OPINION

GUEST COLUMNIST

PENELOPE WILLIAMS

Grade caps, but not the Harvard way

This past May, Harvard announced a plan to cap all A grades at roughly 20 percent. This follows months of intense faculty debate, consideration of several different grading proposals and substantial student backlash. In November, Yale is expected to release a blueprint of its own revised grading guidelines.

When responding to grade inflation, elite universities like Harvard and Yale are faced with a challenging dilemma: maintaining their academically rigorous reputation while not hampering the ability of their students to succeed. Harvard's approach — strictly limiting the amount of A's — is the first of its kind to come out of the Ivy League. It is as bold as it is foolish — the policy's stringent authority reflects a total misunderstanding of what grades are, how they develop and what they ought to be. Yale is thereby obligated to seek and implement a better response.

As student admissions become more competitive — and admitted students generally more academically capable — A grades naturally become more common. This is aligned with what A's reflect: mastery of course content. It is thus senseless to impose a cap on A grades — implying that only a certain percentage of students are capable of demonstrating content mastery is immediately draconian and fundamentally incorrect.

Furthermore, grades should evaluate student performance in relation to an overall standard, not in relation to the performance of one's peers. Implementing the latter would not only result in a skewed grading system that weighs classmate quality over personal ability — a physics section in which Albert Einstein is enrolled, for example, would be harder to succeed in than a section lacking Einstein's presence — but also prompt an endless cycle of course "cherry-picking," in which students only take classes they know they can succeed in, rather than courses they are most interested in. This stands fundamentally at odds with Yale's liberal arts mission.

If Yale wants to combat grade inflation, it should modify its interpretations of content mastery instead of restricting the amount of A's professors can give their students. This would foster collaboration rather than competition, curiosity rather than complacency, and effort rather than circumvention. Yale can accomplish such a task by introducing a new, elevated and capped grade distinction: an A+.

A+'s would represent superior mastery of content, thus rewarding Albert Einstein while still ensuring those who are brilliant, but not the most brilliant, remain able to earn an A. A+'s would be capped at — and this number is just an example — 20 percent of the class, and be worth 4.0 in GPA calculations. A's, by contrast, would be 3.9. This is a fair compromise: top students can differentiate themselves from their classmates in a way that does not seriously injure classmates'

GPAs and thus preserves classmates' chances at gaining entrance to prestigious graduate or professional school programs. The A and A+ distinction would also prompt a slight deflation in grades, helping regulate Yale's extremely over-saturated market of near-perfect GPAs.

In addition, this new A+ grade is immune to grade inflation. Because A+'s are capped at a strict 20 percent, it is impossible for the rate of their distribution to increase.

To be clear: as a Yale student myself, I am naturally inclined to dismiss any grading policy that would make it harder for me to earn top grades. However, this doesn't change the fact that it is wrong for students to be subject to grade deflation policies that firstly pit them against each other — something which is at direct cross-purposes with Yale's established sense of community — and crucially are not in place at other institutions. One of the biggest problems a Yale A cap would present is that it would unfairly disadvantage its own students in graduate school admissions. In other words, unless sweeping grade policy was implemented identically in each of the United States' top schools, it is simply unjust to force Yalies to battle each other for grades that others are acquiring by merely showing up to class. While I think "sweeping grade policy" that revolves around an A cap is inherently misrepresentative and wrong, it would be far worse if Yale instituted it without, at minimum, the rest of the Ivy League doing so as well. Yalies should not be disadvantaged because their school is one of the few with an A cap.

Overall, while it is necessary to adopt a plan that mitigates grade inflation's negative effects, this plan should, at all costs, steer clear of uncompromising restriction and overt authoritarianism. Rather than copy the example of Harvard, Yale should provide an original interpretation that puts students first, rather than school perception first. In doing so, Yale may set an example for the rest of the higher education world, elevating its status from shrewd classmate to Albert Einstein himself.

PENELOPE WILLIAMS *is a freshman in Grace Hopper studying philosophy and classics. Her column focuses on Yale educational policy. She can be reached at penelope.williams.plw28@yale.edu.*

GUEST COLUMNISTS

DANIELLE PACIA AND BEATRICE BROWN

Stephen Latham: questions asked and community built

A mentoring conversation with Professor Stephen Latham, former director of the Yale Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics, might begin with a puzzling bioethics question and end with him sketching out an entirely new career path for you. He might connect you with someone who would become a lifelong friend or tell you a story from his days performing magic in Harvard Square.

At Yale, Professor Latham's course, Bioethics and Law, enrolled roughly 485 students at its height. Since last spring, Professor Latham has retired, leaving behind a remarkable legacy. We knew Professor Latham as a professor at Yale and as a cornerstone in the field of bioethics—not only through his scholarship and leadership, but through the extraordinary network of bioethicists he brought together. We are writing because we believe his approach to teaching ought to be emulated and remembered.

Before arriving at Yale in 2007, Professor Latham served as director of ethics standards at the American Medical Association and taught health law at several universities. In his career, he authored more than 150 publications that appeared across medical, scientific, legal and bioethics journals, including JAMA, Nature, the New England Journal of Medicine and leading law and bioethics journals.

But far more important than the papers he published or the conferences at which he spoke was what he brought to the people around him, including his infectious humor, extraordinary integrity and palpable humility. In the spirit of what we believe to be his greatest legacy—his students and mentees—we spoke with some of them and asked about Professor Latham's impact on their life.

Professor Rachel Fabi, now an associate professor at SUNY Upstate Medical University, remembers taking Professor Latham's exam, "crush[ing] it," and then making a decision that would change her career: instead of going to her physics midterm, she went to the registrar and changed her major to an interdisciplinary political science degree focused on bioethics and health policy. She later earned her PhD in bioethics and health policy and is now a professor of bioethics.

Professor Carly Zubreski, an associate professor of law at the University of Connecticut, took his classes as an undergraduate and was a teaching assistant for those same classes while in law school. What stayed with Professor Zubreski most was how seriously Professor Latham took her ideas when she was still a student. He encouraged a colleague to assign portions of her senior thesis in a graduate seminar, an experience that reinforced something that would stay with her for years: that her own thinking mattered.

Professor Brian Earp, who is an associate professor of biomedical ethics at the National University of Singapore, remembers Professor Latham's ability to break down complex ideas, use storytelling and command a room's attention in a large-lecture format. Professor Earp describes Professor Latham as "deeply humane and thoughtful," taking the material he taught seriously and allowing it to remain as complex and nuanced as it was.

To us, the two co-authors of this piece, Professor Latham is more than an academic mentor: he is the person we credit with bringing us together. Before starting our master's program in bioethics, we sought each other out because Professor Latham told us to. He somehow knew, before we did, that we would really hit it off.

For Professor Latham, mentorship was never simply about teaching. He strengthened not only the field of bioethics, but also what makes academia so special—the people we are lucky enough to meet and the impact they and their perspectives ultimately have on our lives.

Professor Latham's influence lives on in the students who became scholars, the scholars who became mentors and his students who became best friends. He has a rare ability to see people not simply as students, colleagues or young professionals, but as people—with interests, personalities and possibilities. That patient attention, and the kindness that accompanied it, is what we believe makes a mentor—and Stephen Latham in particular—truly extraordinary. Yale will not be the same without him, but campus is genuinely a better place because of the impact that he has made.

DANIELLE PACIA *is a second year student at Yale Law School. She received her master's degree in bioethics from Harvard. She can be reached at danielle.pacia@yale.edu.*

BEATRICE BROWN *is a law clerk. She received her bachelor's degree from Yale College in 2019, and she graduated from Yale Law School in 2025. She can be reached at beatrice.brown@yale.edu.*

GUEST COLUMNIST

CAMILO SALGAR

A dancing lesson from Gustavo Dudamel

Two years at Yale, and I still cannot rid Gustavo Dudamel, the Venezuelan conductor and current Music and Artistic Director of the New York Philharmonic, from my mind. I know, in my heart of hearts, that Yale students must learn from Dudamel how to dance. Each month in New Haven confirms this.

What I mean to say is that Dudamel's persona can teach us a thing or two about what mastery actually looks like.

Almost two years ago, I had the privilege of watching Dudamel conduct the Los Angeles Philharmonic at a concert in Bogotá, Colombia. Almost forty minutes had elapsed since the beginning of the concert. The third movement of Ravel's Piano Concerto in G Major was upon us. The hallowed silence of an orchestral concert's first moments had passed. Like so with the whispered chit-chat that comes after the first couple solos of the night. The performers sat up a little straighter, the audience melted into the music, and as tension rose in a rhythmic portion of the third movement, Dudamel began to swing his hips side to side.

By convention, the conductor stands with his back towards the public so his facial expression is hidden from view. He casts a serious, secular figure in his dark suit, dull and grey haired. Yet mastery need not be dull, and with Dudamel the opposite was the case.

That night in Bogotá, he cut through the air, hemisphere to hemisphere. He threw out his arms abruptly, and the intensity of his expression was clear even in the brief glimpses the audience received, visible only when he looked towards the sides of the orchestra. Sitting at, or close to, the summit of classical music, Dudamel enlaced his mastery with charisma.

Here is where Dudamel can teach us a lesson. The problem is not that we are in Bass until two in the morning — the problem is that we fail to express the energy that we should be imbuing into every portion of our lives. If classical music is not too serious for a conductor to be swinging their hips to on stage, then your philosophy seminar should not be too serious for you to show how passionate you are about your distaste of John Stuart Mill's "Utilitarianism."

> YALIES POSTPONE THEIR ENERGY, CONSTANTLY JUSTIFYING THEIR CURRENT STATE OF BEING "LOCKED IN" FOR A FUTURE WHERE THEY WILL BE ABLE TO "LOCK OUT."

One may think that such an outpouring of energy is only tolerated because Dudamel has already reached the top of his profession. However, it is only a matter of finding videos from back in his career to make it clear that such charisma is part of his career journey. Nineteen years ago, being already an established conductor but nowhere near the level he is at today, Dudamel's curls jump up and down as he performs everything short of a split while conducting.

A Dudamel-type figure is not one that remains dull for the majority of their career, waiting to reach the top, jump up in the air and finally show their energy. Yalies postpone their energy, constantly justifying their current state of being "locked in" for a future where they will be able to "lock out." But if our path towards a supposed notion of success is dull and lifeless, chances are slim that a day will come when everything changes and we can finally jump in the air. As students, if our paths are not invigorating, how can we expect the destination to feel any different?

In such outpourings, it is not only Dudamel who enjoys himself, but rather entire audiences, and even the musicians themselves, as they savor his energy. We need more of those students who are unabashedly enthralled by a topic in the classroom, students who feel connected to the work they produce and feel like something is at stake when they participate in class discussions.

Last month, Yale announced that Gustavo Dudamel will be given the Henry E. Howland Memorial Prize, one of the University's highest honors. The prize serves to honor a distinguished individual who "reflects idealistic principles and contributes meaningfully to society." I believe this award is well deserved. Dudamel's overflowing energy provides an understanding of mastery that is often too sullied.

CAMILO SALGAR *is a sophomore in Davenport College studying applied math and philosophy. His column focuses on voicing an international student's perspective on University affairs. He can be reached at camilo.salgar@yale.edu.*

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YALE DAILY NEWS PUBLISHING CO., INC. 202 York Street, New Haven, CT 06511 (203) 432-2400
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