

SECTION ON GRADING FROM APRIL 2004 ANNUAL REPORT OF EPC

Full Report at <http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/reports/2003-04/R04EDP1.htm>

In February 2000, EPC submitted a report to Faculty Council titled “Grade Inflation at UNC Chapel Hill”¹. This report, known now as the Turchi Report after its author, documented increases in GPAs at Carolina over the period of 1967 to 1999, with a focus on comparing grade levels in 1986 and 1999. It concluded that grade inflation was a serious problem at Carolina. In response to this report Faculty Council empanelled a task force on grading standards, which issued a report in April 2001². That report was far less critical of rising grade levels than was the Turchi Report. Since these two reports, Departments and Programs have been asked to regularly discuss grading standards and EPC has been asked to report annually on GPAs. A sense developed on EPC that by this current academic year there would be enough additional data on grading since the Turchi Report to merit a more in-depth report on grading than in previous years.

At the outset, we want to acknowledge that GPAs are an important and controversial subject. It is not controversial that average grades have gotten higher over the last 40 years, but there is strong disagreement about why this has happened, what it means, and whether anything should be done about it. Very different views on these questions can be seen in the Turchi Report and the *Report of the Task Force on Grading Standards*. This report does not attempt to review all of the issues (e.g., the purpose of grading, why grades are getting higher, and disparities in grades across disciplines) that are covered in these previous reports or in the many discussions of this topic at other universities. Here, we review some developments related to grading since the Turchi report and we outline several steps for addressing rising GPAs that we believe should be studied for possible implementation at Carolina. A substantial majority of current EPC members believe that grade inflation is a serious problem that the University should address. However, a smaller group on EPC believes that grading practices are not a serious problem. These differing perspectives are similar to those found in the two reports mentioned above and in discussions of this issue at other universities.

Grading Since the Turchi Report

The Turchi Report provided information about changes in overall grade level between Fall of 1967 and Spring of 1999, as well as a number of more detailed comparisons of grading in Spring of 1987 and Spring of 1999. Here, we update most of those analyses.

Figure 1 shows changes in average grades given in the years since the Turchi Report. The increase in grades averages .0185 grade points per year over the four year period from Spring 1999 to Spring 2003. The rate of increase between 1987 and 1999 was .0208 per year. One substantial review of national trends in grading indicates that grades are increasing at a rate of .0146 per year.³ Thus, the rate of increase shown in

¹ <http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/reports/R2000EPCGrdInfl.PDF>

² <http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/reports/R2001GradingStandards.htm>

³ Rojstaczer, S. *Grade inflation at American colleges and universities*. Retrieved March 29, 2004 from <http://www.gradeinflation.com/>.

Figure 1 is comparable to what is going on nationally and is similar to the average rate of increase reviewed in the Turchi report.

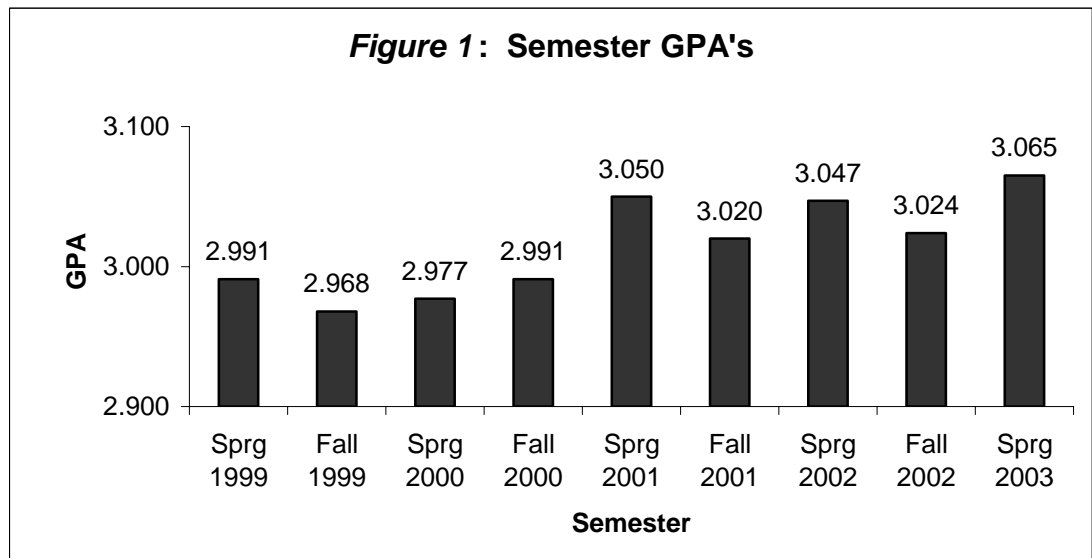


Figure 2 shows the same information broken down by class year of the students. The pattern suggests that the trend for increasing grades exists at all class levels.

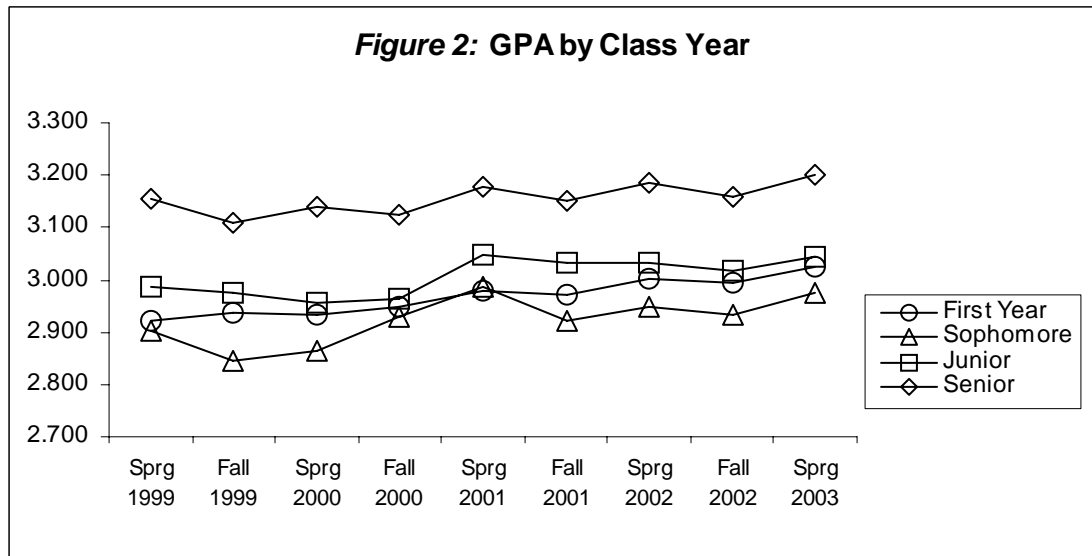


Figure 3 shows the distribution of undergraduate letter grades in Spring 1999 and Spring 2003. At the time of the Turchi Report, the most frequently given letter grade was B with A not far behind. Since then, A has passed B to become the most commonly given letter grade at Carolina.

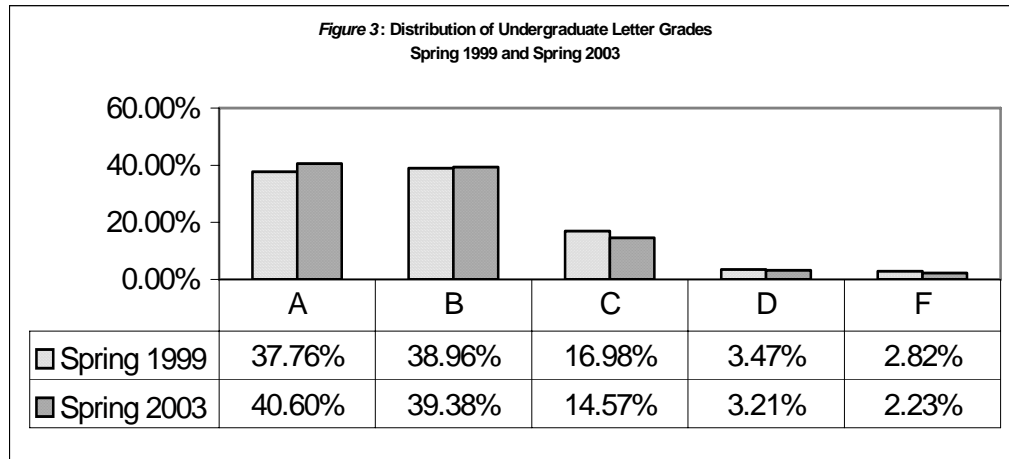
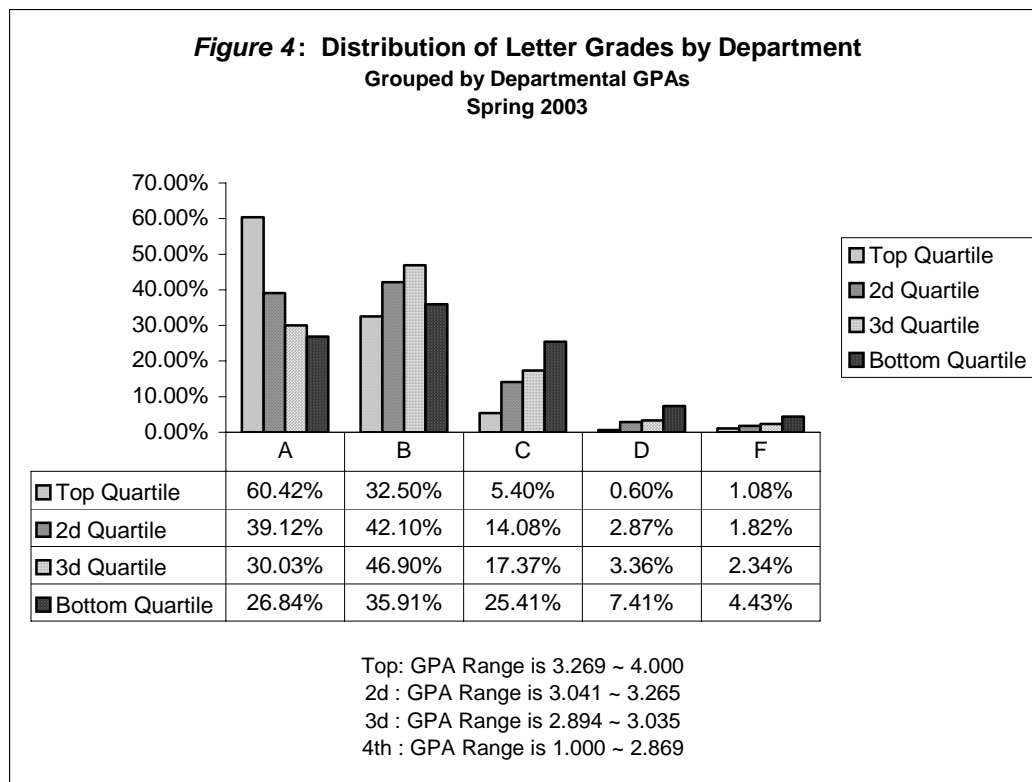


Figure 4 shows the distribution of undergraduate letter grades grouped into four roughly equal quartiles by departmental grading practices. The results show that there is very substantial variation in grading practices across departments, a pattern that was analyzed in more detail in the Turchi Report.



Pick-a-Prof™

In addition to changes in grades, one other significant development since the Turchi Report merits discussion here. A for-profit web service, Pick-a-Prof, has begun to provide information about grade distributions in individual sections, listed by instructor,

for classes taught at UNC Chapel Hill and many other universities. (Pick-a-Prof also provides a forum for students to post evaluations of courses and instructors.) Pick-a-Prof obtains grade information from the University Registrar under the State of North Carolina's public information law. At least one inquiry has been made to the Registrar from another organization about how to obtain this information in order to offer a similar service.

Ready accessibility of the kind of information offered by Pick-a-Prof could accelerate one of the dynamics that concerns critics of rising GPAs. That concern is that some students would use information about grading practices in individual sections for purposes of selecting courses. This would lead to greater demand for courses where grades are high and less demand for courses where grades are low, which in turn could lead faculty to compete for student enrollment (either consciously or unconsciously) by giving higher grades. Of course, this sort of dynamic may operate simply on a course's reputation, but Pick-a-Prof (and possible similar services to come) provide information that is far more detailed and comprehensive than word-of-mouth reputation. To our knowledge, there is only one study that has examined whether students would use such grading information to guide their selection of courses. From fall of 1998 to spring of 1999, a group at Duke University conducted a study in which information about grade distributions was made available to Duke students through a web site that tracked how students' examination of grades was related to their subsequent enrollment choices. The study concluded that grade levels had a significant effect on students' enrollment choices, with students being inclined to select courses in which the grades were higher.⁴

Easily accessible information about grade distributions could also erode public confidence in whether the University is effectively fulfilling its obligations with respect to evaluating student performance. In recent years, some of the nation's most prestigious private universities have been subjected to ridicule in the press over the proportion of their students who graduate with honors. It is easy to imagine that information about grade distributions (at least for some classes or departments) could lead to the same kind of negative public reaction to grading at Carolina. For a state institution, loss of public confidence about the performance of a basic function, like evaluation of student performance, could undermine public support.

Possible Mechanisms for Addressing Grade Inflation

1. The Turchi Report recommended that the Provost set a standard that the mean grade for all departments be 2.7 and that after a transition period this standard be enforced by budgetary sanctions to departments where grade levels exceed the standard. This recommendation was not implemented, nor did it receive serious consideration as far as we know. We believe that this recommendation should be explored with senior academic administrators in order to hear their views on the value of this approach and on any practical difficulties that might emerge in implementing it.

⁴ Johnson, V.E. **Grade inflation: A crisis in college education**. New York, NY: Springer.

2. It is a common belief that student evaluations of teachers (SETs) have promoted grade inflation because they provide a way for students to reinforce teachers for giving them high grades. (As with all other beliefs about increased grades, this view is also vigorously contested.) In an attempt both to break this feedback cycle and to obtain more accurate evaluations of teachers, the University of Washington has implemented a procedure where SETs are adjusted statistically for factors that have been shown to influence evaluations but which are not related to teaching effectiveness⁵. Those factors include class size, whether the class is in the student's major and the student's expected grade in the class. At Carolina, SETs are a mandated procedure for evaluating teaching. Therefore, we believe that approaches to SETs, such as the one taken at the University of Washington, should be explored so that any harmful effects of SETs on grading could be minimized and so that the validity of SETs could be maximized.
3. The Turchi report describes grade inflation as a market failure. Universities and society have an interest in grading practices that differentiate levels of student performance and that have a stable meaning that is comparable across disciplines and over time. However, the incentive for any individual student is to seek out higher grades and for any individual instructor is to give higher grades. The addition of ranking systems to letter grades alters the incentives faced by students and faculty in a way that might reduce or reverse rising grade levels. A simple system might convert grades for a class into ranks indicating the percentage of students who did more poorly than a given grade in relation to the percentage of students who did better than that grade. A more sophisticated system would take into account the abilities of the students in a class, by weighing their performance in other classes, before grades are converted to ranks in the class. The rationale is similar to that underlying the Rating Percentage Index (RPI) used in college sports; the RPI looks at a team's record in relation to the strength of a team's schedule (as indicated by its opponents' records) as a factor in determining whether it is invited to participate in postseason play. A normative procedure for ranking college grades in this way has been published⁶; this method was considered and rejected by the Arts and Sciences Council at Duke University in 1997. We believe that the use of ranking systems to augment letter grades at Carolina should be evaluated.

Recommendations

As stated above, a majority on EPC believes that grade inflation at Carolina is a problem and that steps should be taken to halt or reverse it. This general assessment is similar to that in EPC's last extensive analysis of the issue, as described in the Turchi Report. We have sketched additional mechanisms for addressing grade inflation beyond those in the Turchi Report, and we believe that those mechanisms should be studied further by EPC. However, we recognize that grading is a controversial topic where different people interpret exactly the same data in very different ways. We therefore take

⁵ University of Washington, Office of Educational Assessment:
<http://www.washington.edu/oea/uwrepts.htm>

⁶ Johnson, V.E. (1997). An alternative to traditional GPA for evaluating student performance. **Statistical Science**, 12, 257-278.

this opportunity to seek input from Faculty Council on how the issue of rising grades should be addressed.