

# Grading at Princeton

## *Frequently Asked Questions*

The Faculty Committee on Grading  
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## **Preface: Why does Princeton have a grading policy?**

Princeton established a University-wide grading policy seven years ago for two reasons.

The first is that we wanted grading to be done fairly, so that students in one academic department could expect to be graded according to the same standards as students in any other academic department. Before we adopted the grading policy, there was wide variation in grading standards among departments. In general, students in humanities departments were being graded more leniently than students in social science departments; students in engineering were being graded more leniently than students in the natural sciences. We thought that wasn't fair, and we set about to fix it.

The second reason for the adoption of the grading policy is that we thought students deserved clear signals from their teachers about the difference between their ordinarily good and their very best work. With grade inflation and grade compression, that differentiation wasn't happening. We thought that we had a responsibility as educators to use grades to give students better information about the quality and effectiveness of their work.

This booklet explains the grading policy and its implementation; it shows what has happened to Princeton grades in the seven years since the policy was adopted; and it provides important information and practical guidance for faculty members, students, and parents. It also examines carefully the fortunes of Princeton students in the job market and in admission to graduate and professional schools since the implementation of the grading policy.

Questions about the grading policy should be addressed to the Faculty Committee on Grading in care of its chair, Dean of the College Valerie Smith, at [vasmith@princeton.edu](mailto:vasmith@princeton.edu).

# 1

## **What is the University's grading policy?**

Princeton enrolls a select group of unusually accomplished—indeed, increasingly accomplished—students, whose credentials and achievements place them in the front rank of undergraduates in all American colleges and universities. The grading policy reflects the commitment of the Princeton faculty to hold these students to the highest standards and to make very careful distinctions in evaluating their work. Princeton grades should be understood, therefore, as rigorous markers of academic performance in an extremely challenging program of undergraduate study.

Beginning with fall term 2004–05, grades awarded at Princeton University reflect institutional grading expectations for undergraduate courses and independent work. These expectations result from the determination of the Princeton faculty to address locally the persistent national problem of grade inflation.

Princeton's grading expectations posit a common grading standard for every academic department and program, under which As (A+, A, A-) shall account for less than 35 percent of the grades given in undergraduate courses and less than 55 percent of the grades given in junior and senior independent work. Implementing these expectations across the University sets Princeton's grade distribution well apart from those of its closest peers.

As the Princeton transcript explains in greater detail, the University faculty has agreed that grades in the A range signify work that is exceptional (A+), outstanding (A), or excellent (A-). Grades in the B range signify work that is very good (B+), good (B), or more than adequate (B-). Grades in the C range signify work that is acceptable in varying degrees. The grading policy sets expectations for academic departments and programs rather than individual faculty members. It does not mean that only 35 percent of students in each course will receive a grade in the A range, nor does it mean that a student who does A-range work will receive anything other than an A-range grade. What it

does mean is that if faculty make rigorous evaluative judgments about the quality of student work, we expect that over time, on average, across the University, about 35 percent of undergraduate students will be doing course work of the highest quality, and 55 percent will be doing independent work of the highest quality.

## 2

### **Why have we made the departments responsible for implementing the policy?**

We aspire to have students graded the same way in each department, so that there is no advantage or disadvantage to studying in a particular field. But the departments have different mixes of courses and course enrollments and different challenges and opportunities for implementing the grading policy. We leave it to each department to determine how to meet the common institutional grading standard, taking into account the range, size, and level of the department's courses. We're not asking that every faculty member grade the same way, or that every course have the same grade distribution. Departments are in the best position to know what approach makes sense for their faculty and their courses; the grading policy vests maximum flexibility and room for judgment in each individual department, at the same time that it asks each department to agree to meet a common institutional standard.

## 3

### **How are we evaluating the efforts of the departments?**

The standard by which the grading record of a department will be evaluated is the percentage of As given over the previous three years. The three-year average smoothes out the inevitable yearly fluctuations that result from courses offered or not offered, faculty members on leave, variability in the quality of departmental concentrators, and variability in individual courses (e.g., exceptionally strong students one year).

# 4

## **What are the responsibilities of an individual faculty member?**

The most important responsibilities of individual faculty members are, first, to hold their students to high and consistent standards, and, second, to use the full range of the grading scale to make clear and appropriate distinctions to match the inevitably varied quality of students' work. In other words, there should be different grades assigned for work that is exceptional, excellent, very good, good, acceptable, and unacceptable. Faculty members owe students critical feedback along with letter grades, especially on written work. These are hallmarks of good pedagogy, to which we all aspire; the grading policy seeks to make it easier for individuals to meet these responsibilities in an environment in which grades creep up steadily without deliberate efforts to hold the line.

# 5

## **Suppose more than 35 percent of students in a course do work of A quality?**

Grade them accordingly. Under no circumstances should any member of the faculty fail to give an A to a student who deserves it. Students who are doing outstanding academic work need to receive As. Not to give a grade that matches the quality of the student's work would be irresponsible and unjust.

# 6

## **Suppose it's the best class a faculty member has ever taught?**

The answer is the same as in question 5. Grade them accordingly! Students who are doing stellar academic work need to receive As.

# 7

## **How does a faculty member manage the grading expectations in a small course?**

You have a small number of students, probably advanced students concentrating in your department. You interact with them intensively. They work very hard and respond assiduously to everything you ask them to do. How can you hope to distinguish among them when it comes time to grade them?

It's easy to agree that such courses are not as likely as large courses to produce a spread of grades across the grading scale. But that doesn't mean that all students in such courses deserve As. They may all be working very hard, but some of them will show more insight than others and will produce more sophisticated work. Start out by making sure that you have a clear understanding of your expectations for exceptional work, communicate those expectations to your students, and then grade the students accordingly. Some faculty members also have found it helpful in this situation to circulate the very best papers or exams with the name deleted at the end of the course, so that students who received a lower grade can see what the best work looks like.

## 8

### **What about a large course? How does a faculty member manage the grading of the teaching staff?**

Faculty members report a range of practices that work well for them:

#### **Maintaining equity in grading across precepts and classes**

- Start out by making sure that all members of your teaching staff are fully familiar with the grading policy. Take the time to come to a common understanding about what constitutes exceptional, excellent, very good, good, acceptable, and unacceptable work, and then translate that understanding into a course definition for work that would earn an A, B, C, D, or F. The course head normally works closely with members of the teaching staff to assure the effectiveness of instruction across the various sections for reasons of substance, as well as equity. Seeing to the consistency of grading across sections is part and parcel of this effort.
- Circulate and discuss with your teaching staff representative A, B, C, D, and failing papers, assignments, or exam answers. Hold a collective grading session in which you and your teaching staff grade the same small set of papers or exams, and then discuss the outcomes in order to form a working consensus.

- Another way of proceeding toward the same end: Have each preceptor rank his or her papers or answers to exam questions from best to worst; then have all preceptors read examples of the best and decide together which letter grades to assign.
- Take special care to define grade boundaries. Have each preceptor bring forward what appear to be A-/B+ and B-/C+ papers and answers to exam questions; have the teaching staff cross-read those papers and exams and decide together where to draw the line between A- and B+, as well as between B- and C+.
- Spot check the grading of assignments by the members of your teaching staff.
- As you gain experience in resetting your internal grader, practice what one of our colleagues calls “deficit of the doubt” in resolving close calls at grade boundaries. In other words, when in doubt, faculty members have found it useful to think in terms of tilting downward.

### **Maintaining equity in dealing with your students**

- Working within departmental standards, establish and employ common procedures for accepting late work, penalizing grades, and grading nonattendance or nonparticipation.
- Encourage and monitor the critical feedback and evaluation provided by the members of your teaching staff.

### **Assuring the integrity of final course grades**

- To the extent possible, dissociate grading from the identity of the individual student. That can be accomplished by masking the identity of the student (assigning numbers to students so that names do not appear on work to be graded; or, where names must appear, folding back the cover sheet and grading without considering the student’s identity), as well as by reducing the influence of the preceptor in determining final grades (grade exams by question rather than precept; have the course head assign final grades based on components graded by various preceptors).

- Review the grades from each precept and monitor the proposed grade distributions across precepts or classes before submitting final grades to the registrar.

## 9

### **By what process can a student question a grade?**

Grading often requires clarification and explanation. Calculation errors sometimes happen. The rationale for a grade that is well matched to the quality of the student's work may make clear sense to the professor and the preceptor but may not be transparent to the student who receives it. A student who questions the appropriateness of a grade should begin by talking to the faculty member in charge of the course. If the student continues to believe that the grade seems unjust, the next step would be to talk to the chair of the department (or departmental representative) or the director of the program in which the course is offered. If the student is still not satisfied, the situation may be reported to the dean of the college. In unusual circumstances, where these conversations have not yielded a satisfactory understanding, a formal appeal may be presented to the Faculty Committee on Examinations and Standing. A grade change can be submitted by the faculty member in charge of the course if circumstances warrant such an action.

## 10

### **Why 35/55?**

The working assumption underlying 35/55 is that over time, on average, across the University, roughly 35 percent of students are going to be doing course work of the highest quality, and 55 percent are going to be doing independent work of the highest quality. 35/55 isn't a quota; it's an expectation based on experience. 35/55 reflects the distribution of grades at Princeton as recently as the early 1990s. It was only in the decade after that that the percentage of As trended upward in some departments and spiked upward in others. The faculty decided that it was reasonable and realistic to return to the patterns that were in place prior to that recent spike. When the faculty adopted the new grading policy, a quarter of the academic

departments were still giving grades that were consistent with the historic patterns.

## **11 Why was it important to change Princeton's grading practices? Why do grade inflation and grade compression matter?**

The faculty was responding to a pattern of grade inflation and grade compression, whereby students were being graded in an increasingly narrow range. The grading policy is founded on the following premises:

- Grading, properly done, is an educational tool that assists students in evaluating what they have learned, how well they have learned it, and where they need to invest additional effort.
- Grading done without careful calibration and discrimination is, if nothing else, uninformative and therefore not useful; at worst, it actively discourages students from rising to the challenge to do their best work.
- Students are entitled to a fair and reasonable assessment of the work they have done; there should be a strong correlation between performance and reward.
- It does students no favor to grade them in a way that fails adequately to differentiate routinely good from really outstanding performance. The premise behind the grading policy is that members of the faculty need to do a better job of distinguishing the excellent from the competent and of holding students accountable for negligent, weak, and unacceptable performance.
- An A grade should signify superior work, and a B grade should signify work that exceeds minimal expectations. With compression, the A grade had come to cover a spectrum from work that marginally exceeds expectations to truly superior work; the B grade had come to signify work that was barely acceptable.

By grading in a more discriminating fashion, faculty members are able to give clearer signals about whether a student's work is inadequate, ordinary, good, or excellent. They also are able to encourage students to strive to do the

best work of which they are capable. Students usually know when they have done their best and when they have not. Grading works best when it corresponds to students' own recognition of how well they have done.

The second purpose of the new grading policy is to provide students with evenhanded treatment. Students in one department should be graded according to the same standards as students in every other department.

## **12 Why did we adopt an institutional grading policy instead of relying on exhortation to the faculty to grade more rigorously?**

We tried exhortation for five years, beginning in 1998 with the first dissemination to the faculty of historical grading data. Despite annual reports of grading results and intensive efforts to encourage more rigorous and responsible grading, grading patterns for 1997–2002 were no different than they had been for 1992–97, before the effort to address grade inflation got started.

In the spring of 2003, the department chairs made it clear that we were not going to make progress with exhortation. Faculty in one department had no incentive to grade more rigorously if faculty in another department weren't also grading more rigorously. So the department chairs charged the Faculty Committee on Examinations and Standing with drafting a University-wide grading policy, which was proposed to and adopted by the faculty in April 2004.

## **13 Aren't Princeton students better than ever before? Shouldn't they get more As than ever before?**

There is a strong temptation to argue that undergraduates today come to college better prepared academically than any previous generations of Princetonians—and, therefore, deserve more As. It is certainly tougher than ever before to gain admission to Princeton, but more intense competition does not necessarily mean abler students.

It's true that the proportion of Academic 1s and 2s in the student body has grown over time, but one needs to be cautious about overinterpreting academic ratings. Those ratings are made up of three components: high school grades, rank in class, and SAT scores. As for high school grades, grade inflation is as much a high school phenomenon as it is a college phenomenon. Rank in class is increasingly problematic as a useful measure; in many high schools, there are many students who stand first in the class, for example, and many high schools now decline to provide class rank at all. And SAT scores do not in themselves sustain the argument that current undergraduates are more qualified than previous generations of Princetonians. Moreover, Princeton attracts such excellent students that the difference between a 1 and a 2, or a 2 and a 3, is actually very small.

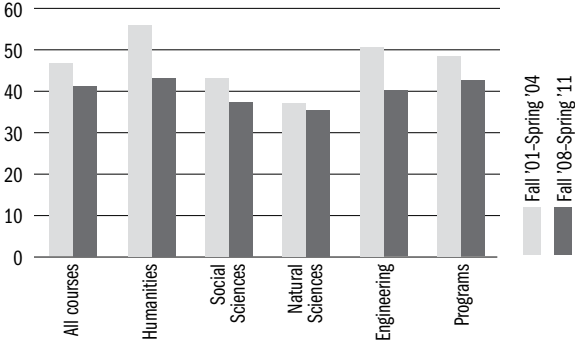
Suppose, though, that we concede the argument—suppose today's undergraduates really are more accomplished academically when they matriculate at Princeton. If that's the case, then the faculty has a responsibility to hold them to higher standards—that is, to expect more of them and stretch them further academically than we have stretched previous generations. And even the best qualified students don't do their best work on every assignment in every course; the point of the grading policy is that they shouldn't be getting the same grades for their ordinary work as they get for their best work.

## **14** How are we doing in implementing the grading policy?

We can compare grading patterns in 2008–11 (the most recent three-year period under the new grading policy) with grading patterns in 2001–04 (the three years before the faculty adopted the new policy). In 2008–11, As (A+, A, A-) accounted for 40.1 percent of grades in undergraduate courses, down from 47.0 percent in 2001–04. In humanities departments, As accounted for 43.2 percent of the grades in undergraduate courses in 2008–11, down from 55.6 percent in 2001–04. In the social sciences, there were 37.8 percent A grades in 2008–11, down from 43.3 percent in 2001–04. In the

natural sciences, there were 36.7 percent A grades in 2008–11, compared to 37.2 percent in 2001–04. In engineering, the figures were 40.0 percent As in 2008–11, down from 50.2 percent in 2001–04.

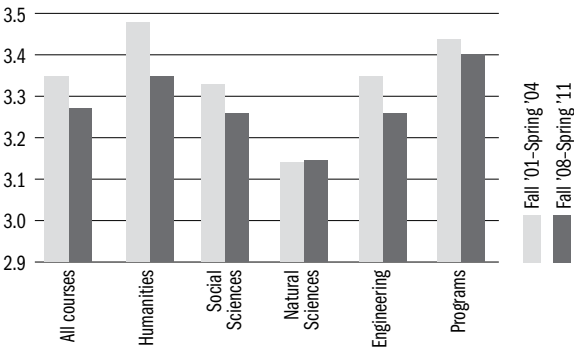
Percentage A Grades in Undergraduate Courses



## 15 What has been the effect of these changes on the grades and grade point averages of Princeton students?

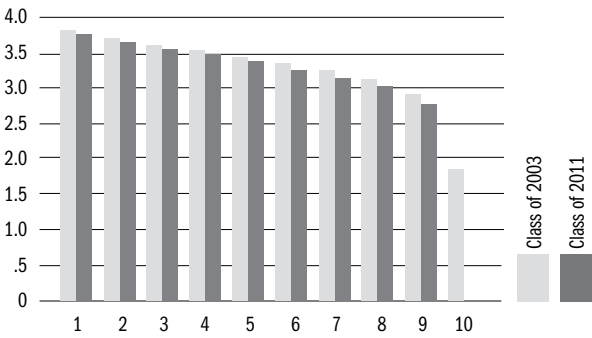
The first graph below shows the mean grade in undergraduate courses in 2008–11 (the most recent three-year period under the new grading policy) and 2001–04 (the three years before the faculty adopted the new policy).

Mean Grade in Undergraduate Courses



The second graph compares the GPA by decile of students in the Class of 2003, who graduated before the faculty approved the new grading policy, and the Class of 2011, the fourth class to earn four years of grades under the new grading

GPA by Decile, Classes of 2003 and 2011



*Note: The GPA for the last student in the 10th decile of the Class of 2011 is 0.*

policy. The GPA for each decile is that of the last student in that decile.

The effect of the grading policy on Princeton GPAs should not be overstated. The average GPA at Princeton has declined minimally as a result of the grading policy—less than 0.1 point. Moreover, for students in some of the largest departments (along with students in the natural sciences), there has been no change at all.

## 16 What have we done to protect the interests of Princeton students in the job market and in admission to graduate and professional schools?

Before the faculty adopted the grading policy, we had numerous conversations and extensive correspondence with employers, admission deans, and administrators of national fellowship competitions to find out how they would respond to our plans. They encouraged us to take the steps we have since taken. They said that if we made plain what the new grading policy entails, they would recalibrate to take account of changes in our grading practices. In other words, they would evaluate Princeton students in the context of Princeton's grading policy. They said, too, that the fact that Princeton grades would be seen as real grades, in contrast to the inflated grades of our peer institutions, would be likely to redound to the benefit of Princeton students.

In the winter of 2004–05, as the new policy was first being implemented, we sent more than 3,000 letters to graduate and professional schools and to employers to explain the new grading policy. With advice from students, we drafted a statement about our new grading practices that is now routinely sent out with every Princeton transcript.

In 2008–09, we began a new practice of writing annually to employers and admission deans, transmitting a copy of *Grading at Princeton*, along with a cover letter explaining the new grading policy. We make these materials available in hard copy to recruiters coming to campus, and electronically to employers who list positions with the Office of Career Services but don't come here to recruit. The Undergraduate Student Government has partnered with Career Services to create an online tool through which students can request that an electronic or hard-copy version of the booklet and cover letter be sent to anyone to whom they are applying for a job or internship or for admission to any program.

## **17** What's happening to the fortunes of Princeton students in the job market and in admission to graduate and professional schools?

At the same time that we have focused on communication, we also have focused on monitoring carefully the fortunes of Princeton applicants for jobs and admission to graduate and professional programs. Based on the record thus far, we can report with a high degree of confidence that the success of Princeton students in the job market and in admission to graduate and professional school remains largely unchanged since the implementation of the new grading policy. Data on employment and admission to graduate and professional schools may be found online at [www.princeton.edu/odoc/faculty/grading](http://www.princeton.edu/odoc/faculty/grading).

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