FROM THE FRONT

"Be more concerned with your character than your reputation."
JOHN WOODEN

Professors discuss grade inflation, Harvard proposal

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ing closely at it" and that faculty will receive recommendations on grade inflation "within a year or so."

Faculty members expressed widespread skepticism about a sweeping grade cap such as the one envisioned in the Harvard proposal.

"The only advantage a cap has going for it would be that it would be an easy-to-implement rule," mechanical engineering professor Udo Schwarz wrote in an email to the News. "It would be more an 'expression of desperation' that whoever implements it is trying to do something about grade inflation, which is a noble goal, but can't come up with any better or fairer way to address it."

The damage of grade inflation

Professors named various harms of grade inflation — including the difficulty for extraordinary students to distinguish their grades and an increased sense of stress and perfectionism.

Chemistry professor Patrick Holland wrote in an email to the News that grade inflation "takes away the opportunity for the most outstanding students to distinguish themselves," noting that inflated grades are therefore "not victimless."

He added that inflated grades do not reflect an "honest assessment" of student performance, and they also do a "disservice" to future employers, graduate schools and instructors of advanced courses, "telling them that a student is excellent at a subject when they were not."

According to Stone, grade inflation has pushed those who want to excel in academics and are concerned about applying to professional schools to a "tiny GPA slot at 3.9 and above," creating "anxiety about remaining near-perfect." Students are afraid of exploring challenging courses, he noted, and they drop courses for fear of getting an A-minus.

Political science professor Dan Mattingly '04 GRD '08 added that he suspects grade inflation "may have had the weird effect of making students more stressed about grades than they used to be."

"If everyone is getting A's, getting a B+ or even an A- feels like a stain on your record," he wrote. "I've noticed more students over the years complaining about grades, even as grades are going up."

Not all professors see grade inflation as a problem.

Film and Media Studies professor Charles Musser '73 wrote in an email to the News that he is "not particularly worried about grade inflation."

"These are students who have mostly gotten A's all their lives," he wrote. "There is enough anxiety going around among students. More than in the past. I want to reduce that, not add to it."

A 'collective action problem'

While grade inflation may seem like a self-imposed, correctable problem for professors, they told the News that the reality is more complicated. The pressure for student enrollment in their courses, as well as the significance of student evaluations in their review process, incentivize instructors to give generous grades, they said.

Mattingly called grade inflation a "collective action problem" — a situation, like the prisoner's dilemma, where individual incentives conflict with a group's — that administrators would need to help solve.

Stone said giving easy grades is "the path of least resistance" for individual professors, and solving the problem thus requires some "top-down component," though he added that a solution should consider the variance between courses and not be "Draconian."

Junior faculty members, especially, Stone added, are "intimidated out" of grading strictly for fear of receiving bad evaluations, which could lower their chances of getting tenure.

"I mean, most faculty will admit this, that if I give a lot of good grades and there's no unhappy students, then nobody's complaining to the chair, to their college deans, and, you know, students probably will give me pretty good evals, too," Stone said.

Some departments, he also said, have also recognized that handing students higher grades attracts more students to their major and vice versa — that "we won't get enough majors if we just make it too hard for everybody."

Philosophy professor Thomas Pogge said in a Zoom interview that professors think combating grade inflation by themselves would selectively penalize their own students.

While professors may think lowering their grades does a "tiny little bit" to address the overall problem, it "seriously" impacts their own group of students and unfairly disadvantages them with a lower GPA, Pogge added. The same goes on a university-wide level, he said.

"If you do that in Harvard, then the professors are gonna say, 'This is going to disadvantage Harvard students against other elite university students who will not have that same correction made,'" Pogge said. "Yes, somebody ought to do something about grade inflation, but why does one cohort of students, namely the Harvard students right now, why do they have to be sacrificed on the altar of a better grading system?"

No to grade caps

The Feb. 27 report by Harvard's Subcommittee on Grading of the Undergraduate Educational Policy Committee also recognizes grade inflation as a collective action problem. A summary of two February town hall discussions between Harvard's dean of undergraduate education, Amanda Claybaugh '93, and students and faculty noted that strict enforcement of "agreed-upon limits, uniformly applied" would be needed to keep the problem from reemerging.

Still, more than a dozen professors at Yale indicated that they oppose a grade cap, raising concerns about the arbitrary nature of quotas and an increased sense of competition.

Chemistry professor David Spiegel MED '04 GRD '05 also wrote in an email to the News that he "strongly" opposes "any proposal to cap the number of A grades."

Students at Yale are very talented, and those in a class may all master the material enough to merit an A, he added.

"A grade cap, by contrast, would amount to punishing excellent students simply because they happen to be surrounded by even more exceptional ones," Spiegel wrote. "Put differently, it would be unfair to assign 'B' grades to a room full of Stephen Hawkings just because there are a few Albert Einsteins in the class."

English professor Michael Warner echoed that idea, writing that he disagrees "entirely" with the Harvard proposal or any grade distribution that renders a student's grade a "function of who else happens to be in the class."

"Like so much in American culture, it assumes competition," Warner wrote in an email to the News. "I will not be told that only a limited number of my students will be allowed to succeed."

History professor Dan Magaziner said he taught a seminar last semester that brought together "the most extraordinary group of students" he has ever taught. If he were to have been "forced to figure out some metric" to measure which 20 percent of them to give As to, he said, that would have been a misrepresentation of their contributions to the class and the grades they deserved.

Physics professor Meg Urry also wrote in an email to the News that under a grade quota, a student could benefit from peers' doing poorly, but she thinks students learn best by working cooperatively.

Mathematics professor Gilles Mordant wrote that a grade cap could prompt professors to make their tests harder and include "tie-breaking questions" to "identify 'the best 20%."

"Tests should be about assessing skills and what was learnt, and sending feedback to the students," Mordant wrote in an email to the News. "It should not be about sieving."

Alternative measures

Professors told the News that a sweeping grading cap like the Harvard proposal was a starting point for discussions but not the only possible solution.

Sterling professor of political science Ian Shapiro GRD '83 LAW '87 wrote in an email to the News that, while he would not want a grade cap in seminar, he would "favor a cap" in lecture courses with more than 30 students.

Pogge, the philosophy professor, said the administration could assess the difficulty of courses using statistical analysis — if a typical B-plus student receives an A in a certain course, that course can be deemed easier — and adjust grade distributions according to that data. Such a system would also have to consider the seniority of students, Pogge added, recognizing that it would be unpleasant and unpopular.

But it could help ensure that "an A really means more or less the same thing across different departments, across different courses," he said.

Pogge added that it's also "worth thinking about" introducing the A-plus grade, which could add 0.33 points to the GPA scale and solve the problem of everyone being squeezed into "a very small part of the GPA scale" between 3.60 and 4.00.

That would be a temporary solution at best, though, because sooner or later, grades would inflate to include the A-plus grade, "a little bit like what some countries have done with monetary inflation" by removing zeroes from their currencies, Pogge said.

Statistics and data science professor Jay Emerson GRD '02 noted that some other universities, such as the University of Toronto, better qualify a letter grade in their transcripts by also mentioning the student's numerical grade and the course's average letter grade, a system that he has found helpful during the graduate school admissions process as his department's director of graduate studies.

"Even if I didn't know anything about all the other courses taken, getting an A in a course where the mean (or perhaps median) was a B- tells me how the student stacks up," Emerson wrote.

In the 2023 report on Yale College grades, Economics department courses had the lowest share of A-range grades at 52 percent, and women's, gender and sexuality studies courses had the highest share, at 92 percent.

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YCC Senate adopts plan for at least 127 storage stipends

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buy too much stuff," a recommendation that has garnered significant backlash over the last week. Lewis apologized for the perception that he did not understand the aid phaseout's impact.

In an email to the student body last Monday condemning the College's discontinuation of summer storage aid, four YCC leaders — President Andrew Boanoh '27, Vice President Jalen Bradley '27, Chief of Staff Surabhi Kumar '26 and Senate Speaker Alex William Chen '28 — wrote that the decision "will be personally felt" by the 23 percent of undergraduates who identify as first-generation, low-income students. That fraction of Yale College's 6,667 students amounts to roughly 1,500 students.

The program will fund at least 127 stipends, with priority given to first-generation, low-income students, the proposal's final text says. During debate over the proposal, senators explored ways to increase allocations made to the stipend program but cited budgetary constraints as hampering their ability to do so.

Saybrook Senator Brendan Kaminski '28, who sponsored the bill alongside Chen and Pauli Murray Senator Kyler Parker '29, said Lewis had told senators at a Feb. 15 meeting that "no major cuts" to student programming were to be expected for the rest of the year.

"There's a couple things that are problematic with that statement. Of course, one is he lied," Kaminski said during the meeting.

Lewis wrote in an email to the News last week that he had forgotten to mention the summer storage phase-out to the YCC.

Kaminski touted the proposal as an opportunity for senators to join in "a defining moment for the YCC in its last session."

The language of the final proposal states that the Google form soliciting stipend applications would be publicized to the student body on Sunday, the same day as the senate session, but Kaminski clarified after the meeting that students should expect the application to be released before the end of the month.



Zoe Berg

Students will need to send proof of their summer storage expenses by May 19, according to the bill.

In a Sunday evening interview, Davenport Senator Joseph Elsayyid '26 expressed dissatisfaction with the stipend model often chosen by the council, claiming that stipend programs represent an attempt by the council to become an "imperfect, inequitable and ineffective financial aid office."

A program such as the one passed "can help YCC members with their reelection campaigns, but it doesn't do very much for the student body," Elsayyid added. He said that he did not think the timeline under which the policy was proposed was fair to candidates in the forthcoming YCC elections "who don't have that level of election interference ability."

"The stipend model is the laziest model that a student government could possibly take. It's the equivalent of writing a five-minute Google form, and then just dumping money in a totally inequitable way because, number one, we can't verify any low-income status," he continued. "It limits what we're telling FGLI students that they need money for, which I think doesn't make sense."

Elsayyid said he voted in favor of the summer storage proposal on Sunday because he felt that YCC funds had not been "effectively" spent this year, leading to "a huge amount of our budget sitting there" which could not be easily spent otherwise.

Chen, a sponsor of the bill, acknowledged in a statement to the News that "the stipend model is broken" but added that "it is only right that we provide some relief" after administrators removed a source of financial support for low-income students.

The YCC has passed several stipend proposals over the past year, funding student purchases of Adobe Creative Cloud licenses — after the University ended free Adobe access for students — and formal attire, the latter of which will soon be funded through a stipend program proposal that also passed on Sunday.

During debate on the proposal, senators reallocated a portion of the Senate Outreach Budget — which had originally been allotted to senators to pay for events they hosted in their residential colleges — in order to fund the remaining bills on Sunday's docket. Those included the formal attire stipend and a proposal creating wellness cabinets in head of college offices that will include bandages, cough drops and other health supplies.

The council's chief financial officer, Aaron Chen '27, explained after the meeting that the clawback measure "freed up available cash that was previously promised, but unused."

Participants in the senate session considered other ways to fund the summer storage stipend program beyond YCC appropriations. Boanoh, for example, suggested that the YCC collaborate with other bodies on campus, such as Dwight Hall, to expand the reach of the stipend program.

The YCC budget this year was the largest in recent memory, totaling about $1.2 million.

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