Finding the Balance Between Providing Academic Flexibility and Maintaining Academic Standards

Committee on Academic Policy

Members: Berk Calli, Jeanine Dudle, Arne Gericke, Destin Heilman, Fiona Levey, Brigitte Servatius, Sarah Jane Wodin-Schwartz, Sarah Miles (registrar), Felix Schroeder (student rep.), Ming Tang (student rep.)
Trends in student behavior

• In the last three years
  – Increased requests to extend deadlines
  – Increased requests for additional assignments and make-up exams
  – Reasons provided:
    ▪ Feeling overwhelmed
    ▪ Mental health reasons
    ▪ Sometimes no reason given
  – Increased claims of deserving better grades

Are these requests reasonable?
How should faculty respond to these requests?
Impacts on Faculty

- Increased faculty anxiety and workload
  - Trying to preserve course objectives
  - Struggling to respond to student requests
  - Cannot request health reports (privacy reasons)
Mental Health Crises

The Mental Health Crisis on College Campuses

Rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation on college campuses have never been higher. Meanwhile, faculty and staff are overwhelmed.

• WPI’s actions:
  – Mental Health and Well Being Task Force
  – Mental Health Implementation Teams (MHIT 1.0 and MHIT 2.0)
  – Campus Wellness Coalition
  – Center of Well-Being (Director Paula Fitzpatrick)
Academic Flexibility Guidelines

• Preparing Academic Flexibility Guidelines for Faculty
  – Paula Fitzpatrick, Director of the Center for Well-Being
  – Charles Morse, Dean of Student Wellness

The goal: to find a policy that compassionately balances the need for structure and flexibility, that is transparent and accessible to all students, and that allows all students some flexibility without negative consequences.

• Not arguing for infinite flexibility
Academic Standards and Course Objectives

Student Wellbeing

Faculty Wellbeing
Academic Standards and Course Objectives

Student Wellbeing

Faculty Wellbeing
Flexibility Guidelines

• CAP is seeking your input
  – Your recommendations:
    ▪ what works
    ▪ what does not
  – Problems you are facing

• CAP will send online forms to dl-faculty@wpi.edu.

• You can also email us gr-cap2023@wpi.edu.
CAP is Seeking Your Input: Grading Practices

Committee on Academic Policy
Members:
Grade Distribution Fall Semester (all courses)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>NR</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>57%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>65%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<td>AY 22/23</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AY 23/24</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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</table>

* I, P and SP grades not shown; P grade < 1% except Fall ’22 (2.6%)

- Steady increase of “A” grades (even before Covid)
  but ...  
- NR rate remains constant (or even increases), i.e., gap is widening

**Covid Spring 2020**
Percentage of “A” grades in 1000 – 4000 level courses (Fall)

Covid Spring 2020

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<tr>
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Faculty approved grading principles for projects

The following are some characteristics that faculty should use in communicating expectations and evaluating the quality of each student’s project work.

The degree to which the student:
• developed effective or creative goals or approaches,
• demonstrated initiative and originality,
• showed depth and critical thought in analysis,
• produced high quality results,
• took the lead in discussion, planning, and analysis,
• produced a clear, professional-level report with excellent drafts along the way,
• anticipated work that needed to be done and completed it in a timely manner, and
• worked to advance the success of the team.
A: This grade denotes *excellent work* that attains all of the project goals and learning outcomes. The product and process of this work meet all of the expectations and exceed them in several areas.

B: This grade denotes *consistently good work* that attains the project goals and learning outcomes. The product and process of this work meet but generally do not exceed all of the expectations.

C: This grade denotes *acceptable work* that partially attains project goals and learning outcomes. The product and process of this work meet some but not all expectations.
### Percentage of "A" grades in HUA Requirement & Projects (Fall)

<table>
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<th>Year</th>
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<td>AY 21/22</td>
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<td>84%</td>
<td>83%</td>
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<tr>
<td>AY 23/24</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
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*AY 23/24: MQP not reported because of high percentage of SP grades; IQP: 13% “SP”; Inq. Sem. 5% “I”; HUA Prac. 4% “I”*
The New York Times

Nearly Everyone Gets A’s at Yale. Does That Cheapen the Grade?

A report found that close to 80 percent of grades were in the A range last academic year. A pandemic-era bump has stuck.
Dean’s List

• >40% of the students are on the Dean’s list.
  – Higher number than initially anticipated (25% initially targeted).

• A similar problem exist for the Charles Thompson list (significant higher numbers of students qualify than originally intended)
Percentage of Students on Dean’s List (Fall*)

Original Goal (when Dean’s List was created): 25%

AY 16/17 33%  AY 17/18 38%  AY 18/19 36%  AY 19/20 37%  AY 20/21 44%  AY 21/22 43%  AY 22/23 43%

* Similar trends for Spring semesters
Dean’s List

CAP is discussing the following options

– Taking no action
– Changing the criteria of the Dean’s list
– Removing Dean’s list
– Encouraging faculty to follow A, B, C descriptions in the faculty handbook
Different scenarios for Dean’s list (Fall data): Current (4A/2B) vs. 5A/1B vs. 6A

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Current (4A/2B)</th>
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<td>37%</td>
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<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>AY 22/23</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>24%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

- Current (4 A's, 2 B's)
- 5 A's, 1 B
- 6 A's
• Ungrading practices

• Every class is different
  – Class type
  – Class size
  – Objectives
CAP SEeks YOUR INPUT

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• You can also email us gr-cap2023@wpi.edu