Yale College

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To: Faculty in Yale College
From: Mary Miller, Dean of Yale College

Nearly two years ago I formed the Ad Hoc Committee on Grading (AHCG) in Yale College. At that time I wrote to its members as follows:

It's easy to shake one's head over the upward homogenization of grades, but much harder to think how to ameliorate the problems associated with that trend. Caps in and of themselves are not very smart; the issue degenerates into a matter of policing. Part of the challenge is political: it's one of those "tragedy of the commons" situations, where each individual may be justified in his or her own action but collectively and cumulatively their actions degrade the value of a resource.

But there are fundamental questions that I believe we, as a faculty, should ask ourselves. What do we think grades should mean? How do we evaluate effort and outcome? How clearly do we set our own goals for our classes, so that we can calibrate student achievement with respect to those goals? Should departments have an annual conversation about grading practices, to establish some consistency within departments? What expectations might we have for large courses in distinction to small classes?

I believe that the conversations that start in this committee could lead to more thoughtful grading practices in every department at Yale.

In the spring of 2013, the AHCG brought four proposals to the Yale College Faculty at its April meeting. Two were accepted by the faculty and have already been put into practice: (1) chairs now receive every September a report of the previous year's grade distributions of all departments; and (2) departments and programs are expected to have at least one meeting each year to discuss grading practices among themselves in whatever manner they deem appropriate, with a report on that discussion to be made by the chair to the Dean of Yale College.

The AHCG's other two proposals from last spring were not approved by the faculty. These concerned (3) a change from letter grades to numerical grades, in hopes that a "change in the currency" might promote a "change in the culture"; and (4) the distribution of non-mandatory grading guidelines. The faculty's various responses to these latter two recommendations were given

very serious attention by this year's committee, which included members who also served last year and others who were new to the group this year.

The AHCG's members have recognized that the problems with grading in Yale College cannot be resolved by dealing solely with the grades themselves. Over the course of this academic year, the AHCG has come to see that the context for grades in Yale College runs broader and deeper than the undergraduate transcript, and that this context can be nothing less than our collective practices and philosophies about grades and what roles they have in each course we teach. Students have told the committee that they want not higher grades but rather clearer standards; they do not seek to work less but to understand more—and sometimes to work to higher standards. What they deserve is for us to apply the same critical thinking we apply to our academic disciplines to how we assign our grades.

Pedagogy and Grades in Yale College

Giving a grade is an act of communication between several different pairs of interested parties at once: teacher and student, teacher and advisers, a student and her parents or guardians, a student and external institutions, and even the institution and itself.

Students need more opportunities to learn from your responses to their work, and they pay sharp attention when the grade underscores the point, especially before midterm, and well before the final days of the semester. The Yale College Council has asked the Yale College Faculty to consider a proposal that would limit the percentage that a final exam contributes to the final grade to 50%. Whether or not that specific proposal is endorsed by the Course of Study Committee, and whether or not it is enforceable, the spirit of the proposal is a good one, regardless of the nature of final work. *Given the brevity of the semester, assignments graded and returned, paced over the 13 weeks of class and the 11 days of reading and exam period, serve students more effectively than a single assignment submitted in the last days of the term, when the opportunity to improve, grow intellectually, or meet new challenges has come to a close.*

If you have prepared a syllabus for the coming academic year, please look at it now. Does it provide appropriate opportunity for feedback before midterm on written work, either through tests, quizzes, or essays? Our students increasingly learn and study in short bursts: in your field of instruction, what sorts of short assignments make sense in week three or week four? If you work in a field where the gold standard of publication is or has been the book, do you have an assignment that will require students to explore the library shelves and to draw upon resources unavailable online? If online articles and databases are where the best work in your field appears, do students have the skills to mine them appropriately? In a class where the current written work is a single 20-page (5000 word) paper, how might a very short assignment of 500 or 750 words in week three or four, a slightly longer one graded and returned by midterm, and a 2500-3000-word final assignment be more effective? How much weight do you give to class participation? While the Course of Study limits class participation's contribution to the course grade to 20%, you still have decisions to make as to whether that maximum percentage or a lower one is right for your course. How does attendance factor into participation, and are you explicit in your attendance policy and in how class participation will be graded?

Syllabi of repeated courses change over time, sometimes drifting from the plan of study originally approved by the Course of Study Committee, in some cases to the degree that they no longer conform to Yale College standards and expectations. Group projects have been substituted for final

examinations or fully independent work in some courses. These collaborations may be more appropriate early in the course rather than later, first to stimulate one another's aspirations and to share research techniques; end-of-term collaborations are more difficult to gauge and grade in many instances. Some syllabi no longer spell out how grading will be determined. Midterm feedback remains a paramount concern. Accordingly, I have asked the Course of Study Committee to develop a plan to review the syllabi of departments and programs from time to time.

Next steps for Yale College Faculty on grading

Next fall, when you continue discussions in your department regarding grading practices, start by looking at the grading within your department and within other departments, using the charts and other data that will be distributed, as voted by the faculty in 2013.

Departments should look at individual courses with the same or similar (e.g. a or b; 101 and 102; etc.) levels. Here, faculty members should agree to provide consistency in grading. When students know that grading is idiosyncratic—as they often do, through comments registered in the Online Course Evaluation (OCE) system about the grading in one section or in one semester as compared to another—they may act strategically, pursuing a more favorable grading environment. Consistency would provide the equity that students say is the most frustrating aspect of grading in Yale College.

This same commitment to consistency and fairness would be enhanced by a Yale College-wide frame of reference. To that end, the AHCG has recommended that departments categorize their classes as introductory, intermediate, and advanced, and then adopt grading guidelines appropriate for each category. For example, introductory courses and freshman seminars would likely be in the first category; lectures that follow introductory courses would be in the second; and seminars designed for majors in the third. I endorse this recommendation.

In discussions next fall, I hope that departments will also discuss how to use a broad range of letter grades, with attention to such a range of courses. We do our students a disservice when our expectations are not high. Especially in introductory courses, when our students are new to the material, smartly deployed grading will help them focus on strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. I ask that you discuss what appropriate guidelines might be in your department and convey these next fall to the next Dean of Yale College and the Dean of the FAS, in order to engage the topic further.

Adopting guidelines across departments would eliminate some of the inequity that students say drives them from one major to another and will promote consistency and fairness. But these guidelines should be a flexible guide over time, reflecting the work, say, of an exceptionally good class in a given year, and in every case reinforcing the message that the highest grades are within reach of all students who demonstrate extraordinary commitment and superb outcomes.

What can you do?

Across the board, when you assign grades, I ask that you distinguish between a well-mastered set of concepts distilled from lectures, homework, and section that might appear on an exam, and the discovery of the archive, the data, and the possibilities of interpretation that would be a part of exceptional work. As faculty, we must distinguish competency from proficiency and proficiency from excellence, and engage our students, in general and on specific tasks, to recognize these differences; the expectation of competency from all students in a course should be understood to be

that of a passing grade. I urge you to reserve the grade of A for work that exceeds expectations along every dimension; meeting them is not sufficient. I also urge you to use this or similar language in your own course descriptions and syllabi.

In addition to departmental discussions, individual faculty members should look closely at the trends in their own classes. Yale grades are at an all-time high overall, and even between Fall 2012 and Fall 2013 they have ticked upward. Nationally, and perhaps notably here as well, students report spending less time every year on their coursework for which they receive ever higher grades. If this upward trend does not cease, grades will continue to lose meaning both internally and externally; our entire academic endeavor is in jeopardy. Even as we continue discussions in Yale College, I ask you to take steps immediately to be sure that grades rise no further.

New faculty need especial coaching from more experienced members of their departments. Our younger colleagues need to learn how grades are assigned by Yale faculty, and new faculty may, in turn, bring ideas from other institutions about both pedagogy and the role of grading in it that could enlighten their senior colleagues. Non-ladder faculty and teaching assistants have acknowledged that they are particularly concerned about student "satisfaction" with their courses. Research into the Online Course Evaluation suggests that overall satisfaction with a course and the amount of work it entails do not correlate in any negative fashion: rather, by and large, students seek excellent courses, not easy ones, nor necessarily those with a reputation for easy grading.

In all classes in which teaching assistants are involved, a recommended strategy is to grade collectively: when each individual responsible for grading identifies the most excellent and the least successful submission, along with something in between, we can all become better readers of written work. Use the SID numbers wherever possible, to eliminate implicit bias. In smaller courses, I would encourage faculty to identify work along the same dimensions, reserving the A for work that is both exceptional and creative. Use this language with students, where appropriate, to help set expectations.

Whatever we call it—grade inflation or grade compression—the solution is in the hands of both individual faculty members and the departments and programs in which we teach. As I return to full-time teaching in the History of Art department, I will work with my own colleagues to develop constructive ways to continue the conversations I point to here. I intend to inform my own teaching from what I have learned from the Committee's work, spelled out here, as should all who teach in Yale College.

Yours truly,

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