

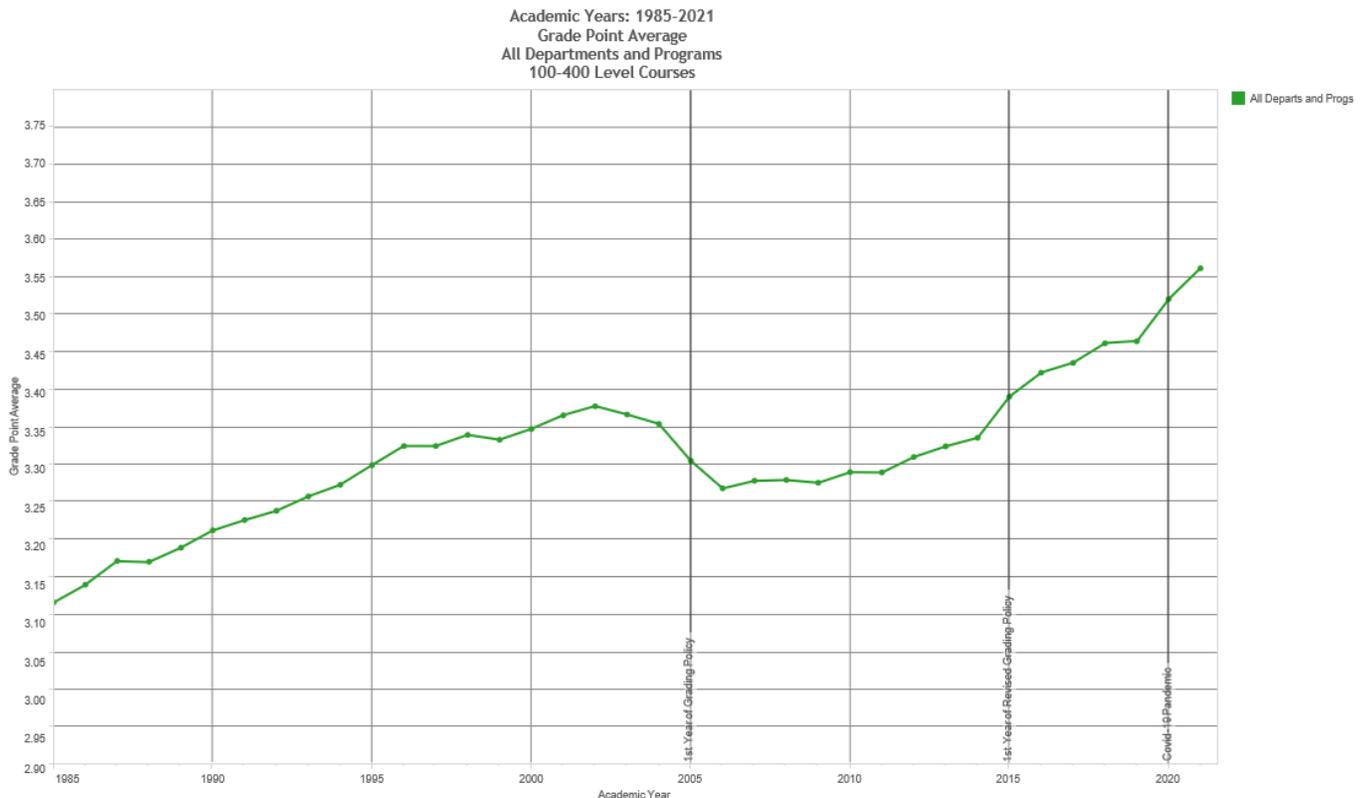
For release September 13, 2021

To promote fairness and transparency in the assessment of students' work, the University grading policy, approved by the faculty in October 2014, charges each department to articulate and uphold its own well-defined, meaningful grading standards for work within its discipline. This policy calls for the Faculty Committee on Examinations and Standing to report to the faculty each fall on the grading record of the previous year. The 2020-21 report follows.

### Undergraduate Grading Results for AY 2020-21

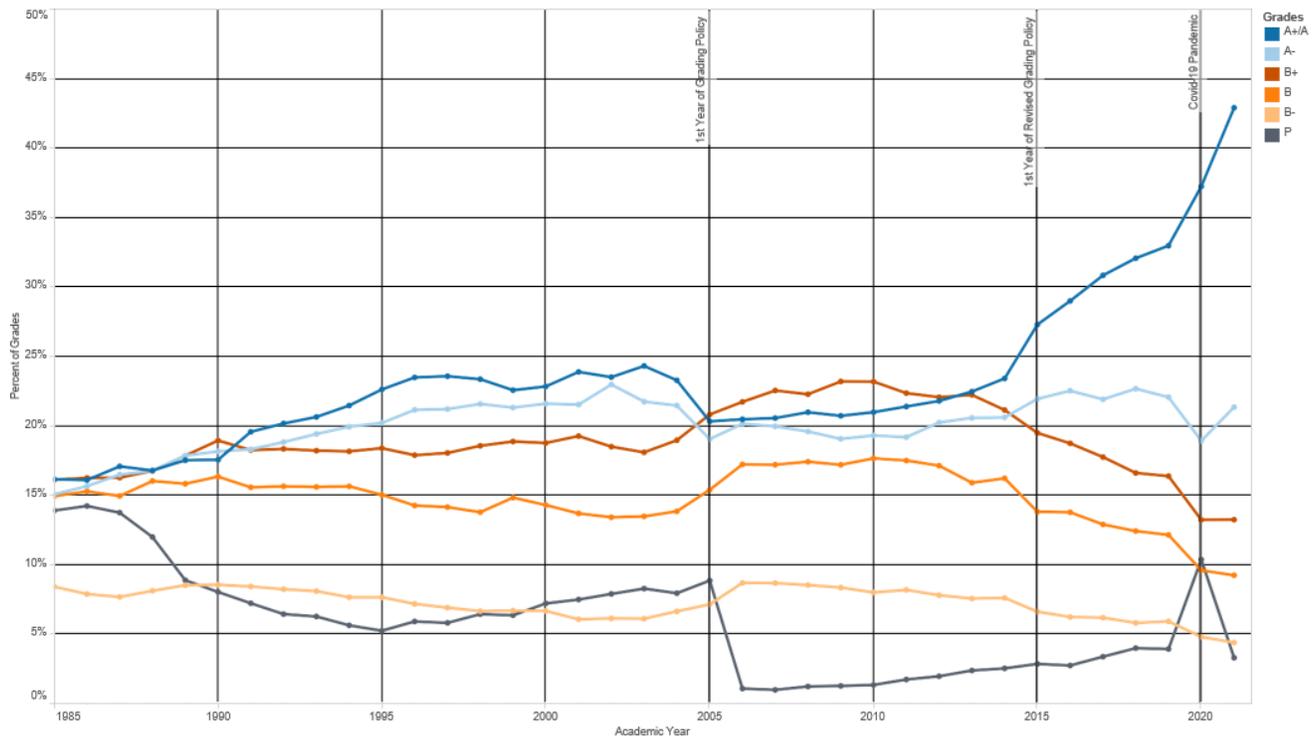
In AY 18-19, the Committee reported that the inflationary trend of the previous five years appeared to be levelling off. But the more generous grading policies and practices instituted in response to COVID-19 pandemic conditions have resulted in a steep increase in GPA during the last two academic years.

The mean course grades across all departments and programs increased from 3.520 in AY 19-20 to 3.562 in AY 20-21, an increase of .042 points. The course grade point average for the University as a whole is now .172 higher than it was in AY 2015, the first year the revised grading policy was in effect, and .258 higher than in AY 2005, the first year following the previous grading policy, which actively sought to curb grade inflation.



Grading during the COVID-19 pandemic continued to be generous, with a significant increase in the number of A grades awarded, as the following chart indicates.

Academic Years: 1985-2021  
 Distribution of A-Range, B-Range, and P Grades  
 All Departments & Programs  
 100-400 Level Courses



Furthermore, the pandemic P/D/F policy meant that students were free to elect the P/D/F option for any undergraduate course. P's accounted for 19.6% of all transcript grades in AY 2020-21; 59.4% were A grades; 18% were B grades; and 2.4% were C grades.

Last year's P/D/F policy was meant to assist students learning remotely in varied circumstances. It was also meant to mitigate concern about grades, given students' increased mental health worries during the pandemic. It's not clear, however, that the P/D/F option—or inflated grades—do, in fact, alleviate grade anxiety rather than encouraging the race to attain a 4.0.

The original P/D/F policy was originally intended to encourage risk-taking and exploration. We worry that this option (even without a pandemic) is now most frequently used as a tool for grade management. For instance, some high-performing students took advantage of last year's P/D/F policy to cover any grade less than an A to maintain the coveted but now increasingly common 4.0 GPA.

Compression at the top of the grading scale remains a challenge when we award honors and prizes at both University and department levels. (In AY 2020-21, for example, 120 sophomores earned a 4.0 [10.8% of the class], compared to 36 such students [2.7% of the class] in AY 2015.)

Grade inflation makes distinguishing students who are truly academically excellent very difficult indeed. It requires us to use additional metrics to measure excellence when awarding University prizes. We look at a student's program of study to note the variety and complexity of the courses they've taken; we count in their favor students who've taken more than the requisite number of courses each semester; and we look at the number of A+ grades they receive and the absence of self-selected P/D/F grades. This process is further complicated by different grading practices across divisions and departments.

Some faculty report that determining honors is increasingly challenging at the department level, as the light between high GPAs has dimmed considerably. The proportion of students receiving honors has increased University-wide, and dramatically so in some departments.

The Faculty Committee on Examinations and Standing wishes to underline the difficulty of defining academic excellence in the current climate. The committee questions whether the 4.0 grading scale has outlived its function as a differentiator of student performance. Are there more meaningful ways to evaluate student performance? If these inflationary trends continue past the pandemic moment, it might be time for a campus-wide conversation about our grading practices.

For now, we encourage you to continue department-level conversations about grading and to carefully consider your own rubrics in each of your individual courses.

More detailed grading data for all divisions, departments, and programs will be made available shortly to all faculty through a secure server on the Office of the Dean of the College website: <https://odoc.princeton.edu/faculty-staff/grading-princeton>.

Individual faculty members will also receive a report on their own grading data from the Registrar. Chairs will receive department summary reports. We recommend that departments review their grading results to ensure they are consistent with articulated local standards.

*--Dean Jill Dolan, for the Faculty Committee on Examinations and Standing*

*The Faculty Committee on Examinations and Standing is chaired by Jill Dolan, Dean of the College, and includes the following elected faculty members, representing all four divisions: Rebecca D. Burdine, Molecular Biology; Brandice Canes-Wrone, Public & International Affairs and Politics; Peter R. Jaffe, Civil & Environmental Engineering; Ralph E. Kleiner, Chemistry; Yair Mintzker, History; Michael E. Mueller, Mechanical & Aerospace Engineering; Paul Nadal, English and American Studies; and Dan-El Padilla Peralta, Classics. Karen Richardson, Dean of Admission; Polly Winfrey Griffin, Registrar; W. Rochelle Calhoun, Vice President for Campus Life; and Claire Fowler, Senior Associate Dean of the College, serve ex officio. The committee's charge from the faculty is to administer academic regulations concerning the program of study and scholastic standing of undergraduate students.*