

Have Undergraduate Course Grades Increased Over Time?

In October 2017, a University-level committee raised the question whether or not there is a grade inflation issue at NU. To address this question, we analyze 94,000 undergraduate grade records for Fall/Spring semesters since 2011. (Graduate courses will be the subject of a separate study.)

Figure 1 shows trends in the percentage of A (range) grades over time. Results suggest that the proportion of A grades decreased in each undergraduate school and overall. The proportion of A grades decreased by 60% in SEng and around 20% in SHSS and SST, from 2011/12 to 2016/17. It should be noted, however, that SEng had substantially higher grades in 2011/12 compared to other schools. Overall, the proportion of A grades decreased at NU by 35% over the last six academic years. Within each school, the most commonly awarded grade decreased from an A range to a B range.

Figure 1. Percent of Grades in the "A" Range (A- and A) Over Time

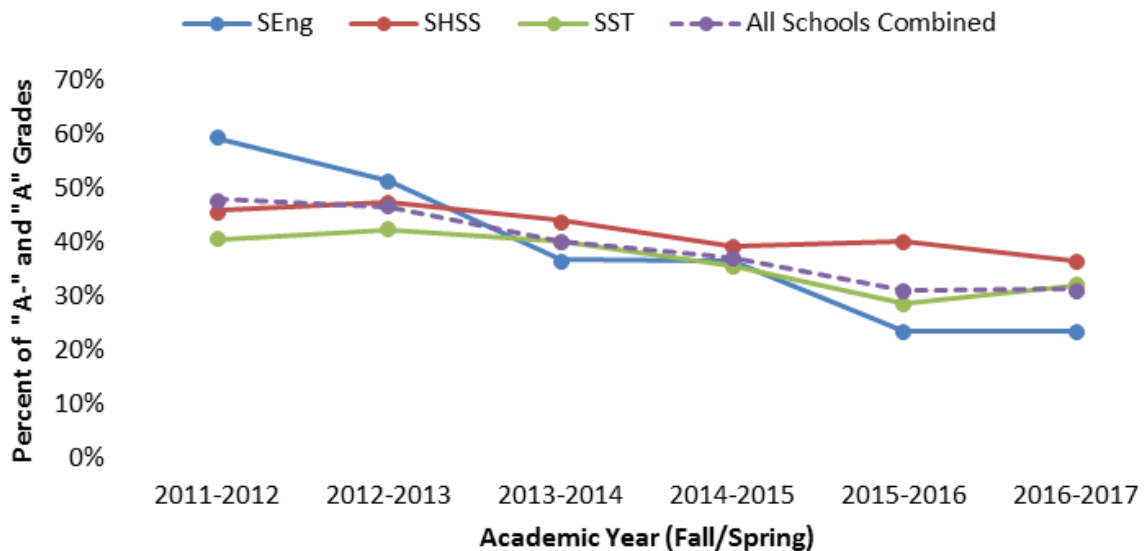


Figure 2 shows variations in the proportions of A grades by academic department/unit (anonymized). The last column shows the percent increase (positive number) or decrease (negative number) over time. Results suggest that grades vary across academic units and over time. For instance, the proportion of A grades increased by 64% in department/unit 1 but decreased by more than 50% in departments/units 18, 19, and 20. A decrease in the proportion of A grades was observed in 75% of the departments/units.

Figure 2. Percent of Grades in the "A" Range over Time and by Academic Department/Unit

Department/Unit	AY 2011-12	AY 2012-13	AY 2013-14	AY 2014-15	AY 2015-16	AY 2016-17	Six-Year Trend	Percent Change
Department/Unit 1	30.3%	41.1%	42.2%	40.1%	42.0%	49.9%		64.4%
Department/Unit 2	41.4%	53.8%	48.6%	46.5%	39.7%	49.7%		20.2%
Department/Unit 3	28.5%	31.1%	28.3%	38.1%	35.2%	33.2%		16.8%
Department/Unit 4	14.3%	70.7%	49.5%	28.1%	19.7%	16.4%		14.9%
Department/Unit 5	29.7%	40.2%	41.1%	34.5%	26.7%	30.2%		1.9%
Department/Unit 6	54.2%	52.0%	66.6%	48.7%	63.9%	50.3%		-7.3%
Department/Unit 7	32.0%	47.2%	43.7%	30.1%	35.8%	29.4%		-8.0%
Department/Unit 8	37.0%	44.5%	39.9%	28.5%	29.1%	30.2%		-18.3%
Department/Unit 9	47.4%	51.9%	57.1%	50.0%	35.6%	37.6%		-20.5%
Department/Unit 10	44.7%	34.9%	36.3%	37.3%	31.2%	33.3%		-25.5%
Department/Unit 11	56.3%	58.1%	48.7%	64.3%	56.1%	39.7%		-29.5%
Department/Unit 12	27.1%	32.0%	28.0%	16.9%	10.0%	19.0%		-29.9%
Department/Unit 13	49.5%	42.6%	42.7%	30.5%	35.0%	29.9%		-39.5%
Department/Unit 14	52.9%	47.0%	44.7%	35.0%	36.7%	30.9%		-41.5%
Department/Unit 15	54.5%	46.9%	38.3%	36.2%	30.6%	28.7%		-47.4%
Department/Unit 16	61.5%	38.9%	37.4%	32.8%	37.8%	32.4%		-47.4%
Department/Unit 17	35.9%	46.6%	31.3%	31.3%	29.1%	18.8%		-47.6%
Department/Unit 18	72.0%	61.3%	23.1%	50.6%	30.1%	34.3%		-52.3%
Department/Unit 19	57.3%	43.4%	30.1%	34.4%	26.8%	26.4%		-53.9%
Department/Unit 20	47.1%	42.6%	18.1%	32.8%	19.7%	20.4%		-56.8%

In sum, these basic analyses suggest no evidence of grade inflation at the institutional/school level over time. Overall, grades decreased over time. Departmental-level analyses, however, suggest perhaps at least one case of potential grade inflation. In such a case, the question is whether students have become better prepared for this particular field or instructors more lenient in their assessment/grading. Analysis of course-level (in addition to school/program-level) data may shed more light on this issue.

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