in spring, 1999 were "A" and "B" as compared with only 66.4 percent in spring 1987.



The impact of grade average on the distribution of letter grades is even higher for those departments that award high grades. Figure 5 shows the distribution of letter grades for high, medium and low grading departments. It divides all the letter grades awarded in Spring 1999 into four roughly equal quartiles.

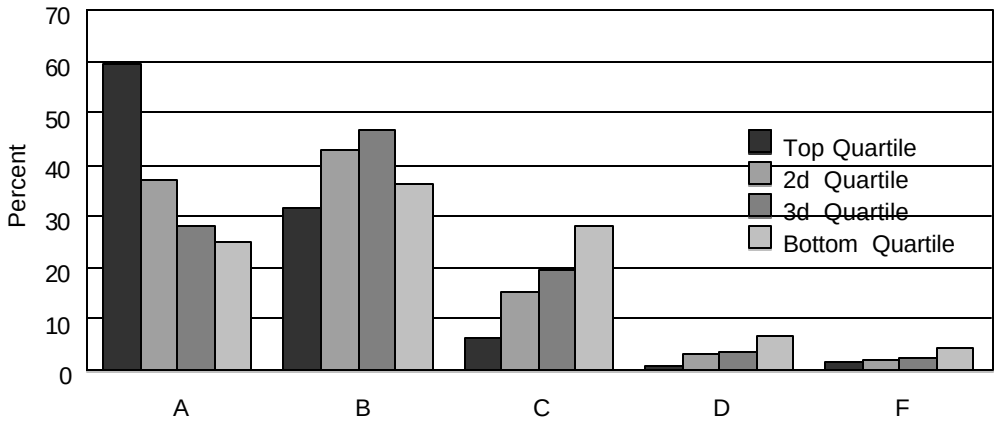
- The 44 departments that award the highest grades (GPA from 3.217 - 4.00) show an extreme concentration of *As* and *Bs*: over 91 percent of all grades awarded are *As* and *Bs* while only about 6.3 percent are *Cs* and 2.4 percent are *Ds* and *Fs*.

- The 19 departments in the second quartile (GPA from 2.988-3.201) award 80 percent *As* and *Bs*, 15.3 percent *Cs* and 4.81 percent *Ds* and *Fs*.

- By the third quartile (14 departments, GPA from 2.862 -2.979) the number of *As* has declined to slightly under 30 percent, but it still exceeds the number of *Cs* by 8.7 percent.

- Only when we reach the last quartile (23 departments, GPA from 2.299 to 2.852) does the number of *Cs* (28.1 percent) exceed the number of *As* (24.8 percent).

Figure 5: Distribution of Letter Grades by Department
Grouped by Departmental GPAs*
Spring Semester 1999



Top: GPA Range is 3.217-4.000
2d: GPA Range is 2.988-3.201
3d: GPA Range is 2.862-2.979
4th: GPA Range is 2.299-2.852

The Purpose of Grading

We rely upon the *Report of the Committee on Grading*, submitted to the Faculty Council in April, 1976. That *ad hoc* faculty committee was originally constituted by a faculty concerned about the rapid increase in GPAs that had begun in the late 1960s. Reference to Figure 1 will confirm that the committee submitted its report at the peak of the first episode of grade inflation. The committee asserted, and the Faculty Council later ratified the following thoughts about the function of the grading system:

> Grading is the process of a teacher's arriving at and recording a summarizing, symbolic remark on the academic performances of his or her students. Grading should express neither approval nor disapproval of students as persons.
>
> … the purpose of a grading system is to give the teacher a regular way to transmit to students, and to other persons who may be concerned with the intellectual development of students, value judgments made by the teacher.
>
> High grades should be used for the one purpose of signalizing outstanding academic achievement.

Is Grade Inflation a Problem?

The grading system is an important feature of the University's public measure of the quality of its program. The GPAs that our undergraduates present to the world speak very specifically to the quality of the institution that awards them. When the University routinely awards large numbers of high grades our whole quality evaluation system becomes less meaningful to graduate schools, to prospective employers and to others. David Dill, a Professor of Public Policy at UNC and a student of academic quality notes:

> In the new global economy success in higher education has become more determinative of what the sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf has termed one's "life chances." As a consequence the general public and policy makers are interested not only in the traditional issue of access to higher education, but increasingly in the issue of academic standards. Academic grades are an important component of the debate over university standards, because in the US grades have become an accepted and influential measure of student learning and academic success. (Dill 1999, p. 1)

Dill cites a recent analysis by George Kuh that used a series of surveys of student activities conducted in a representative sample of colleges and universities since the late 1960s. (Kuh, 1999) The surveys explored the nature of students' academic experiences, how students spend their time, and the amount of effort they devote to academic activities known to be related to learning:

> Kuh's analysis indicated that in all types of colleges and universities students of the 1990s reported spending less time on learning-related activities such as attending class and studying than did their predecessors but reported higher academic grades. These results are consistent with other national as well as institutional studies that have revealed substantial "grade inflation" in higher education over time. For example, a recent study of grading patterns at Princeton University revealed a trend toward a growing number of A's and B's and fewer C's and D's. The study concluded that the increase in grades could not be attributed to increases in student quality or student learning, but was due to more lenient professors and students who badger them for higher marks. (Dill, 1999)

The function of grades is to distinguish among levels of student performance. Admittedly, the scale is arbitrary; we grade graduate students on a 4-point scale and undergraduates (in theory at least) on a 5-point scale. We could grade undergraduates on a 3-point scale; indeed, that is what the highest grading departments in the University are doing *de facto* when 97.6 percent of the grades that they award are C or better. Given the compression overall and the wide variance among departments, the substantive meaning of the letter grades has ceased to be interpretable, and their use in distinguishing among the varieties of student performance is problematic at best.

The 1976 Committee on Grading had the following to say about the impact of inflated grades:

1. The truly good students, on the other hand, can but share A's and B's with their less able classmates. Teachers always know who their genuinely outstanding students are; but when two-thirds or more of their students are graded A and B, teachers are left without the means of expressing in the symbolism of a grade scale their high professional opinions of the performances of the very best students.

   Inflated grades are inaccurate feedback to students with respect to their own capacities and deficiencies in intellectual development. This difficulty affects both poor students and good ones. The poor students may be falsely encouraged to proceed to a level of academic endeavor that is, to their eventual sad discovery, out of their depth. All administrators and teachers who have had much to do with graduate students can recall numerous instances in which students with honor grades in college turned out to be badly fitted intellectually for advanced study. Their experience is likely to be always sorrowful and sometimes tragic.

2. By resorting to criteria other than the records of academic achievement of applicants, admitting officers of graduate and professional schools must attempt to identify those students who are, indeed, the ablest for their lines of research and study. It is interesting that an amazingly large, complex establishment of testing and measuring has developed for, chiefly, sorting from among the large number of students with high grades the relatively small number who can be admitted to our graduate and professional schools. It is a commonplace opinion among admitting officers that the cumulative academic record is the most reliable single predictor of a student's chances for success at the next higher level of study. The record is trustworthy, hence valuable, when it derives from the honest, conscientious effort of the student and the most painstaking, truly professional evaluation by the teacher of the student's accomplishments. The record does not have to be demonstrably false to lose value; it need only lose respect.

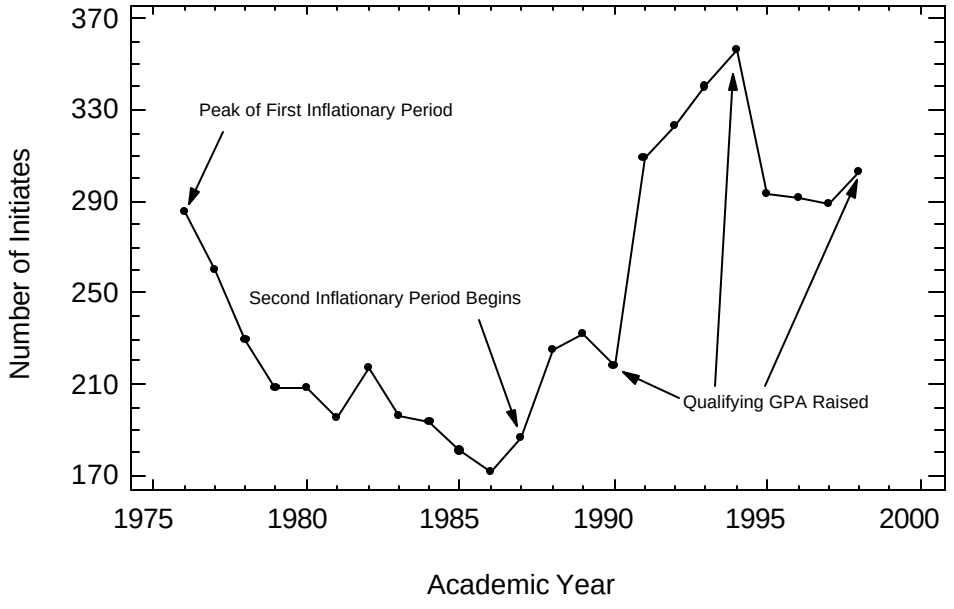
3. Most importantly, inflated grades are a form of intellectual dishonesty and may discredit a great profession. If the teacher-scholar cannot or will not distinguish ranges of quality in performance within his or her own scholarly and professional practice by his or her own pupils, the teacher and the pupils will lose respect for the profession, as will the society in which the profession exists and whose support it needs.

Grade inflation raises issues of "horizontal" and "generational" inequity. The grades of students who left UNC as little as a decade ago are no longer comparable to those of today's undergraduates. Perhaps more serious is the horizontal inequity across disciplines: Students who take a preponderance of natural science and mathematics courses will routinely receive grades up to a full point lower than their colleagues in the humanities.

Honorary societies are finding it increasingly difficult to use grade averages in identifying outstanding scholars. Figure 6 shows the fluctuation in the number of Phi Beta Kappa initiates since 1975. Phi Beta Kappa has had to raise overall eligibility standards three times during the 1990s, to the point that juniors will be required to have a 3.85 GPA and seniors a 3.75 GPA by August, 2002. Nevertheless, the number of initiates has grown considerably since the mid-1980s. Can undergraduate perfection be far behind? How does the area imbalance in grading affect the distribution of academic awards that are awarded to students? The faculty advisor to Phi Beta Kappa, Professor Michael Lienesch, reports that students in the sciences do well in the competition; however, they might be doing even better were the

grading more equitable.

Figure 6
UNC: Total Number of Phi Beta Kappa Initiates, 1975-1998



The wide variation in departmental grading standards potentially has serious educational policy implications. Might not systematically more rigorous grading in certain fields influence students' choices of majors? Since enrollment and number of majors is increasingly being used as a basis for allocation of resources, could not variation in grading standards indirectly lead to *de facto* changes in educational emphasis, say, away from the sciences and towards the humanities?

Grade inflation makes it easier for students to attain a degree with a minimum amount of effort. While grade inflation makes it difficult to distinguish outstanding performance from the merely good, it also makes it difficult to penalize those students who do little or nothing. If the standard grade for acceptable performance is a "B" then what does a "C" mean? In many cases, we suspect, students today receive a "C" for work that would have received a "D" a generation ago.

Since the minimum requirement for graduation is still a 2.0 GPA, grade inflation makes it much easier to have graduated without even having contributed a "gentleman's" amount of effort. Lax grading ill prepares our students for the harsh competition that they will face after graduation.

Compression at the upper end of the grading scale devalues truly exceptional work and discourages outstanding students from achieving their full potential. Steven Cahn writes in *Saints and Scamps: Ethics in Academia* (1986):

"Do grades foster competition? Obviously, many people have goals that only comparatively few can attain; not everyone can succeed as a surgeon, a movie star, or a professional basketball player. Thus competition arises. And, surprising as it may seem to some, its effects are often beneficial. Gilbert Highet [referring to a boys' preparatory school] observed,

> It is sad, sometimes, to see a potentially brilliant pupil slouching through his work, sulky and willful, wasting his time and thought on trifles, because he has no real equals in his own class; and it is heartening to see how quickly, when a rival is transferred from another section or enters from another school, the first boy will find a fierce joy in learning and a real purpose in life.

Any scheme for eliminating all competition is unrealistic. But grades, if awarded fairly, will contribute to fair competition, a worthy ideal."

Grade inflation may have some positive consequences that should also be considered:

- When our students apply to graduate school or apply for jobs, their GPAs remain competitive with the GPAs of students from other universities where grades are inflated.

- Students feel better about their scholastic accomplishments and feel more encouraged to achieve academically.

- The perception of relaxed grading standards attracts more applicants and students to the University.

- Relaxed grading standards reduce competition for grades, which is, itself, harmful to the learning enterprise.

Although we have scant quantitative information, we suspect that the degree of grade inflation varies considerably, being particularly acute in our peer *private* institutions such as Harvard,[3] Princeton,[4] Stanford, and Williams. Even Duke has been concerned about its own grade inflation, which appears to be significantly greater than our own. The flood of *A*s from the private colleges could well have an impact on our graduates' success in gaining graduate school admission or prestigious jobs.[5] We will never be able to win a grade escalation war with our brethren in private colleges and universities, who clearly must be using high grades as a partial justification for their students' paying tens of thousands of dollars for an education available at UNC-CH for a fraction of the cost. Nevertheless, while we cannot address all institutions' grading problems, we suggest below ways in which comparison problems can be mitigated.

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[3] See, Lambert (1993).

[4] Archibold (1998).

[5] But it may not. Lambert (1993) quotes Harvard's director of instructional research and evaluation regarding Harvard's own inflation: "If grade inflation continues, admissions to graduate and professional schools will not be made on the basis of grades but of test scores. Recommendations are already generous: if grades can't be used to distinguish between scholars, nothing would be left but test scores. While scores have merit, they could become too important in this process." (p. 37).

The latter three justifications for grade inflation presuppose a purpose for grades that is at odds with our previous definition and with their standard function. If the faculty wants to achieve these results with the grading system (assuming that they could, in fact, be achieved this way) then it needs explicitly to state so and to present a grading system for faculty use that can be applied consistently and fairly across all units of the University.

Why are we experiencing grade inflation?

- *High-schools are doing a better job of preparing students prior to entering the University.* This may, or may not, be the case; we will leave it to individual faculty members to make their own judgments. However, even if true, the statement implies that the University is not, or should not be, adjusting its standards to changing student quality. We want to make it very clear that any rising quality of the student body *must* be reflected in the rising standards of the faculty. An *A* awarded in 1965 should mean exactly the same thing as an *A* awarded in 2000: A student has demonstrated exceptional mastery of the subject matter, far beyond that required to signify satisfactory performance, *given contemporary standards of quality*. An *A*-student in 1965 should exhibit the same quality relationship to his/her peers as an *A*-student in 2000 should to his/hers.

- *Facilitated by a larger and more qualified applicant pool, the University has become more selective in the admissions process.* See the response to the previous item.

- *The University has become more successful in attracting the best admitted students to actually enroll.* See the response to the previous item.

- *Students are working harder once they are here*. The national data, as referenced above, suggest otherwise. In addition, even if students are working harder, failure to take that into account in developing course requirements means that faculty, and by extension the grading system, are losing their ability to distinguish superior from satisfactory from unsatisfactory performance.

- *Students are taking lighter course-loads per semester, facilitated by AP credits, Summer School, and longer time until graduation.* Again, even if true, it appears that faculty are not adjusting so as to maintain their ability to discriminate among performance levels.

- *Students now expect higher grades, and they have become more aggressive in complaining about low grades*. If this is true, it may reflect a confusion about what the letter grades are supposed to mean. In any case, the fact that students want high grades is scant reason to comply.

- *Students systematically gravitate towards those instructors and courses that award higher grades.* Although folklore and our own experience as students would suggest that this statement has some validity, we have not seen an analysis that would support or contradict this hypothesis. In any case, it would hardly explain the wholesale upward shift in the entire distribution.

- *Some subject areas are inherently more challenging and demanding than others; therefore, it is understandable that they would assign lower grades.* This is a debatable and controversial proposition. It also ignores the definitions of grades that we will consider below. The grading system is *not* intended to reflect differences -- perceived or real -- in difficulty between subject areas. Instead, it is designed to reflect degrees of mastery of the subject matter *within each and every course.* It is the instructor's job to develop a system that rigorously and accurately assesses those differences in mastery among each and every group of students that he or she teaches.

- *Faculty are doing a better job of teaching students the required material.* Perhaps, but this begs the question, since the role of the grading system is to differentiate among levels of performance.

- *Faculty are "spoon-feeding" the material to students in a form that makes it easier to earn high grades.* Even if faculty are, in fact, making it easier for students to learn the material -- a noble goal in itself -- this does not gainsay the need to have a grading system that fulfills its primary objective.

- *Faculty are awarding higher grades in order to curry favor with students in course reviews.* At UNC there is some evidence in favor of this hypothesis. We have seen that student ratings of faculty performance are strongly affected by expected grade in the course. In addition, the second bout of grade inflation began in the late 1980s, at almost precisely the time that the University mandated student course evaluations for all faculty.

- *Departments are awarding ever higher grades in a "bidding war" for enrollments, majors, and (ultimately) resources within the University.* We have no evidence of a conscious design in this regard; however, conscious or not, the effect of differential grading policies may, indeed, be reflected in enrollment, majors, and resources.

- *The improvement in grades reflects a richer intellectual climate and concomitant higher academic achievement at the University.* Even if true (we leave it to the reader's own judgment) the "richness" of intellectual climate can hardly be helped by a grading system that manifestly fails to differentiate outstanding from good from satisfactory from poor performance.

- *Grading standards in the University have become less demanding.*

Whose Responsibility Is the Grading System?

Higher education in the United States differs from that in many other countries, particularly European countries, because it is characterized by a market that is considerably more open than markets in those countries. This brings us many benefits including a wide range of innovative colleges and universities that are relatively unhampered by public control. A disadvantage is that quality variation in U.S. higher

education is enormous compared to that which has existed in countries such as France, Sweden, Germany or the United Kingdom.

American consumers and producers of higher education have become accustomed to factoring in quality evaluations for each assessment of a college or a university. This has not been true in other countries: "Traditionally a university education in countries such as the UK, Sweden, and Hong Kong was assumed to meet a common 'gold standard.' That is, admissions criteria, faculty-hiring practices, taught curricula, and examination standards were assumed to be equivalent across the entire university sector, thus assuring common academic quality." (Dill, 1999)

The grading system represents an important intra-university indicator of quality and an inter-university indicator as well. When the grading system becomes debased, as ours has, our students will be judged by other criteria. At Harvard, where grade inflation is even more serious than at UNC, the proportion of students graduating *magna cum laude* and *cum laude* has grown so high that graduate school admissions offices at other institutions routinely ignore those honors when assessing Harvard graduates' admission applications (Lambert, 1993). Instead, they turn to standardized test scores or faculty recommendations (which also have well known comparability problems).

The grading system at UNC and, we suspect, at other universities has evolved in a way that makes it fundamentally no one's responsibility beyond that of the individual instructor who awards the grades. Conferring of the Ph.D. apparently used to carry with it the innate understanding of just what kind of performance justifies an "A," "B," "C," "D," or "F." Unfortunately, this shared social knowledge appears to have eroded seriously over the past three decades.

Instead, we have a classic example of what economists call "market failure" -- the lack of congruence between the costs and benefits to an individual instructor of his or her grading policy and the costs and benefits to the University as a whole. The instructor can achieve private objectives by awarding high grades that subvert the grading system for the rest of the faculty and University. Moreover, at present the University has no mechanism in place to forestall this kind of behavior and to maintain the integrity of the system.

So, whose responsibility is the grading system? We reemphasize that the grading system is, and always has been, the responsibility of the faculty, both collectively and individually. The responsibility of individual faculty members for their own grades is well accepted; however, we contend that the faculty as a whole has a collective responsibility for the system's integrity. It is the faculty, acting through the Faculty Council, that chooses the grading system, defines the meaning of each grade, and insures that the system is fairly and uniformly applied across the entire student body. This principle is as true now as it was twenty-four years ago when the Faculty Council last addressed the issue of grade inflation.

We are not recommending that the authority of each instructor to assign grades to *individual* students should be reduced or eliminated; however, we do insist that the faculty as a whole has a right and obligation to insure that instructors apply the system in conformance with general University norms and

standards. These norms and standards should be determined by the entire faculty, acting through the Faculty Council.

Principles Guiding Reform

Our study of grade inflation at UNC-Chapel Hill leads us to propose a set of principles that should guide any attempt to restore the integrity of the grading system:

1. It is the Faculty, acting through the Faculty Council, that determines the purpose and the form of the grading system. Reiterating long-standing faculty policy we assert that the purpose of grades is to identify degrees of mastery of subject matter. Moreover, letter grades have specific meaning with respect to the mastery of that material:

   "A": Outstanding mastery of course material. Students earning an "A" have exhibited performance far above that required for credit in the course and far above that usually seen in the course. The "A" grade should be awarded sparingly and should identify student performance that is relatively unusual in the course. "The A grade states clearly that the student has shown such outstanding promise in the aspect of the discipline under study that he/she may be strongly encouraged to continue."[6]

   "B": Superior mastery of course material. Students earning a "B" have exhibited mastery clearly above that required for credit in the course. The "B" grade should represent student performance that is strong and very clearly above performance that is generally held to be satisfactory. "The 'B' grade states that the student has shown solid promise in the aspect of the discipline under study."[7]

   "C": Satisfactory mastery of course material. Students earning a "C" have exhibited satisfactory mastery of course material. The "C" grade should reflect performance that is satisfactory on all counts and that clearly deserves full credit for the course. "The 'C' grade states that, while not yet showing any unusual promise, the student may continue to study in the discipline with reasonable hope of intellectual development."[8]

   "D": Mastery of course material that is unsatisfactory or poor along one or more dimensions. Students achieving a "D" have exhibited incomplete mastery of course material but have achieved enough to earn credit for the course. "The 'D' grade states that the student has given no evidence of prospective growth in the discipline; an accumulation of 'D' grades should be taken to mean that the student would be well advised not to continue in the academic field."[9]

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[6] Committee on Grading (1976) p. 2.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] *Ibid.*
[9] *Ibid.*

"F": Unsatisfactory mastery of course material. Students earning an "F" have not demonstrated sufficient mastery of course material to earn credit for the course. "The 'F' grade indicates that the student's performance in the required exercises has revealed almost no understanding of the course content. A grade of 'F' should warrant an adviser's questioning whether the student may suitably register for further study in the discipline before remedial work is undertaken."[10]

We wish to emphasize that we have *not* changed the meaning of the grading system. The verbal descriptions above are essentially the same as those that the faculty has, in theory at least, been using the past twenty-four years. We *will*, however, propose a system for insuring the integrity of the grading system, something the Faculty Council did not do in 1976 and 1978.

2. Grades measure *performance*, not innate ability or individual worth. They should fulfill the functions described above, and only those functions. Moreover, we wish to reiterate the Faculty Council's views concerning the use of plus and minus with the above grades: "… pluses should not be attached to 'A,' and minuses should not be attached to 'D.' Plus (+) should denote a shading toward the next higher grade; and minus (-) toward the next lower."[11]

3. The meaning of letter grades should be widely published. All concerned persons, including students, faculty, administrators, parents and other interested parties, should understand what each of the letter grades signifies in terms of intellectual achievement in a course.

4. Schools and departments should bear the primary responsibility for maintaining the integrity of their grading systems, but they must be responsible to the University as a whole.

5. Grading practices of schools, departments and instructors should be public information and departmental standards should be subject to ongoing faculty review.

6. The forces that pressure instructors to award high grades should be reduced to a minimum.

7. The faculty, acting through the Faculty Council, must have the means at its disposal to insure the integrity of the grading system. Without those means, we believe that it would be very difficult to achieve a grading system that meets the expressed standards of the faculty or to maintain such a system, should it ever be achieved.

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[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Educational Policy Committee (1978).

Some Suggested Reforms

The principles just enumerated suggest some specific reforms that might help to achieve them:

- The Faculty Council should adopt clear quantitative guidelines for the grading system at UNC-Chapel Hill. We do not suggest any kind of officially mandated curve; rather, we note that a *University-wide undergraduate GPA of 2.6 to 2.7* would lead to a distribution of letter grades that, while not being unduly punitive, would better reflect the substantive meaning of the letter grades presented above. The 2.6 - 2.7 GPA range is consistent with research undertaken some years ago in the College of Arts and Sciences, which suggested that University-wide GPAs lower than this range would seriously affect student eligibility and progress to an undesirable extent.

- Not only should the overall undergraduate grade average reach this range, but the GPAs of each individual department and school should also achieve it. Note that we are *not* suggesting that each and every course reach this objective; as is the case in today's departments that inhabit the lowest quartile, there is a wide range of GPAs among courses.

  Some may question our recommendation that schools, such as the School of Education or the School of Business, be held to the same overall standard. Why, one might ask, should a school such as the Business School, which has a minimum GPA entry requirement, not grade its students to a higher average? The answer to this question reflects back to the purpose of the grading system: it is to distinguish degrees of mastery. We do not expect the vast bulk of entering freshmen to continue to earn grades at the same level they did in high school. Neither should students who have been admitted to a restricted program expect to earn grades at the same level that they did during the first two years of college. It is the obligation of the professional schools to provide a learning experience that challenges their students to precisely the same degree that students in other units are challenged. If that requires additional effort from this selected group of students, it is precisely that which the faculty demands.

- The faculty needs the ability to insure that the norms of the grading system are observed. The Faculty Council should, therefore instruct a University official acting in its behalf -- perhaps the Chancellor or the Provost -- to put in place a mechanism that will insure overall adherence to faculty norms. This mechanism might include the following:

  - Every semester the Provost should publish widely the GPAs of each individual department and school, taking care to identify those departments that are not meeting the University norm.

  - The Provost, as part of the written report on University and departmental GPAs, should remind the faculty as to the meaning of the letter grades and the university's target grade average.

  - The transition period toward the lower overall GPA should last three years, after which schools and departments should be penalized budgetarily for grading practices that do not adhere to the University norm. This potential sanction may appear to be unprecedented; but the grade inflation

that we face is unprecedented also. When the private benefits that instructors and departments receive from high grading cannot, even in theory, be offset by credible sanctions, we have little hope that grade inflation can be controlled. In fact, we doubt that these sanctions would ever be used; once they are in place, their mere existence will likely have the desired effect.

- At the beginning of each academic year, the Chair of the Faculty should send to the parents of all incoming freshmen a letter that details the substantive meaning of the grading system and informs them as to the distribution of grades to be found at UNC.

- Every semester each department and school should indoctrinate new graduate teaching assistants into the grading system, explaining to them their responsibility to grade fairly, objectively and within the overall University norm.

- Deans and departmental chairs should be assigned the responsibility of monitoring the grading practices of instructors in their respective schools and departments. They should inform instructors whose grading practices do not meet University norms.

- All student evaluations of instructors should be adjusted to purge instructor ratings of factors that are known to affect student evaluations but are not germane to assessment of the instructor's performance. These include: students' expected grade in the course, size of course, and student assessment of how demanding the course is.

- The undergraduate transcript should carry a notice to the reader something like the following:

  The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill strictly monitors its grading system in order to insure fairness and consistency both across units and over time. Therefore, the grades on this transcript reflect an overall grade average of 2.6-2.7. Special care should be taken in comparing grades on this transcript with grades from colleges and universities that have not controlled grade inflation. See the distribution of grades on the back of this transcript.

  In addition, the University should develop as many ways as possible to notify users of its transcripts that the overall level of grades at UNC is likely to be lower than at other universities that either promote or do not control grade inflation.

- In its annual report to the Faculty Council, the Educational Policy Committee should summarize the condition of the University's undergraduate grading system and recommend remedial action as necessary.

This set of policies represents a comprehensive approach to grade inflation at UNC. It makes clear the meaning of each letter grade, both to students and their parents and to instructional staff. It sets clear quantitative guidelines that will achieve equity and fairness across instructional units. It provides for the regular dissemination of information regarding grading standards so that all can witness how successfully

the common obligations of equitable grading are being met. It provides a mechanism to familiarize new and continuing teachers with university-wide grading norms.[12]

At the same time, this program deals with some of the underlying causes of grade inflation. It provides a mechanism whereby student evaluation of teaching is divorced from factors that should not influence it. It provides a normative framework that will withstand pressures, from whatever source, to inflate the grading system. It addresses the issue of inter-university comparability of grading standards by using the student transcript as a "bully pulpit" to proclaim our commitment to integrity in grading. Finally, a program such as this would make it abundantly clear that this high quality institution recognizes its obligation honestly and clearly to report its qualitative standards to the world at large.

[12] The reforms proposed above seek to end grade inflation and return the grading system to a previous state. Another approach is to accept that inflation in the awarding of letter grades is here to stay, but to *index* those grades by adjusting the quality points assigned to letter grades on a course-by-course basis. Indexing would work as follows: In a course in which, say, all students receive *A*'s, that letter grade would be assigned 2.0 quality points when computing the student's overall GPA. In a course, say, where 25 percent of the letter grades are *A* , the student would receive 4.0 quality points. In this way, the student's overall GPA would reflect both his/her performance and the grading practices of instructors. The overall GPA would adjust for inflation, no matter what the grading practices of individual instructors. This approach might appeal to some who would look askance at direct Faculty Council involvement in setting the grading norms.

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Appendix A: Departmental and School Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Department/school	Abbreviation	Department/school	Abbreviation	Department/school	Abbreviation	Department/school
AERO	AEROSPACE STUDIES	ECON	ECONOMICS	LTAM	LATN-AMER STUDIES	PHYI	PHYSIOLOGY
AFAM	AFRO AMER STUDIES	EDCI	CURRICULUM AND INSTR	MACD	MACEDONIAN	PHYS	PHYSICS
AFRI	AFRICAN STUDIES	EDFO	EDUC FOUNDATIONS	MASC	MARINE SCIENCE	PHYT	PHYSICAL THERAPY
AHSC	ALLIED HEALTH SCIENCES	EDSP	SPECIALIZED PROF ED	MATH	MATHEMATICS	PLAN	CITY AND REGIONAL PLANNING
AMST	AMERICAN STUDIES	EDUC	EDUCATION	MCRO	MICROBIOLOGY	PLSH	POLISH
ANTH	ANTHROPOLOGY	ENDO	ENDODONTICS	MEDC	MEDICINAL CHEMISTRY	POLI	POLITICAL SCIENCE
APPL	APPLIED SCIENCES	ENGL	ENGLISH	MHCH	MATERNAL & CHLD HLTH	PORT	PORTUGUESE
ARAB	ARABIC	ENST	ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES	MNGT	MANAGEMENT AND SOCIETY	PROS	PROSTHODONTICS
ARMY	ARMY	ENVR	ENVIRONMENT SCIENCES	MTSC	MATERIAL SCIENCE	PSYC	PSYCHOLOGY
ART	ART	EPID	EPIDEMIOLOGY	MUSC	MUSIC	PUBH	PUBLIC HEALTH
ASIA	ASIAN STUDIES	EXSS	EXERCISE AND SPORT SCIENCE	NAVS	NAVAL SCIENCE	PUPA	PUB. POLICY ANALYSIS
ASTR	ASTRONOMY	FOLK	FOLKLORE	NBIO	NEUROBIOLOGY	PWAD	PEACE WAR & DEFENSE
BIOC	BIOCHEMISTRY	FREN	FRENCH	NURS	NURSING	RADI	RADIOLOGIC SCIENCE
BIOL	BIOLOGY	GEOG	GEOGRAPHY	NUTR	HEALTH NUTRITION	RECR	RECREATION AND LEISURE STUDIES
BIOS	BIOSTATISTICS	GEOL	GEOLOGY	OBIO	ORAL BIOLOGY	RELI	RELIGIOUS STUDIES
BMME	BIO-MED.ENGINEERING	GERM	GERMAN	OCCT	MED ALLIED HLTH PROF	ROML	ROMANCE LANGUAGES
BUSI	BUSINESS ADMIN.	GNET	GENETICS	OMSU	ORAL SURGERY	RPSY	REHABILITATION PSYCH & COUNSEL
CBIO	CELL BIOLOGY	GREK	GREEK	OPER	DENTISTRY OPERATIVE	RUES	RUSSIAN & EAST EUROPEAN STUDIE
CDFS	CHILD DEVELOP & FAMILY STUDIES	HBHE	HLTH BEHAVIOR & EDUC	OR	OPERATIONS RESEARCH	RUSS	RUSSIAN

Abbreviation	Department/school	Abbreviation	Department/school	Abbreviation	Department/school	Abbreviation	Department/school
CHEM	CHEMISTRY	HIND	HINDI/URDU	ORAD	ORAL RADIOLOGY	SANS	SANSKRIT
CHIN	CHINESE	HIST	HISTORY	ORPA	ORAL PATHOLOGY	SERB	SERBO-CROATIAN
CLAR	CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY	HMSC	HUMAN MOVEMENT SCIENCE	ORTH	ORTHODONTICS	SEVI	SEVILLE (SPAIN)
CLAS	CLASSICS	HNRS	HONORS	PADM	PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION	SLAV	SLAVIC LANGUAGES
CLSC	CLINICAL LABORATORY SCIENCE	HPAA	HEALTH POLICY & ADM	PATH	PATHOLOGY	SOCI	SOCIOLOGY
CMPL	COMPARATIVE LIT.	IBMS	INTERDISC BIOMEDICAL SCIENCES	PEDO	PEDODONTICS	SOWO	SOCIAL WORK
COMM	COMMUNICATION STUDIES	IDST	INT-DISCIPL STUDIES	PERI	PERIODONTICS	SPAN	SPANISH
COMP	COMPUTER SCIENCE	INLS	INFORMATION & LIBRARY SCIENCE	PHAD	PHARMACY ADMIN.	SPCL	EXP & SPL STUDIES
CZCH	CZECH	INTS	INTERNATIONAL STUDY	PHAR	PHARMACY	SPHS	SPEECH & HEARING SCIENCES
DECO	DENTAL ECOLOGY	ISP	INTL STUDENT PROGRAM	PHCO	PHARMACOLOGY	STAT	STATISTICS
DENG	DENTAL GRADUATE COURSE	ITAL	ITALIAN	PHCY	PHARMACY (NON-DEPARTMENTAL)	SWAH	SWAHILI
DHED	DENTAL HYGIENE EDUCATION	JAPN	JAPANESE	PHIL	PHILOSOPHY	TOXC	TOXICOLOGY
DHYG	DENTAL HYGIENE	JOMC	JOURNALISM AND MASS COMM	PHNU	PUBLIC HEALTH NURS	VIET	VIETNAMESE
DRAM	DRAMATIC ART	LATN	LATIN	PHPR	PHARMACY PRACTICE	WMST	WOMEN STUDIES
ECOL	ECOLOGY	LING	LINGUISTICS	PHYA	PHYSICAL ACTIVITIES	YAP	YEAR ABROAD PROGRAM

Appendix B: Spring 1999 GPAs, Departments & Schools

Sch	Dept	Subj	A Count	B Count	C Count	D Count	F Count	Total	GPA	CumNum
MS	CBIO	CBIO	1	0	0	0	0	1	4	1
PH	HBHE	HBHE	1	0	0	0	0	1	4	2
ED	TEP	CDFS	50	0	0	0	0	50	3.95	52
AS	PHYA	PHYA	2,544	138	13	2	34	2,731	3.87	2,783
SW	SOWO	SOWO	12	2	0	0	0	14	3.86	2,797
MS	MAHP	MAHP	2	0	0	0	0	2	3.85	2,799
AS	AERO	AERO	45	9	1	0	0	55	3.84	2,854
AS	NAVS	NAVS	34	5	0	0	0	39	3.83	2,893
AS	PWAD	ARMY	52	6	1	0	0	59	3.77	2,952
AS	ROML	ROML	18	3	0	0	0	21	3.77	2,973
AS	IDST	IDST	3	1	0	0	0	4	3.75	2,977
AS	HNRS	HNRS	211	46	0	0	3	260	3.75	3,237
PH	EPID	EPID	70	16	0	0	0	86	3.71	3,323
PH	MHCH	MHCH	1	0	0	0	0	1	3.7	3,324
LS	INLS	INLS	132	44	6	2	0	184	3.65	3,508
DS	DHYG	DHYG	214	81	16	1	0	312	3.61	3,820
PH	HPAA	HPAA	173	80	3	0	1	257	3.6	4,077
AS	SPCL	SPCL	37	9	3	0	2	51	3.6	4,128
AS	ASIA	VIET	3	4	0	0	0	7	3.56	4,135
NU	NURS	NURS	490	366	30	0	3	889	3.52	5,024
MS	MAHP	HMSC	1	1	0	0	0	2	3.5	5,026
MS	PATH	PATH	1	1	0	0	0	2	3.5	5,028
AS	LTAM	LTAM	27	14	1	0	0	42	3.47	5,070
AS	ROML	SEVI	156	178	16	0	0	350	3.47	5,420
AS	SLAV	RUSS	60	28	4	1	3	96	3.47	5,516
PH	NUTR	NUTR	62	48	2	1	0	113	3.44	5,629
AS	ROML	MONT	110	77	14	0	0	201	3.42	5,830
ED	EDFO	EDFO	2	2	0	0	0	4	3.42	5,834
AS	SLAV	SLAV	47	21	3	0	2	73	3.42	5,907
AS	ASIA	ASIA	52	38	7	0	1	98	3.41	6,005
AS	ASIA	HIND	17	12	0	0	1	30	3.41	6,035
ED	EDSP	EDSP	38	19	7	0	1	65	3.38	6,100
AS	CLAS	GREK	13	8	3	0	0	24	3.38	6,124
AS	MUSC	MUSC	1,447	383	110	25	44	2,009	3.36	8,133
AS	PUPA	PUPA	77	62	12	0	3	154	3.35	8,287
AS	AMST	AMST	98	78	13	3	1	193	3.33	8,480
ED	EDUC	EDUC	170	65	60	7	3	305	3.33	8,785
AS	AFAM	SWAH	9	14	2	0	0	25	3.32	8,810
AS	ASIA	CHIN	89	83	17	4	0	193	3.29	9,003
AS	DRAM	DRAM	884	711	178	33	15	1,821	3.29	10,824
AS	FOLK	FOLK	2	4	0	0	0	6	3.28	10,830
PH	ENVR	ENVR	16	23	1	1	1	42	3.26	10,872
AS	ART	ART	415	368	73	7	26	889	3.24	11,761
AS	ENGL	ENGL	2,338	2,342	484	74	103	5,341	3.22	17,102
Top Quartile			59.78	31.52	6.32	0.94	1.44			17,102
AS	CMPL	CMPL	93	91	13	2	8	207	3.2	17,309
AS	AFRI	AFRI	208	225	55	6	7	501	3.17	17,810
AS	AFAM	AFAM	360	415	101	9	13	898	3.17	18,708
AS	WMST	WMST	157	179	40	8	7	391	3.17	19,099
AS	ROML	FREN	437	419	157	30	10	1,053	3.14	20,152
AS	PHYE	PHYE	536	438	182	39	31	1,226	3.12	21,378
MS	MAHP	CLSC	65	112	36	1	0	214	3.1	21,592
AS	INTS	INTS	58	74	29	1	2	164	3.08	21,756

Sch	Dept	Subj	A Count	B Count	C Count	D Count	F Count	Total	GPA	CumNum
AS	OR	OR	3	5	0	1	0	9	3.08	21,765
AS	COM M	COMM	643	855	230	35	30	1,793	3.08	23,558
AS	ROML	ITAL	118	77	46	8	6	255	3.07	23,813
AS	ASIA	JAPN	35	34	8	2	4	83	3.06	23,896
AS	ECOL	ECOL	46	50	27	1	2	126	3.06	24,022
AS	ANTH	ANTH	684	707	258	70	40	1,759	3.06	25,781
BA	BUSI	BUSI	683	1,214	383	35	23	2,338	3.04	28,119
AS	ROML	PORT	127	155	60	18	7	367	3.04	28,486
AS	SOCI	SOCI	514	588	215	57	30	1,404	3.02	29,890
AS	LING	LING	118	117	46	12	7	300	3	30,190
AS	PSYC	PSYC	1,418	1,594	735	175	86	4,008	2.99	34,198
2d Quartile			36.87	42.99	15.33	2.98	1.83			17,096
AS	POLI	POLI	763	946	458	52	59	2,278	2.98	36,476
AS	MASC	MASC	31	18	9	1	4	63	2.98	36,539
MS	MAHP	SPHS	23	52	14	4	0	93	2.98	36,632
AS	GERM	GERM	91	137	51	3	7	289	2.97	36,921
JO	JOMC	JOMC	443	948	330	20	24	1,765	2.96	38,686
AS	RELI	RELI	312	529	150	44	27	1,062	2.95	39,748
MS	MAHP	RADI	16	26	14	3	0	59	2.94	39,807
AS	SLAV	PLSH	1	2	1	0	0	4	2.92	39,811
AS	GEOL	GEOL	595	480	270	103	23	1,471	2.9	41,282
AS	PWAD	PWAD	13	49	16	0	0	78	2.88	41,360
AS	HIST	HIST	824	1,940	708	98	62	3,632	2.87	44,992
AS	ROML	SPAN	554	1,081	423	109	51	2,218	2.86	47,210
AS	GEOG	GEOG	440	590	367	92	30	1,519	2.86	48,729
AS	LSRA	LSRA	62	122	77	2	6	269	2.86	48,998
3d Quartile			28.16	46.76	19.51	3.59	1.98			14,800
AS	PLAN	PLAN	9	11	4	0	3	27	2.85	49,025
MS	BIOC	BIOC	9	11	11	1	0	32	2.85	49,057
AS	CLAS	LATN	42	28	18	7	6	101	2.81	49,158
AS	PHIL	PHIL	372	798	388	58	50	1,666	2.81	50,824
AS	CLAS	CLAS	106	134	67	24	17	348	2.8	51,172
MS	MCRO	MCRO	41	77	45	12	4	179	2.78	51,351
AS	COMP	COMP	135	160	86	17	24	422	2.77	51,773
AS	CLAS	CLAR	81	132	78	23	6	320	2.76	52,093
AS	ROML	ARAB	6	6	1	0	2	15	2.71	52,108
AS	PHYS	ASTR	96	147	81	18	16	358	2.71	52,466
MS	BMME	BMME	0	1	0	0	0	1	2.7	52,467
AS	ECON	ECON	531	738	553	165	76	2,063	2.66	54,530
AS	CHEM	CHEM	1,003	1,393	889	145	115	3,545	2.66	58,075
PH	BIOS	BIOS	12	24	20	2	2	60	2.65	58,135
AS	PHYS	PHYS	215	325	307	46	33	926	2.65	59,061
MS	PHYI	PHYI	23	43	38	10	2	116	2.64	59,177
AS	APPL	APPL	11	16	13	2	4	46	2.63	59,223
ED	EDCI	EDCI	7	5	0	0	8	20	2.59	59,243
AS	BIOL	BIOL	751	944	1,165	221	80	3,161	2.58	62,404
AS	STAT	STAT	179	257	239	71	37	783	2.57	63,187
AS	ENGL	CELT	5	10	13	0	1	29	2.51	63,216
AS	MATH	MATH	355	562	502	243	192	1,854	2.3	65,070
MS	PHCO	PHCO	0	0	1	0	0	1	2	65,071
Bottom Quartile			24.82	36.22	28.12	6.63	4.22			16,073