

Grading

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the highest number of students this spring — including English, history, journalism and economics — are handing out more A's and fewer B's and C's than they have in the past seven years.

At the same time, grades in major departments such as psychology and mathematics have remained fairly constant.

The Office of the Registrar only computes statistical reports of grade point averages for fall term of each year.

Registrar Herb Chereck said the improvement in grades could be happening because the University is "admitting brighter students" or because — he hopes — students are studying more.

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Richard Kamber
philosophy professor,
College of New Jersey

Chereck added that the number of petitions from students wanting to change from a graded option in a class to the pass/no pass option has remained consistent throughout each school year.

Buch speculated that grade inflation may be occurring because incoming freshmen have stronger GPAs and test scores than they did five years ago.

He also suggested grade inflation could be occurring in high schools, even before students come to the University.

"I don't think there is a simple single answer," Buch said.

History of grade inflation

Nationwide, more than 30 percent of 30,000 college freshmen studied in 1996 reported a high school grade average of A- or above, compared with 22 percent a decade earlier, according to a UCLA study.

Grade inflation has been affecting colleges and universities both locally and nationwide since the 1960s, College of New Jersey philosophy Professor Richard Kamber said. Kamber, in an e-mail interview, said many colleges and universities have failed to maintain consistent grading standards.

"As a result, grades have become cheapened in the eyes of graduate schools, professional schools and employers," he said. "Many faculty members are afraid to give appropriate grades, since they fear it would put their students at a competitive disadvantage and lower their own teaching evaluations."

Kamber said institutions that try to excuse grade inflation by saying their students are better or are working harder "miss the point." He added that an A at Harvard

University will always carry more weight than an A at a school like the University.

"If grades are to have any coherent meaning, they need to represent a relative degree of success in meeting or surpassing the requirements of courses at a particular college or university," Kamber said.

Solutions to the problem

A recent American Academy of Art and Sciences report endorsed a number of conventional suggestions for dealing with grade inflation at the institutional level, such as sharing grade distribution data within departments and schools, establishing curves for large classes and including mean class grades on transcripts.

Currently at the University, grade statistics are compiled by the Office of the Registrar, but those statistics are not examined at a total school level. Some departments such as English evaluate grade inflation and grade patterns, but others such as the Department of History don't consider it a major concern. The process is not uniform from one major subject to the next.

John Gage, professor and head of the Department of English, said he and his staff haven't found a definitive answer in the three years they have studied the grade inflation phenomenon.

"One issue for us is that many of our sections are taught by graduate teaching fellows who find it harder to give tougher grades," Gage said.

But the steps the English department has taken to remedy the problem don't include trying to impose certain quotas on faculty grades, he said. Instead, the department anonymously distributes student grades to all faculty members so they can compare their grades to others'.

Daniel Pope, head of the Department of History, said his department has never done anything collectively to evaluate grade inflation.

"We have the realization that different people have different grading standards," he said.

Pope, who has been teaching at the University since 1975, said he isn't convinced that there has been a big change in the number of A's being given over the past five years at the University.

"I'm not all that convinced it's an acute, current problem," he said.

He said more students exceed in specific courses because they are taking subjects they chose to study such as African American History.

Buch said grade inflation makes a difference when it comes to who receives scholarships and who doesn't. Grades also help to determine whether degrees are awarded, or if a student is accepted to medical or law school.

However, outside of the college environment, he said, GPAs don't carry that much weight for everyone.

"But five or two years after graduation, does it really make a difference if you had a (GPA of) 3.1 or a 3.32?" he said.

E-mail features reporter Lisa Toth at lisatoth@dailyemerald.com.

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