

- [News](#)
- [PWB Search](#)

[Princeton University](#)

[Princeton Weekly Bulletin](#) September 24, 2007, Vol. 97, No. 2 [prev](#) [next](#) [current](#)

Grading policy change yields strong results

By Eric Quiñones

Princeton NJ — After three years in effect, Princeton's new grading policy has proven successful in bringing grades in undergraduate courses under better control.

Dean of the College Nancy Malkiel announced at the Sept. 17 faculty meeting that the new policy, adopted by the faculty in April 2004, has made significant progress toward achieving its goal of curbing grade inflation. The policy sets an institution-wide expectation for the percentage of grades in the A range and provides clear guidelines on the meaning of letter grades.

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In a statement issued at the meeting, members of the Faculty Committee on Grading said, “The Princeton faculty has now demonstrated conclusively that with clear intent and concerted effort, a university faculty can bring down the inflated grades that — left uncontrolled — devalue the educational achievements of American college students. The Princeton faculty is working successfully to restore educational content and meaning to the letter grades earned by the highest-achieving students in the United States.”

Under the new policy, which sets a common grading standard for every academic department and program, A's are to account for less than 35 percent of the grades for undergraduate courses and less than 55 percent of grades for junior and senior independent work. The standard by which the grading record of each department or program is evaluated is the percentage of A's given over the previous three years.

With the results from the 2006-07 academic year, the committee gained its first opportunity to compare three-year averages for grades given under the new policy (fall 2004 through spring 2007) with grades given in the three years before it was implemented (fall 2001 through spring 2004).

In 2004-07, A's (A+, A, A-) accounted for 40.6 percent of grades in undergraduate courses, down from 47.0 percent in 2001-04. In humanities departments, A's accounted for 45.9 percent of the grades in undergraduate courses in 2004-07, down from 55.5

percent in 2001-04. In the social sciences, there were 37.6 percent A grades in 2004-07, down from 43.3 percent in the previous three years. In the natural sciences, there were 35.7 percent A grades in 2004-07, compared to 37.2 percent in 2001-04. In engineering, the figures were 42.1 percent A's in 2004-07, down from 50.2 percent in the previous three years.

“By any measure, the faculty has achieved extremely impressive results. Even in the two divisions that are not yet in essential compliance, individual departments have made major strides in bringing their grades down,” the committee members said in the statement.

All departments at the University realized significant gains, except for three in the natural sciences that already were grading in accord with the policy. Departments with the most ground to cover made the most progress — five departments reduced their percentage of A grades by as much as 15 percentage points, while 11 departments recorded reductions ranging from 8 to 11 percentage points.

The more rigorous grading results have not hindered departments in terms of attracting student concentrators. Currently, 63 percent of juniors and seniors are concentrating in departments that are at or very close to the grading standard for undergraduate courses.

“While there is clearly more work to be done in some departments, we continue to head in the right direction, and we are greatly encouraged by the progress made thus far,” the committee members said. “With another year of redoubled efforts on the part of the faculty, we will be closing in on our goal.”

The committee also noted that efforts to bring grades under control have not hindered Princeton students in terms of finding jobs or getting into graduate and professional schools. Detailed data about employment and postgraduate admissions will be distributed to all faculty, undergraduates and undergraduate parents this month in a new pamphlet titled “Grading at Princeton: Frequently Asked Questions.”

The committee’s statement on undergraduate course grades can be found at <http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S19/00/61A48/>. The committee plans to report to the faculty about grades in independent work later in the academic year.

[top](#) | [comments](#)