



Academic Standards, Regulations and Admissions Committee

Academic Standards, Regulations, and Admissions Committee Response to Charge S-1910 March 2, 2021

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.

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:

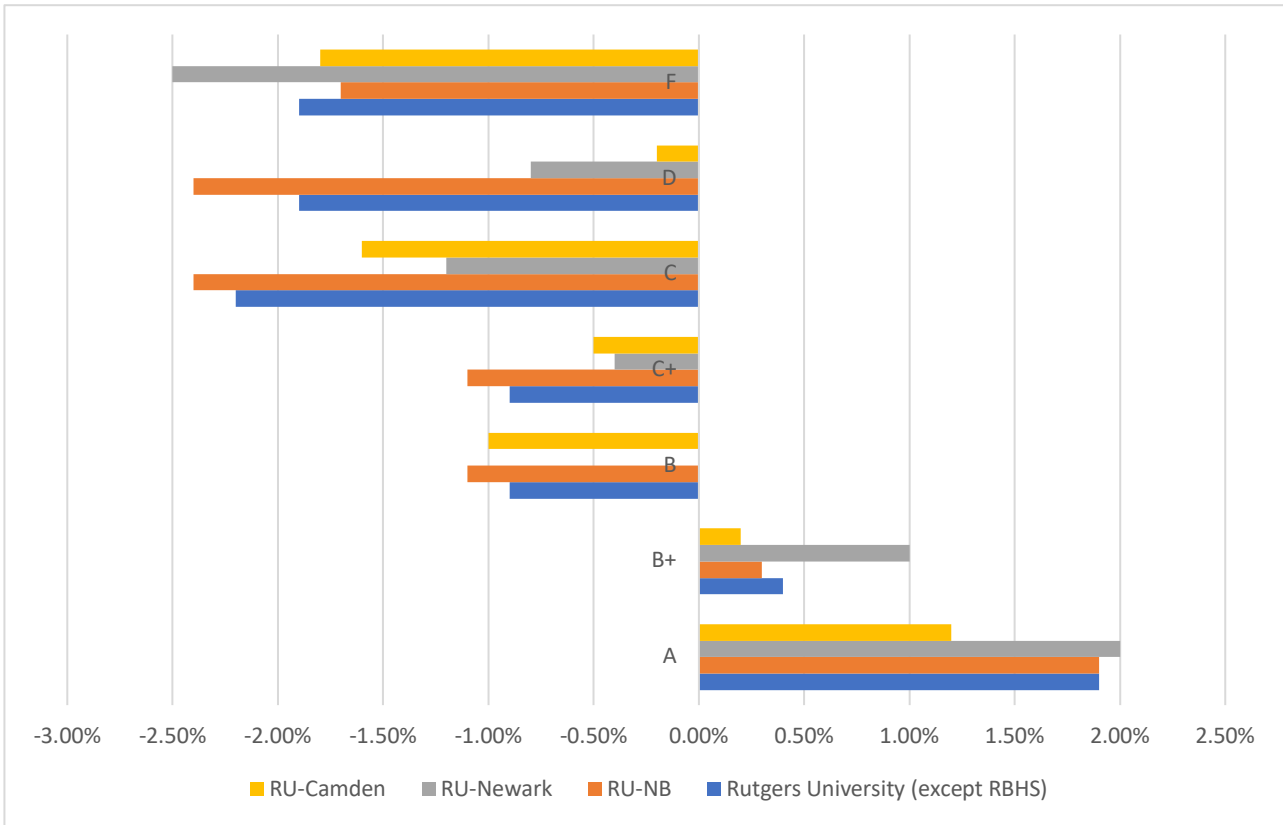
A review of the relevant literature revealed that this issue of grade inflation has been studied since the early 1960's. Several studies have concluded that Grade Point Averages (GPAs) have increased approximately 0.15 points on the usual four-point scale per decade since the late 1960s, with grade inflation at private schools proceeding at a more rapid pace than at public institutions (Rojstaczer, 2008). Numerous studies have documented evidence of rising grades since the 1960's (Farley 1995; Cluskey *et al*, 1997; Grove & Wasserman, 2004; Bellow & Valientes, 2006). Further analysis was provided by Professor Marybeth Gasman of the Rutgers Graduate School of Education who posited that in general, grades have increased across institutions of higher education with some theories grounded in research, but sample sizes were too small to draw substantive conclusions.

To empirically examine whether there was grade inflation at Rutgers University (except RBHS) and at Rutgers-New Brunswick, Rutgers-Newark, and Rutgers-Camden, ASRAC used grade distribution data

for fall semesters over a 21-year period or between 1998 and 2018.¹ ASRAC conducted a CAGR (compound annual growth rate) analysis of the available grade distribution data and the findings are presented below.

The CAGR estimates show that (Chart 1), while there was a statistically significant increase in both A and B+ grades over the study period (fall 1998-fall 2008) across the three campuses (or universities) and at Rutgers University overall, such increase was very low or negligible. For example, the growth of A grades over the two decades mentioned earlier was 1.9% at Rutgers-New Brunswick, 2.0% at Rutgers-Newark, 1.2% at Rutgers-Camden, and 1.9% at Rutgers overall (except RBHS). Similarly, the growth of B+ grades was 0.3% at Rutgers-New Brunswick, 1.0% at Rutgers-Newark, 0.2% at Rutgers-Camden, and 0.4% at Rutgers overall (except RBHS). As shown in the chart below (Chart 1), a decrease was noticed in all other grades below B+. ² Based on our preliminary analyses, across the three campuses (or universities) and at Rutgers University overall, such increases have been very low or negligible, with claims of grade inflation anecdotal.

Chart 1: Growth rate (CAGR) of Grades at Rutgers University, Fall semesters, 1998-2008



Data source: OIRAP, Rutgers University.

¹ This data was provided by Tina Grycenkov, Director, Data Analytics and Management of the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning or OIRAP.

² A table in the appendix shows additional results.

In the matter of student evaluations and grade inflation, some studies have shown that as grades get higher, student evaluations become more positive (Jewell *et al*, 2013). 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. Several studies have documented evidence in demonstrating a strong correlation between faculty rank and student grade (Ford, Puckett & Tucker, 1987; Jackson, 1986; Sonner & Sharland, 1993; Williamson & Pier, 1985). While the discussions on the issue of grade inflation among ASRAC committee members highlighted the possibility of grade inflation tied to favorable student evaluations, the macro level data available to ASRAC and presented in Chart 1 provides no empirical evidence supporting this idea at this time. Thus, based on our preliminary evidence, we cannot draw any conclusion regarding the relation between student evaluations and grade inflations Rutgers University (ASRAC will need additional disaggregated data for such a task).

Most commonly, disciplines that are traditionally more quantitative such as economics, mathematics, psychology, chemistry, and computer science exhibit less evidence of grade inflation, while courses such as art, English, music, speech, and political science typically have higher rates of grade inflation. Most research on grade inflation is based on students reporting data and students regularly inflate their grades when reporting (Kohn, 2008; Jewell, T. *et al*, 2011). ASRAC did not have disaggregated data at the major or program levels to carry out a CAGR analysis of grade inflation and therefore, we are unable to provide any information or draw any conclusions on individual programs or majors.

Findings from recent committee testimony and publications imply that PTLs, as well as faculty may feel a sense of pressure to receive favorable student evaluations in order to obtain a teaching assignment in the future. (Esarey & Valdes, 2020, Lewontin, 2014, Rojstaczer, 2008, Sonner, 2010). 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 (Clery, 1998; Freeland, & Rifkin, 1998; Thompson, 1984). While full-time faculty members may also feel pressured to grant higher grades to increase their chances for promotion and/or tenure, research evidence indicates that grades tend to be higher in courses taught by adjunct faculty. For full-time faculty, this can be problematic because students grow accustomed to elevated grades with their coursework (Grenzke, 1998; Jackson, 1986; Clery, 1998; Freeland & Rifkin, 1998). The methods that some universities have devised to combat grade inflation, such as with capping high grades and adding more “contextual” information to transcripts, have proven unsuccessful (Saffron, 2015).

Finally, some studies have suggested 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 (Crumbley, 1995; Darby, 1995; Leo, 1993). ASRAC did not have the necessary information (either faculty or student survey data) to examine this issue at Rutgers University.

Conclusions:

Based on our committee testimony and discussions along with support of data analyses, ASRAC posits the following:

1. Statistical analyses of university-level data demonstrate grade inflation trends at Rutgers University in the past twenty years. Based on the analyses, ASRAC concluded that grade inflation occurred at Rutgers University, but it was low or negligible and may not be a significant issue.
2. It appears likely from committee discussions and testimony that non-tenured track faculty members are subject to more pressure than other faculty members to deliver high grades.
3. It appears likely from committee discussions and testimony that some faculty members, such as those teaching elective language courses, are under pressure to give high grades to sustain enrollment and course survival.

Recommendations:

1. Examine the faculty incentive for grade inflation.

ASRAC recognizes that student evaluations of teaching are desirable, as they can help faculty improve instruction. However, faculty may feel incentivized to give good grades because personnel decisions, including those affecting job security, promotion, and tenure are partly based on student evaluations. Since many part-time lecturers (PTLs) and non-tenured faculty are eager to have their teaching contracts renewed, they may be willing to give students high grades in order to receive good teaching evaluations. The general conclusion of the literature along with our committee discussions is that to some extent instructors are encouraged to strive for better student evaluation scores by inflating expected grades. Currently, we do not have the necessary data to examine this issue at Rutgers University; however, based on available information on the literature and committee discussions, ASRAC recommends development of meaningful methods of evaluating teaching, such as peer review and teaching portfolios, in personnel decisions, with limited emphasis on student evaluations.

2. Examine the impact of budget models on grading.

Rutgers currently operates under a budget model in which units that provide instruction are treated as revenue generating centers. One way to increase revenue is to increase student enrollment. ASRAC urges (OIRAP) to assist with an examination of the linkage between growth of A and B/B+ grades at course and department levels at Rutgers to assess if the current budget model is a contributing factor to a possible grade inflation. ASRAC will follow-up with relevant conclusions and recommendations once the proposed examination is completed.

3. ASRAC recommends assigning the Office of Institutional Research and Academic Planning (OIRAP) to monitor grade inflation.

Existing literature and committee discussions show the concerns that higher education has regarding grade inflation and its potential causes, such as faculty incentives or budget models. ASRAC was limited in its ability to carry out in-depth analysis of the issue of grade inflation at Rutgers and its possible causes. ASRAC, therefore, recommends that in collaboration with ASRAC, the OIRAP is assigned to collect the necessary data needed to carry out additional analysis outlined in Recommendations #1 and #2.

Resolution:

Be it resolved that the Rutgers University Senate endorses the Academic Standards, Regulations, and Admissions Committee's recommendations as listed above and urges the Rutgers University Administration to implement them expeditiously.

Submitted respectfully,

Lucille L. Foster (Co-Chair)

Robert A. Schwartz (Co-Chair)

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APPENDIX

Chart 1 presented in the main body is based on the following table which shows the Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR) estimates of Grades at Rutgers University, Fall semesters, 1998-2018

Course Grade	Rutgers University (except RBHS)	RU-NB	RU-Newark	RU-Camden
A	1.9%	1.9%	2.0%	1.2%
B+	0.4%	0.3%	1.0%	0.2%
B	-0.9%	-1.1%	0.0%	-1.0%
C+	-0.9%	-1.1%	-0.4%	-0.5%
C	-2.2%	-2.4%	-1.2%	-1.6%
D	-1.9%	-2.4%	-0.8%	-0.2%
F	-1.9%	-1.7%	-2.5%	-1.8%
Satisfactory/Pass	4.2%	5.5%	-3.3%	2.7%
Unsatisfactory /Incomplete/ No Credit	6.1%	12.9%	-0.6%	4.2%
W	-2.8%	-2.8%	-3.7%	-1.6%
Average number of student course records per year (fall semester only)	200,069	151,843	30,097	18,129

Note: (i) CAGR stands for the Compound Annual Growth Rate. It is the measure of a scale variable's (e.g., investments) annual growth rate over time, with the effect of compounding taken into account (Source: Certified Financial Institute, <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com>), and (ii) all CAGR estimates were statistically significant at 99%.