

# Wellesley College's Grading Policy: Frequently Asked Questions

The Committee on Curriculum and Academic Policy (CCAP)  
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## *1. What is Wellesley College's grading policy?*

Grades at Wellesley College are described in the Articles of Government as follows:

- a. Grade A is given to students who meet with conspicuous excellence every demand which can fairly be made by the course.
- b. Grade B is given to those students who add to the minimum of satisfactory attainment excellence in not all, but some of the following: organization, accuracy, originality, understanding, insight.
- c. Grade C is given to those students who have attained a satisfactory familiarity with the content of a course and who have demonstrated ability to use this knowledge in a satisfactory manner.
- d. Grade D is a passing grade.
- e. Grade F denotes failure and loss of credit for the course.

In addition to these grading standards, Academic Council approved in 2003, and has subsequently reaffirmed, the following measures:

The mean grade in 100-level and 200-level courses with 10 or more students should be no higher than 3.33 (B+).

Instructors of such courses with a mean above 3.33 should submit an explanation to the chair of the Committee on Curriculum and Academic Policy (CCAP).

## *2. What are some misconceptions about the grading policy?*

- a. *Doesn't this mean that courses are graded on a curve?*  
No, the policy does not require that faculty “engineer” the grading outcomes for their courses. If students perform at an A level, they should receive A’s, and similarly for all other grades. The maximum average of 3.33 was set with the expectation that this is the average that will emerge if the standards are appropriately high.
- b. *Isn't this really a grade deflation policy that results in lower grades than students deserve?*  
All students should receive the grades they have earned for each course. The grading policy is not intended to lower student grades artificially; rather, it seeks to evaluate student work accurately by holding students across disciplines to consistent standards.
- c. *Doesn't this mean that there is a fixed quota on A's?*  
The College specifically chose not to adopt a grading policy that strictly limits the number of A’s in each class, over time. What is dictated instead is a ceiling on the mean grade for introductory courses with 10 or more students. This affects the overall rigor of the grading, but does not set a quota on A’s.
- d. *What if a faculty member finds that her/his class average is above 3.33?*  
As noted above, students should be given the grades they deserve within each class, with an explanation provided to the Dean of the College in the case of an unusually strong class that exceeds the 3.33 average.

## *3. Why did the college adopt this grading policy?*

Although grades have increased nationwide at colleges and universities over the past few decades, this trend was particularly acute at Wellesley College. By the year 2000, nearly three-quarters of the seniors graduated with Latin honors, and by 2002, Wellesley’s grades were among the very highest in our cohort of colleges and universities. At the same time, there was a discrepancy between mean grades in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. This not only discouraged students from majoring in subjects with lower averages but also sent incorrect signals to students about their achievements in different subjects. In short, our grading practices worked in opposition to the main educational rationale for grading at all.

The new grading policy supports the position that grades should inform students of the relative strengths and weaknesses of their work, both within an individual course and across the curriculum. Grades are intended to reflect a student's ability to meet high academic standards. If every student receives an A grade in a class, it not only diminishes the value of the grade but it also provides students with less useful information about their performance.

Two other factors provided strong motivation to curb grade inflation and grade compression:

First, a college-wide increase in GPAs made it difficult for those evaluating transcripts and candidates -- both within and beyond Wellesley -- to understand a student's academic abilities. Under these circumstances, GPA and grades are no longer useful indicators of student achievement.

A second undesirable result of grade inflation is the devaluation of the Wellesley degree. Regardless of their academic performance at Wellesley, graduates benefit from Wellesley's reputation as an academically rigorous institution. This reputation has been achieved over many decades, but can be quickly eroded if students' grades don't accurately reflect their academic accomplishments. Arguably, with nearly three-quarters of the class graduating with Latin honors in 2000, and a very high GPA relative to our peers in 2002, the college was at some risk of tarnishing its hard-earned reputation. If graduate schools, employers, and other institutions begin to regard Wellesley's grades as lacking meaning, the value of a Wellesley education will decline for both current and future students, as well as alumnae.

In February 2003, Academic Council acknowledged the inconsistency between the college's legislated grading standards and current grading practices. In December 2003, in February 2008, and again in April 2011, the faculty voted in favor of specific measures to address this inconsistency and reaffirm the college's grading standards. As described above, the grading policy dictates that the mean grade in introductory courses (100- and 200-level courses) with 10 or more students should be no higher than 3.33 (B+).

#### *4. How is this policy in the best interest of Wellesley students?*

The grading policy supports Wellesley's position as an outstanding liberal arts college with students who are held to high academic standards. By protecting these standards, the grading policy maintains the excellent reputation of a Wellesley education.

Responses to Wellesley's grading policy from graduate schools and employers have been overwhelmingly positive. Our pre-med and pre-law advisors maintain close contacts with admissions officers at medical and law schools, and discuss the college's grading policy with them. They report that the policy enables graduate programs to have a clear understanding of the academic performance of Wellesley graduates. Nearly all graduate programs take into account trends in grades from individual institutions (for example, many law schools compute three-year running averages of GPAs of applicants from a given school), which helps to account for the continued strong success of Wellesley graduates in gaining admission to graduate programs during the transition period when the grading policy was first instituted.

A grading policy that is consistent over the sciences, social sciences, and humanities gives students more equal opportunities for achieving honors in their majors and in achieving academic distinctions such as Latin honors and Phi Beta Kappa.

### *5. How did the college arrive at this particular policy?*

All policies related to the curriculum of the college fall under the purview of the Committee on Curriculum and Academic Policy (CCAP), a committee of Academic Council whose membership includes faculty, students, and staff. In 2003, the Committee on Curriculum and Instruction (CCI, the precursor to CCAP) undertook a review of grading practices at the college, and noted a pattern of grade inflation that showed no sign of diminishing.

The CCI brought forward several recommendations before Academic Council in December 2003 for debate and discussion. Following this meeting, there was extensive discussion in other venues -- at a meeting of the Board of Trustees, at Student Senate and in residence hall discussions, in department meetings and on electronic conferences. CCI members met with large groups of students (in six joint House Council meetings and in two Senate meetings), and reviewed numerous email communications. In the spring of 2004, CCI brought forward to Academic Council a resolution on grading standards and policies for discussion and debate. On April 14, 2004, the grading policy now in place was approved by a vote of 100 to 9, with 4 abstentions. Since that time, the grading policy has been formally endorsed by Academic Council in February 2008 and April 2011.

In arriving at the grading policy currently in force, the Curriculum Committee rejected a number of alternative approaches, such as including median grades for each course on a student's transcript, having a target maximum

number of A's in every class (averaged over time), or including classes with fewer than 10 students or 300-level courses in the grading policy. A target ceiling of B+ seemed achievable, clear, and sufficient to result in a significant rebalancing of grades.

## *6. How have grades changed since we implemented the grading policy? How well are we doing in meeting our goals?*

There were two main goals of the grading policy: to reverse the grade inflation that made Wellesley the highest grading institution among our peers, and to reduce the differences in grading standards across the college. We have been successful in both dimensions:

- In the spring semester of 2001, before the grading policy had been introduced, the overall mean grade at the college was 3.53, and the difference between the mean grades in the Humanities and the Sciences was substantial:  $(3.63 - 3.30) = 0.33$ , or roughly the difference between an A- and a B+.
- During the 2002-03 and 2003-04 academic years, while the grading policy was being discussed in Academic Council, grades in all divisions fell. We believe that widespread faculty conversation about grading was responsible for beginning the process of moving us toward more meaningful grading standards.
- As of Fall 2011, the mean grade at the college was 3.34, down by 0.19 from its all-time high, but up by 0.06 from its low of 3.28 in 2004, when the new grading policy was implemented.
- As of Fall 2011, the difference between the mean grades in the Humanities and the Sciences had fallen to 0.20 from a high of 0.35 in 2002.
- Under the current grading policy, the awarding of Latin honors at commencement is both more "honorific" and less dependent on students' choice of majors than before. When the grading policy was implemented in 2004, nearly half of all Wellesley students received Latin honors, and the awarding of *magna cum laude* was not proportionally distributed across majors. In 2011, just under a third of Wellesley students graduated with honors, and the 10% of students receiving their degrees *magna cum laude* was more closely proportional to enrollments in their majors, recognizing their academic performance as truly exceptional.

It is difficult to compare grades across institutions, since those data are not widely available. We do know that we are no longer among the highest grading institutions of our type. There has been some increase in mean grades in the years since implementation of the policy, but we have not seen the continued rapid growth that many other elite institutions have experienced in this period.

### *7. How is the college monitoring the effects of the grading policy?*

The Curriculum Committee (CCI/CCAP) is charged with reviewing the effects of the grading policy on a regular basis. In 2007, in the immediate aftermath of the sudden decrease in mean grades at the college that began in 2004, CCI reported its findings to Academic Council. After collecting data and consulting with students, faculty, and administrative offices, it reported finding no negative impact of Wellesley's grading policy, including admission rates to medical school and law school, and the number of students hired by firms that recruit through the Center for Work and Service (CWS).

From a faculty survey, 70-80% of respondents felt that the policy had reduced the salient problems of grade inflation: the blurring of vital distinctions in performance, grades inconsistent with legislation, and damage to the college's credibility and reputation. More than 60% thought that the policy had reduced disparities in grades between departments and addressed the misleading information that students were receiving about abilities and achievement.

From senior exit interview data taken over the four years when the grading policy was first introduced, we found that the fraction of students admitted to their first choice graduate program was virtually unchanged, even though those students were the ones most likely to be affected by the introduction of the grading policy.

Wellesley supports rigorous research on the admission rates of Wellesley students to medical and law schools and other graduate programs, and students' success in other career paths, and reviews the findings with CCAP and Academic Council.

### *8. What is the College doing to ensure that students benefit from the policy?*

- a. We provide accurate information about the grading policy in a cover letter to accompany all student transcripts.
- b. We provide graduate school and professional school admissions offices with accurate information about the grading policy.
- c. We work with CWS to provide a summary of Wellesley's grading policies to recruiting firms and those who interview our students.
- d. We work with the Admission Office and the Office of the Class Deans to give new students and their families an accurate understanding of the grading policies at Wellesley.
- e. Grading practices and policies are discussed extensively at Academic Council each semester, and detailed grading information is provided to chairs of academic departments and directors of academic programs as the basis for discussion of grading practices within the various departments and programs.
- f. New faculty members are informed of the college's grading policy upon their arrival at campus, as part of Faculty Orientation.
- g. We meet with Student Senate and other student groups to provide accurate answers to questions about grading policies and practices.