



Academic Standards, Regulations and Admissions Committee

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Response to Charge S-1910

April 6, 2020

Charge S-1910: Grade Inflation

Proposed Charge: Investigate the extent of grade inflation at Rutgers over the past 20 years. Determine what factors contributed to whatever grade inflation exists and make appropriate recommendations. Respond by April 2020.

Background:

ASRAC has sought to identify and understand the phenomenon of grade inflation at Rutgers University. We drew upon our student, faculty and staff experiences on our committee and specific statistical and empirical expertise within it.

The Committee Chair RA Schwartz reached out to Tina Grycenkov Director, Data Analytics and Management of the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning (OIRAP). OIRAP gathers, analyzes, and uses data to inform those interested in institutional planning, policy development, and decision-making. Director Grycenkov graciously provided data for ASRAC analysis.

Discussion/Considerations:

ASRAC reviewed and analyzed the detailed data provided by Tina Grycenkov, Director, Data Analytics and Management of the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning (attachments 1 and 2). It showed growth curves with growth having been significant over the years, documenting grade inflation, without empirically identifying contributing factors. We recognized that this matter is a common concern across higher education and not specific to Rutgers. After reviewing data of the Rutgers University-wide undergraduate students for the fall semesters between 1998 and 2018, a consistent increase of As has been documented year by year.

One committee member recalled that as an undergraduate at an Ivy League

school, people lamented that the two hardest things were to get into the school and to flunk out, because it was relatively easy to get high grades. Another recalled comparing Stanford with easy-to-achieve high student grades with a Rutgers aspirational peer, the University of California Berkeley, with its then alleged pre-grade inflation 66% first-year attrition rate. The committee recognized that relatively recently serious concerns have arisen about grade inflation. ASRAC had anticipated that data would likely document that there has been grade inflation at Rutgers in the last 20 years.

ASRAC noted that a substantial fraction of instruction and as a consequence a large portion of grades are provided by adjunct faculty, whose continuing employment is not assured. Many studies have shown that as grades get higher, student evaluations become more positive. As a result, there is a powerful inducement for adjunct faculty who wish to continue being employed, to raise grades in order to raise their student evaluations. The same may be true for full time faculty seeking academic promotion or tenure. Rutgers has been accused of giving inappropriately heavy weight to student evaluations of teaching in personnel decisions.

Other considerations are delineated below.

Recommendations:

1. Reduce Faculty Incentives for Grade Inflation

Faculty are incentivized to give good grades because personnel decisions are based in part on student evaluations. ASRAC recognizes that student evaluations of teaching are desirable, as they can help faculty improve instruction. Since many part-time lecturers (PTLs) are eager to have their teaching contracts renewed, they are willing to give students high grades in order to receive good performance evaluations. This data may imply that PTLs feel a sense of pressure for receiving favorable student evaluations or not getting a teaching assignment in the future. Given the fact that PTLs do not enjoy job security teaching classes at Rutgers University, this data comes as no surprise. To make matters worse, students quickly learn that PTLs tend to grade easier, thus potentially reducing enrollment in classes where full-time professors may be perceived as stricter in their grading. Needless to say, full-time faculty members may also feel pressure to grant higher grades to increase their chances for promotion and/or tenure.

Thus, ASRAC recommends development of meaningful methods of evaluating teaching, such as peer review and teaching portfolios, in all personnel decisions, with little or no emphasis on student evaluations.

2. Commodification of Instruction

Background: Rutgers operates under a budget model in which units that provide instruction are treated as profit-making centers. One way to increase profits is to increase revenue. The main source of revenue for these units is tuition. The only way that this source of revenue can be increased is through increased enrollments, especially in elective courses. One of the most effective methods of increasing enrollment is to assign high grades. An edifying example of grade inflation was the creation of a course by one school in New Brunswick to satisfy a core requirement of another school and to generate revenue for the first school. To ensure high enrollments, over 90% of the students in that course received a grade of A.

Thus, ASRAC recommends unlinking the funding of a unit to the tuition revenue generated by the students registered in the unit's courses.

3. Budget Model Modification

Another way in which this budget model is causing grade inflation is by inducing the imposition of relatively high minimum numbers of enrolled students required in order to allow a course to be offered. Once again, instructors recognize the relationship between high grades and enrollment, especially in small elective courses.

Accordingly, ASRAC recommends eliminating or lowering the minimum number of students required for a course to be offered.

4. Robotic Course Scheduling

Another factor that causes instructors to raise grades in small elective courses to increase enrollment is the location and schedule of these courses. Students often make enrollment decisions based upon the time and campus on which a course is given. In New Brunswick, for example, courses on the College Avenue Campus that do not meet on Fridays are perceived as the most desirable. Unfortunately, the robotic scheduling system now implemented is

not programmed to schedule small elective courses in a way to encourage enrollment and has done the opposite in trials.

Recommendation: Consider eliminating use of the robotic scheduling system. If that is not feasible, then allow departments to designate certain courses as requiring scheduling preference for time and location.

5. Enhance Expectations

One of the causes and effects of grade inflation is that faculty no longer expect as much in order for a student to earn a high grade and students believe that they can earn a high grade with less effort and fewer accomplishments. Clearly, it is not possible to measure this factor; evidence is primarily anecdotal.

Recommendation: Academic leadership and administration should find additional ways to value learning and educational achievement.

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