

## Where Stanford Falls in an Environment of Rising Grades: Is the University Pandering to Students or Responding to its Critics?

*This article is the second of a three-part series. The first established the background of grade inflation at different schools, this one is an analysis of grade inflation at Stanford, and the third will look towards the future.*

While Stanford has been nationally recognized for many prestigious honors, including its stellar academics, beautiful campus, and notable alumni to name a few, this fall, the university also made *Business Insider's* list of "13 Schools Where It's Really Hard to Fail". The [article](#) claims that failing grades are almost invisible and grade inflation is prevalent at Stanford, along with Harvard, Yale, MIT, and other prestigious institutions.

This observation only enforces what statistics have shown: the average undergraduate GPA at Stanford has been increasing over time. Stanford's official, though sometimes sporadic, [grading data](#) was recorded yearly from 1917 to 1948, was published another three times between 1948 and 1972, and then on an every-other-year-basis from 1973 until the mid-1990s, when Stanford stopped making its grading data public. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the average GPA was in 2.45 to 2.55 range (a C+ by today's standards) but was up to a 3.4 (a B+) in 1992, the last year the university released official grading data. The most recent data reports an estimated 3.5 average in 2000 and an estimated 3.55 in 2005.

Stanford's debates on grading policy dates back to 1994, though, when a Stanford Daily [article](#) reported that 93% of the letter grades in undergraduate courses during the 1993-1994 academic year were As or Bs. Only 77% of the letter grades were As and Bs for the 1968-1969 academic year. In a response released that same year, [a Senate Committee debated whether to crack down on grades to combat this phenomenon](#). The Committee debated "imposing some kind of distribution" on the grades professors gave, "redefining grades from letters to some other scale", and bringing back the "F" grade, which, along with the "D" grade, had been abolished in 1970. Although the "D" was reintroduced into Stanford's

grading system in 1975, the “F” still had not returned at the time of their meeting. However, none of those options seemed particularly appealing; Law Professor Weisberg, a member of the committee, remarked that this grading system debate was "a nightmare. Every proposal is bad.”

In the end, the Committee decided to re-implement the “F” grade, under the new moniker of “NP” or “Not Passed” in order to decompress the grading scale. As Gail Mahood, geology professor and chairwoman of the faculty committee drafting the changes to the grading system, [said](#), “If you think of grades as the slang we use to communicate with students and the outside world, we have a problem in that our vocabulary has really shrunk. We can't communicate with as much precision as would have been possible in the mid-1960's.”

After the Senate Committee’s vote to bring back the failing grade, Donald Kennedy, President Emeritus of Stanford University and Bing Professor of Environmental Science and Policy, wrote an op-ed to *The New York Times* explaining his own personal “vantage point” on grade inflation. In his article titled, “[What Grade Inflation?](#)”, he explained that he taught “large undergraduate courses in biology” until 1977, “scarcely taught at all” from 1979 to 1992, and finally returned in 1993 to the same large sophomore course he had last taught in 1977. Of the experience, Kennedy wrote, “Stanford undergraduates [today] are significantly brighter and better-prepared than their 1977 counterparts. They work harder, and we expect more of them. If they are receiving B-plus as against their predecessors' C-plus, that is an improvement of about 10 points on a 100-point scale. So we should ask whether these students are 10 percentage points better. My time-lapse answer is ‘at least’”.

He also argues that the rising GPA at Stanford and other leading universities is not a result of the university’s “pandering towards students” but rather a fulfillment of what “critics

have demanded: offering more seminars and independent-study courses for advanced students, in which higher grades are always more prevalent.”

Increasingly bright, hardworking, and prepared students and expanding seminar- and independent study -rich curriculum are a boon to any university. However, if these trends continue, Stanford’s grade inflation, grading policy debates, and spot on *Business Insider’s* list of “Schools Where It’s Really Hard to Fail” may persist as well.

