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Harvard's quiet secret: rampant grade inflation

First of two parts

By Patrick Healy
GLOBE STAFF

CAMBRIDGE — Trevor Cox is in the throes of his greatest challenge at Harvard University: a senior honors thesis about Abraham Lincoln's wartime attorney general. It's exciting and gut-churning, he says; it's also his first Harvard paper that doesn't feel like a sham.

Matters of Honor

"I've coasted on far higher grades than I deserve," said Cox, who has a B-plus average and leads Harvard's student volunteer group. "It's scandalous. You can get very good grades, and earn honors, without ever producing quality work."

This is Harvard's dirty little secret: Since the Vietnam era, rampant grade inflation has made its top prize for students — graduating with honors — virtually meaningless.

Last June, a record 91 percent of Harvard students graduated summa, magna, or cum laude, far more than at Yale (51 percent), Princeton (44 percent), and other elite universities, a Globe study has found.

While the world regards these students as the best of the best of America's 13 mil-



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DAVID KAMERMAN

Harvard's Trevor Cox says he has received far higher grades than he deserves.

lion undergraduates, Harvard honors has actually become the laughingstock of the Ivy League. The other Ivies see Harvard as the Lake Wobegon of higher education, where all the students, being above average, can take honors for granted. It takes just a B-minus average in the major subject

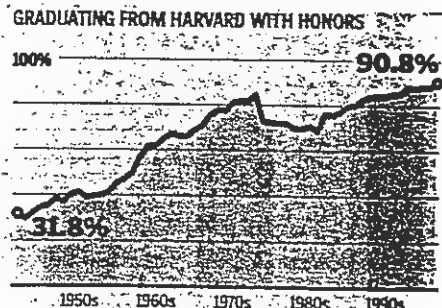
to earn cum laude — no sweat at a school where 51 percent of the grades last year were A's and A-minuses.

"Honors at Harvard has just lost all meaning," said Henry Rosovsky, a top dean and acting president at Harvard in the 1970s and '80s. "The bad honors is spoiling the good."

With Harvard's new president, Lawrence Summers, focused on improving undergraduate studies and set to deliver his inaugural address on Friday, the Globe reviewed the university's academic records and internal memos over the last 50 years to analyze the rigors and rewards of a Harvard education.

The documents indicate that Vietnam and the protest movements of the '60s led to an increase in lax grading campuswide, and that the faculty never recovered. Harry Lewis, the current dean of Harvard College, wrote in one e-mail that humanities professors today can't tell an A paper from a B paper, partly because of a "collapse of critical judgment."

HARVARD HONORS, Page A32



At Harvard, it's honors all around

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► HARVARD HONORS *Continued from Page A1*

Many Ivy League schools now limit honors, but Harvard says that's unfair. — today's seniors are better students than a generation ago, and those who do honors work deserve the distinction.

"After teaching them well, and after they perform well, would it really be fair to give them low grades or deny them honors?" said Susan Pedersen, Harvard's dean of undergraduate education.

A Harvard College education is undoubtedly one of the best in the world, and at least some of those thousands of A's can be attributed to the fact that the campus is full of high-school valedictorians with perfect 1600 SAT scores who do superior work.

Yet Pedersen also admits that grade inflation is real. As at many schools, at Harvard, the A to F grading range has unofficially turned to an A to B-minus range. As a result, the university's current honors requirements make Harvard unique: It inevitably rewards grade inflation with honors.

"A Harvard graduating class with 91 percent honors is the most impressive indicator of grade inflation I've seen in a long time," said Arthur Levine, president of Columbia University's Teachers College and an authority on grading. "Rather than singling out who performs best, they're signalling the 9 percent who perform the worst. Harvard has done away with true honors."

Besides the comparison with other elite universities, the Globe study of Harvard's honors and grading practices also found:

■ Undergraduate honors increased from 32 percent in 1946 to 91 percent in 2001, with the greatest growth in the 1960s and early '70s, and then again during the last 15 years;

■ Vietnam-era draft boards panicked Harvard students and teachers, so that inflated grades became the moral equivalent of opposition to the war, helping prevent all but 19 Harvard College men from dying in Southeast Asia;

■ 1969 was the defining moment in grade inflation: SAT scores for entering freshmen fell for the first time in years, yet the

proportion of A's and B's shot up by 10 percent and the rate of honors continued climbing sharply;

■ The arrival of 120 black freshmen in 1969 — up from 60 the year before, because of aggressive affirmative action — was partly the result of lowered admissions standards, but was not a primary cause of grade inflation, as one Harvard professor contends;

■ Graduate-student teaching fellows have exacerbated grade inflation because of their power in the classroom and a lack of guidance from professors, who are often consumed with research.

Yet no matter how much grade inflation drives honors at Harvard, the credential has retained real cachet in society. It adds luster to resumes and graduate school applications, and sticks in people's minds during networking conversations. Corporate recruiters especially value honors — some say they won't even interview applicants who aren't cum laude material. In a tight job market, the credential helps a candidate stand out. And honors is still a nice touch for the Sunday wedding pages; Harvard alumni regularly note that they graduated cum laude, a cultural status symbol.

Yet some academic insiders say that when 91 percent of Harvard graduates can claim honors, it becomes more like a reward for good attendance than for excellence.

"From age 3 nowadays, students compete to get into nursery school, primary school, high school, and then Ivy schools, and each stage they have to present their credentials: grades and honors," said Isaac Kramnick, Cornell's vice-provost for undergraduate education, and himself a 1959 summa from Harvard.

"Now they're paying \$35,000 at Harvard, and they expect something to show for it," he said. "But honors cannot speak for itself anymore."

Three wars, one campus

Between the end of World War II in 1945 and Kramnick's arrival 10 years later, Harvard Yard bustled with men who knew more about fighting in the Pacific Theater than studying for exams. The GI Bill of Rights had professors

widely fretting about grade inflation for the first time. If the vets struggled in class, would anyone really penalize them with a D?

Grades did rise, but not dramatically, and it was largely due to Harvard setting higher admissions standards, according to university memos from the period.

The Vietnam War, and to a lesser extent the Korean War, gave grades real value. Students needed good marks to stay in school and keep draft deferments. And some, trying to avoid fighting overseas, used A or B averages as a springboard to graduate schools. Honors from Harvard was second only to a Rhodes scholarship for opening doors.

"Latin honors really helped people who wanted to become professors, and many students did," said Kramnick.

As an undergraduate, Kramnick devoured political philosophy and hungered for honors. In 1959, his work paid off when he was among 2 percent of his class to earn summa (compared to 5 percent last June). Then came Cambridge University, a doctorate at Harvard, and finally Cornell.

Today he keeps his diploma in his attic to avoid seeming showy. The current honors rate at his alma mater only makes him laugh; he wonders, if more students are striving for honors, are they less bashful than he in mentioning it?

"Summa's been on my vita for 41 years, but I can count the times I bring it up on one hand," Kramnick said.

The '60s began with Harvard students demanding choice: over the curriculum, over grades, over just about everything. The faculty, meanwhile, worried about a narrow curriculum: English majors seeking a broad liberal arts education, for instance, shouldn't be



Derek Bok, who became Harvard president in 1971, said he is worried about the kind of surge of top grades that occurred in 1969-70.

consumed only with Chaucer and Shakespeare.

In 1961, professors hit on a compromise. They loosened honors requirements by allowing students to earn cum laude by taking a range of courses, without actually doing honors work in their major.

The move was significant. Honors shot up in 1962 by seven percentage points. Today, one-quarter of all honors go to these students who do not earn honors in their major. It requires only a B average overall, and not everyone needs a thesis.

That kind of honors distinction seems more than a little flimsy to most Ivy schools.

"To be an honors student is to create your own intellectual work in a thesis or a science lab — to have had a transformative experience," said Jamshed Bharucha, dean of the faculty at Dartmouth, where 40 percent graduated with honors last spring.

"If you go to Harvard, you are by definition a Harvard student, so we automatically know your education is worth a lot — therefore honors should require *more* there than it does at most places," said Lee Mitchell, a Princeton English professor who has studied grade inflation in higher education.

High grades took on new urgency at Harvard in 1963 as each week brought rumors of a looming draft for the war in Southeast Asia. To avoid it, steady academic progress was needed, and top grades would be extra insurance to dissuade draft boards from taking a Harvard man.

Graduate teaching fellows were instinctively sympathetic, since, as students, many of them found the idea of a draft chilling. And with more professors caught up in their own research and pub-

lishing, the twentysomething teaching fellows began exerting enormous power over grades, to the bane of some administrators.

"I don't believe in giving low grades," one fellow said during the first week of Epic and Drama, an introductory humanities course, in 1963. "Life is much too short."

At that, students broke into applause, said Jim Metcalf, a freshman then, who recalled the moment. He ended up receiving a B in the class, while in some other courses — several taught by professors — he earned C's. (The physics major ended up graduating without honors, "but still had a very happy life," he said recently, with a job at Hanscom Air Force Base and a daughter now enrolled at Harvard.)

Anxiety over the war worsened in 1965-66, when the Selective Service System sought Harvard's help in developing rules for drafting its own students. The request sickened some professors. But "we at Harvard felt obliged to cooperate, and did so," John U. Munro, the dean of the college, wrote at the time.

Under this arrangement, Harvard computed a class rank for each student based on grades, then sent the data to the student to forward to the draft board. Students had deferments from the draft, yet they worried about losing them if the war escalated. If that happened, and a draft board needed men, high grades and class rank would be essential to avoiding Vietnam.

"Students realized they needed evidence to show they weren't just messing around in college to avoid the draft," said George Flynn, a historian and author of "The Draft, 1940-1973."

"The war just set off inflation at Harvard," said Henry Rosovsky, who joined the economics faculty in 1965. "Professors gave higher grades to protect them."

Rosovsky, now retired and working on a research project about grade inflation with other scholars at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, demurred on whether he himself inflated grades. "It's a very hard question for me to answer," he said. "If I did anything like that, it wasn't con-

sciously."

In the end, very few Harvard men were called to serve. For Rosovsky, perhaps the most powerful symbol of grade inflation is above the pews in Memorial Church, on campus. There, a small, gold-plated plaque lists the undergraduates who lost their lives in Vietnam. It has only 19 names.

Across from it is a huge stone-faced wall etched with the names of hundreds of students who died in World War II.

"Vietnam was our class-based war, no question," Rosovsky said.

No time for finals

By 1966, many students spent as much time organizing protests as writing papers. Any high-profile event on campus was ripe for a demonstration. More than 1,000 students screamed "Murderer!" at Defense Secretary Robert McNamara as he tried to drive through campus for a speech; he was finally escorted by police. The next year, students barricaded a recruiter from napalm-maker Dow Chemical in Mallinckrodt Lab for several hours, until faculty "worked out conditions for his release," according to one memo written in the aftermath.

The Social Relations Department, a locus of antiwar thought, even hired outside protesters to teach and grade students.

"The TF's (teaching fellows) went into the streets and hired people who had no academic ability at all to run class sections," said John Dunlop, a faculty leader and economics professor at the time, who later became US Labor Secretary under Nixon. "There were

plenty of grading abuses, when grades were even given."

The taste of power drove students to seek more control over education as well. And time and again, the faculty bent.

Classes were sporadically cancelled. In 1967 and '68, professors encouraged the use of plus and minus grades; broadened options like pass/fail marks and student-designed independent study; and eased tough foreign language requirements. "A flight from grades," as one dean said in 1968.

"Professors were being told to get with it," said Theda Skocpol, a government and sociology scholar who had just started teaching at Harvard. "And the professors, in general, loosened up. Once that happens, it's very hard to tighten back up."

There were so many powder-keg issues on campus that faculty began retreating deeper into their labs and libraries. One volatile topic was racial diversity. Harvard had been enrolling a few dozen black freshmen each year, but protesters began demanding more, as well as a degree-granting Department of Afro-American Studies.

Harvard aggressively targeted the nation's ghettos as part of an affirmative action campaign in 1968-69. Officials wanted a broader socioeconomic, as well as racial, spectrum. And in the fall of '69, about 120 black freshmen arrived in the Yard, almost twice as many as the previous year.

Many of them struggled. Derek Bok, who became president of Harvard in 1971, said this was inevitable for students whose high schools were anything but An-

dover and Exeter. "That created some academic difficulties, because of the big adjustment to Harvard," Bok said.

That freshman class in 1969 had some of the worst SAT scores Harvard had seen in years. The top percentile of test-takers — mostly white students from prep schools — had an average of 1561, down seven points from 1968, according to records. The two lowest percentiles — many of them less affluent and less prepared academically for college work — scored 1280 and 1134, a decline of 37 and 28 points respectively.

A weak freshmen class usually would lower grade averages, but the opposite was true in 1969-70. The proportion of A's and B's overall grew by about 10 percent. And

honors spiked up. The freshmen of 1969 ended up earning more honors than previous groups — and they were arguably not better students, as the university asserts today. About 77.5 percent of them earned honors in 1973, compared to 69 percent in 1969.

Did race play a role in grade inflation? Harvey Mansfield, then and now a professor of government and a social conservative, says yes. He argues that the lax grading culture led professors and teaching fellows to indulge their more liberal sympathies and inflate grades in order to create a level playing field for black students, who would have done worse than whites otherwise.

This theory is offensive to many and roundly dismissed by current Harvard officials. In private, however, former officials say that black and white students both benefited from grade creep when they were on the cusp of a higher mark. Academic records from the 1960s show that the draft and faculty votes on grading had a much more pervasive impact on grade inflation than 120 black freshmen sprinkled among hundreds of classrooms.

It's conceivable that the human impulse was to not give black students D's, but it doesn't explain the grade inflation up the line," Bok said in a recent interview.

Mansfield still discusses his views on race in the hopes that it will spur Harvard into, first, proving him right or wrong, and second, publicly acknowledging grade inflation as a major problem.

"One professor follows another here — I give high grades because others do, and I don't want my students to suffer," Mansfield said. "Action must be taken university-wide."

What worries Bok more than grade inflation is the kind of surge of top grades that happened in 1969-70. In May 1970, after Ohio National Guardsmen shot and killed four students at Kent State, the faculty made spring finals optional, and went on record supporting students who were drawn away from their academic work

and into direct political activity," according to a 1970 faculty memo.

"Things got excessive that year," Bok said. "I think you can't force people to conform on grading, but you can try to find a way to stabilize the number of categories by which you distinguish different students' work. I think that conversation could be healthy today."

His friend and former dean, Rosovsky, agrees.

"One of the problems is that very few standards are ever discussed. What is a B-plus? What is an A-minus? It's assumed people will know what to do when grading. But I think that's a faulty assumption now," he said.

A or A-minus?

When Bok became president in 1971, the protest culture was ebbing on campus. Many in the Students for a Democratic Society — who had roughed up deans during a takeover of University Hall in 1969, only to be ejected violently by police the next day — had graduated (with honors, in some cases). The "crisis" was passing, officials felt, and an attempt to save learning and grading was needed.

One study by historian Ernest May, a dean at the time, found that departments graded and awarded honors quite differently. Bok hated that. History and literature majors like Frank Rich, class of 1971, were able to graduate magna while some peers in the hard sciences were on a steep grading curve that drove marks down.

"This was the period of really shifting cultural values, and grades were a part of that," said Rich, who is now a New York Times columnist. "You practically had to write '(expletive) you' on a blue book to flunk out."

To provide more unity, Harvard crafted a core curriculum. One of the goals was to return more professors to the classroom and reduce grade inflation by the teaching fellows.

Rosovsky, who led this effort as dean of the faculty, also worked with professors to develop tougher rules for honors. In their first year,

1978, honors declined from 85 percent to 73 percent. By 1985, it had fallen to just under 69 percent.

But high grades never really slid downward. The A grades returned in earnest in the mid '80s, and honors took off again, to 80 percent in 1990 and 91 percent this past June.

For students like Richard John, the obsession with high grades only grew with time. John, a fresh-

honors would help him in a crowded academic field, he dreamed of summa.

John avoided a few legendary tough graders, and he carefully steered his way past the Marxists in his social studies department who demanded more ideology than he gave. And he benefited from a faculty culture that didn't emphasize careful grading. In one of Professor Daniel Bell's sociology courses, John remembers turning in a paper on economic development that came back more honored than assessed.

"He didn't make any comments on it and gave me an A," John said. "He didn't have a [teaching fellow], which was good. But I don't think he spent a lot of time on the paper."

John graduated magna in 1981 and went on to become a teaching fellow at Harvard, where he saw the arbitrariness of grading in a new light. He and another teaching fellow once argued over honors for a student who, the other fellow felt, hadn't properly criticized Horace Mann's views on American education in a paper.

"The TF's judgment was based on shallow, ideological grounds, and he blocked the student from getting magna," said John, who is now an associate professor of history at the University of Illinois at Chicago. "I felt she deserved a magna, and still do. I really feel quite bad about that."

Last spring, after French grammar teaching fellow

Mahalia Gayle had given her students their final grades, she received e-mail from two of them begging for higher marks. One young man wanted an A-minus upped to an A because, he said, his class participation was strong and his homework was always thoughtful and complete.

"We had a long argument but I made it clear he was getting an A-minus — one, I had calculated the grade; two, it was already at the registrar; and three, I don't negotiate," Gayle said.

"It was charming in a way," she added. "I think he'll do very well in life."

Corporate recruiters are indeed looking for academic stars,

very good, but honors certainly helps it along," said M.J. Wheble, national manager of campus recruiting for Deloitte & Touche. "It indicated someone has really worked hard."

Over the last decade or so, deans at Harvard have made stabs at discouraging grade inflation, such as regularly informing faculty about how fast A's are rising. But the prerogative for controlling grades belongs to the professors. And ever since Rosovsky, the deans have either marched in lockstep with tradition or chosen not to take the faculty on.

The current dean of the college, Lewis, wrote a memo last spring linking grade inflation to better students, but he also blamed it on "the collapse of critical judgment in the humanities and some of the social sciences." Yet what can be done? Lewis wrote, noting the power of the faculty's dean, Jeremy Knowles, and a largely failed effort by Princeton to rein in grades. Lewis and Knowles declined comment.

The humanities are indeed a harbor for A's, which account for half of all the grades given in those classes; humanities professors teach about 30 percent of Harvard students. The hard sciences enroll a similar proportion and give more B's, while the social sciences enroll about 50 percent and fall toward the middle of grading trends.

Alexandra Mack, a 1991 anthropology major, received a C in calculus and a B-minus in Stephen Jay Gould's evolution class, but recalls breezing through one humanities exam by simply regurgitating the professor's ideas.

"The comments back from the professor were 'great insights, great thoughts,'" Mack

said. "I felt, I'm glad you think I'm brilliant, but c'mon."

Still, renaissance literature scholar Stephen Greenblatt, a University Professor in the Humanities, says a lack of critical judgment isn't the issue — it's that Harvard simply has better students than other colleges. He uses words like "astonishing" and "amazing" to describe his stu-

dents' papers.

"A very remarkable number of these projects are publishable quality," Greenblatt said. "Is someone who graduates summa cum laude at a less selective university really the same as a summa at Harvard or Yale?"

Summa, in fact, is the one honor that Harvard officials have taken steps to protect. In 1996, the number of highest honors jumped from 79 (or 5 percent of degrees) to 115 (about 8 percent), infuriating some professors. They then decided to cap summa at 5 percent and required that these students

earn almost all A's, receive an endorsement from a special summa committee, and almost always write a thesis or other project.

Yet while Yale and others cap other honors categories as well, Harvard worries far less. Cum laude, which can be earned either with a B-minus in the major or a B average overall, was given to a total of about 50 percent of graduates last spring. About 36 percent earned magna by having a B-plus average, usually a thesis, and a recommendation from their department.

While Harvard and other Ivies have talked about joining together to deflate grades — to avoid a unilateral change that might hurt a given school's students who apply to graduate school — that step seems unlikely.

"It would be hard to motivate our faculty to do something different about grading because the Cornell faculty thinks it should," said Jeff Wolcowitz, Harvard's associate dean of undergraduate education.

But some say that as long as grades and honors continue to rise, Harvard is raising doubts about the integrity of its own diploma.

"It's a good time for Summers and the faculty to reconsider how they grade and give honors," said Professor John, the magna from

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RICHARD JOHN, professor

1981. "It wouldn't hurt Harvard one bit to get a reputation for being tough."

President Summers declined to be interviewed for this article. Officials say he wants to address undergraduate issues at his inauguration on Friday, but Dean Pedersen also notes that grading and honors have not been a major concern of his. She hopes to at least start the faculty talking seriously this fall about the issues of grading and evaluating students.

Trevor Cox, meanwhile, is graduating in a matter of months, and is therefore prone to reckoning. He is among those who say they would sacrifice easy honors for more rigor: More comments on papers, more challenges from faculty members, more direction in his studies, more grades that made him buckle down. Cox says he is putting his all into the Lincoln thesis, but he knows he won't have to sweat it too much. Honors is guaranteed.

"You'd think I'm not competitive enough to care about honors, but I'd feel dumb if I was among the 9 percent who *don't* get it," Cox said. "I think magna is within my reach — which is criminal, really."

Tomorrow: What it takes to earn honors at other top colleges.

Patrick Healy can be reached by e-mail at phealy@globe.com.

Harvard's honors system

The Vietnam draft, campus unrest in the late 1960s, and grade inflation have sapped the university's highest status symbol of meaning, officials say.

1946 Enrollment of World War II veterans surges; first sign of grade inflation, former Harvard President Neil Rudenstine says.

1961 Harvard faculty eases rules for graduating with honors.

1965 Many students, hoping to avoid the draft, grow increasingly anxious about class rank; Harvard sees signs of grade inflation.

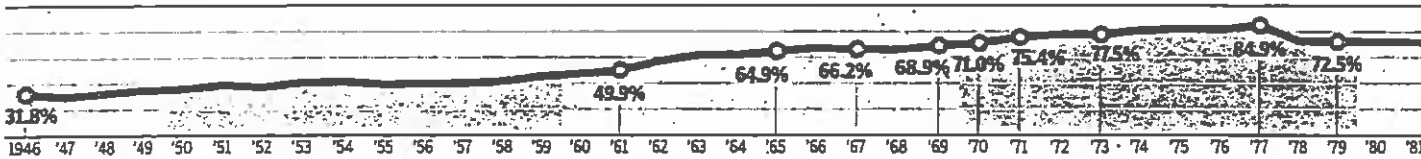
1967 Faculty adds flexibility to grading, stoking concerns about grade inflation.

1969 In April, antiwar protesters seize University Hall; police oust them a day later. In the fall, new affirmative action policy enrolls many more black freshmen. SAT scores for the freshmen class fall sharply, but A's and B's increase.

1970 Harvard faculty further loosens grading in the face of antiwar protests. It makes spring finals optional.

1971 Internal report says Harvard grading, honors are erratic and that too many graduate students are teaching classes.

1973 Hoping to stop grade inflation, faculty allows greater use of satisfactory/unsatisfactory instead of grades.



SOURCE: Harvard University archives

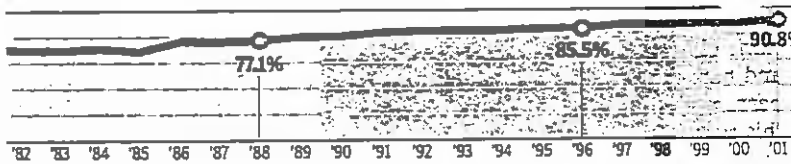
1977 Under Dean Henry Rosovsky, a new core curriculum is designed; rules for honors are toughened.

1979 First year of Harvard/Radcliffe official merger; women are included in honors rates.

1988 Harvard faculty dean warns of grade inflation; A's become increasingly common.

1996 After bulge in highest honors, Harvard caps them, appoints panel to review "outstanding work."

2001 Harvard honors exceed 90 percent; new President, Lawrence H. Summers takes office.



GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC/PATRICK HEALY, HWEI WEN FOX



GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/DOMINIC CHAVEZ

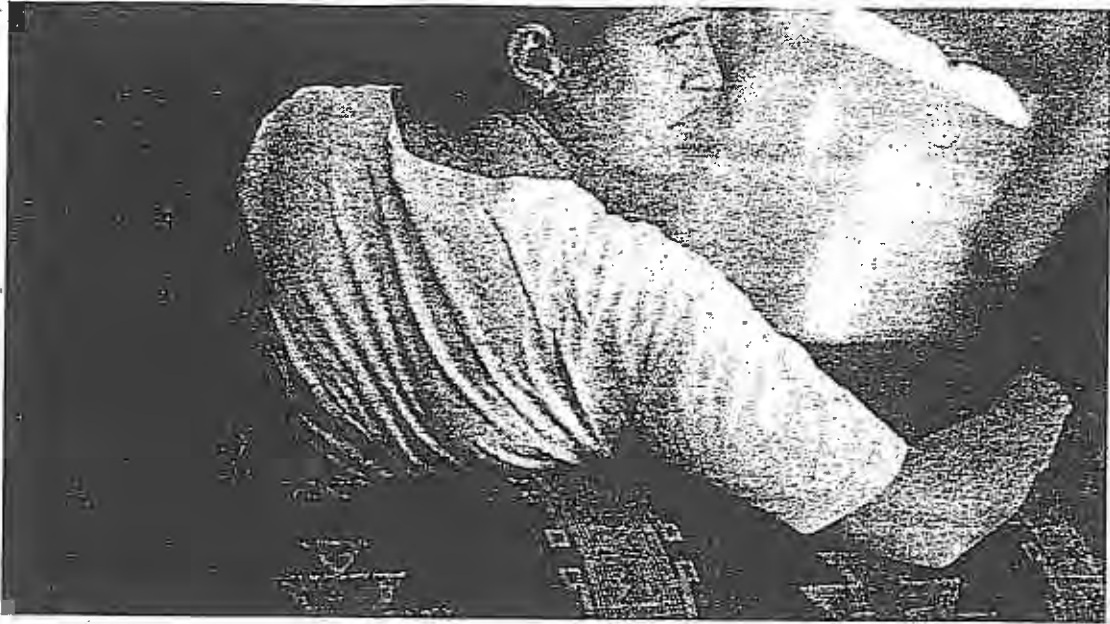
Sympathetic professors and teaching fellows helped set off grade inflation in the mid-'60s in an attempt to keep Harvard students from being drafted. For the most part, they succeeded, as only 19 students were killed in Vietnam (commemorated on campus, right) compared to hundreds during World War II (left).

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GLOBE FILE PHOTOS

Grade inflation surged again in 1969-70 as students were drawn into direct political activity. From left: A 1966 protest of an appearance by Robert McNamara; pressure for Harvard to become more diverse resulted in twice as many black students gaining admittance in 1969; and an anti-ROTC demonstration in 1969.



HARVARD UNIVERSITY

AT CAMBRIDGE IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS



THE President and Fellows of Harvard College, with the consent of the Honorable and Reverend the Board of Overseers and acting on the recommendation of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, have conferred on

ALEXANDRA MACK
the degree of Bachelor of Arts
magna cum laude in Anthropology.

In witness whereof, by authority duly committed to us, we have hereunder placed our names and the seals of Harvard University and of Radcliffe College on this sixth day of June in the Year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and ninety-one, of Harvard College the three hundred and fifty-fifth, and of Radcliffe College the one hundred and twelfth.

David Bok
PRESIDENT

Linda A. Wilson
PRESIDENT OF RADCLIFFE COLLEGE

Henry Rosen
ACTING DEAN OF THE FACULTY

James A. Dan
MASTER OF WINTHROP HOUSE

GLOBE STAFF PHOTOS/DOMINIC CHAVEZ

Despite a C in calculus and a B-minus in an evolution class, Alexandra Mack said she breezed through one humanities exam simply by regurgitating the professor's ideas.

For the record

■ **Correction:** Because of a reporting error, a Page 1 story Sunday about grade inflation at Harvard University mischaracterized professor Theda Skocpol's tenure there. She did not join the Harvard faculty until 1975.

City & Region

THE BOSTON GLOBE MONDAY, OCTOBER 8, 2001

Harvard's honors fall to the merely average

Second of two parts

By Patrick Healy
GLOBE STAFF

The freshmen who arrived at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton universities last month share a pedigree of academic success and driving ambition, yet those at Harvard enjoy special advantages for achieving the Ivy League's premier status symbol — honors.

Helped along by grade inflation and lax requirements not usually associated

with top universities, a record 91 percent of Harvard seniors graduated with honors last June, eclipsing peers at 13 other elite US colleges, a Globe study has found.

Harvard's honor roll stunned rival universities, many of which make exacting, often brutal choices to distinguish outstanding student work from the merely excellent. "Hilarious," the dean of Yale College said of Harvard's 91 percent. "Can't believe it," a Cornell vice provost concurred. "It wouldn't ever happen at Dartmouth," said the dean of faculty at that Ivy, which is

sometimes derided as Harvard's academically lesser peer.

Yale, Brown, and many other elites now limit honors as a way to preserve the category's value.

Yale caps universitywide honors at 30 percent of graduating seniors, though, when comparing various types of honors with Harvard's, a total of 51 percent of Yale seniors earned some form of honors last spring.

Behind Harvard and Yale is Princeton, where the honors rate this year was 44 percent; Brown, 42 percent; Dartmouth, 40 percent; Columbia, 25

percent; and Cornell, 8 percent. The University of Pennsylvania denied requests for the data, saying furnishing it would violate student privacy.

Elsewhere, 28 percent of Duke University seniors received honors last spring, while the rate was 20 percent at Stanford and 35 percent at Johns Hopkins.

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology doesn't award honors, saying the sheer value of its degree is distinctive.

HARVARD HONORS, Page C7

Harvard honors lack distinction

► HARVARD HONORS *Continued from Page B1*

Experts on undergraduate education say Harvard's high honors rate indicates a problem with grade inflation, achievement expectations, or both. Even if students are stronger today than when rates were lower in the past, as Harvard argues, academic integrity requires honors to change with the times, experts say.

"The Harvard students simply aren't that different from the Princeton student and the Yale student," said Arthur Levine, president of Columbia University Teachers College. "Honors has clearly taken on a new definition at Harvard. They should be much more candid about that."

Honors is a widely coveted prize among the nation's student elite, a credential that helps open doors to graduate schools and the power suites of business and government. It's also a faculty's most piercing tool for judging students and tracking their intellectual development.

But concerns about grade inflation trends have led some schools to cap honors so it does not reward puffed-up grades.

The Globe study found that unchecked grade inflation has long been Harvard's worst-kept secret, but officials have done little to stop it. They've also done little to slow honors rates, which are based on grades, casting doubt on whether honors from Harvard has much meaning any longer.

"Harvard has a problem with what honors signifies. At 91

percent, it doesn't signify anything," said William Chafe, dean of the faculty at Duke University and a magna cum laude from Harvard in 1962. "Honors has to be reserved for distinction. It is a very strong credential if it's not seen as something accessible to everybody."

But Harvard officials say that they and all universities award honors differently, and its faculty gives honors only to students who meet strict requirements.

Most Harvard departments require high grades, research papers, and a senior thesis for honors. In 1996, the faculty took its one and only step toward joining the trend toward honors limits, capping summa cum laude at 5 percent of graduates after a bulge in the highest honor category. Yet the college worries less about the growth in magna cum laude, which requires at least a B-plus average, and was given to 580 students graduating in June (40 percent of those receiving honors). Cum laude, which requires either a B-minus in the major or a B average overall, was given to more than half of those earning honors.

"I don't think 91 percent honors is a problem," said Susan Pedersen, Harvard's dean for undergraduate education. "The faculty decides what is appropriate honors work in each field. I wouldn't want a system where students aspire to honors work, and then are told they don't make some arbitrary, internal cut."

Yet that is exactly how honors works at Princeton, and to some extent at Yale and most other

Top of the class

Percentage of college seniors graduating with honors in 2001

Ivy League schools

Harvard	91%
Yale	51%
Princeton	44%
Brown	42%
Dartmouth	40%
*Columbia	25%
Cornell	8%
**Penn	Not available

Non-Ivy League schools

Tufts	52%
BU	39%
Johns Hopkins	35%
BC	29%
Duke	28%
Stanford	20%
MIT	0

* For Columbia College, by far the largest undergraduate school. Percentages for the other undergraduate schools are: engineering, 10%; general studies, 30%; nursing, no honors available.

** Penn does not release honors data, nor does it provide universitywide honors data to its students for them to determine their class ranks.

SOURCES: The universities; Globe staff research

GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC

schools. Harvard's system, meanwhile, guarantees honors to almost any student who receives at least a B.

"The Harvard undergraduates I'm grading are excellent students," said Professor Theda Skocpol, who is renowned both as a political sociologist and a relatively tough grader. "I don't hesitate to give C's and D's, but there are not all that many students who deserve it."

Yale College Dean Richard Brodhead said his students produce exemplary research papers and probing lab experiments as well, often reflecting the young genius that Harvard sees. Yet Yale makes sharper distinctions among accomplishments.

"It certainly isn't true that fewer Yale students do honors work than Harvard students," Brodhead said. "Harvard simply chooses to reward 91 percent of them."

In the late 1980s, Yale faced a burst of cum laude diplomas "that gave us concern, though it wasn't as egregious as what Harvard sees," Brodhead recalled. Yale had been awarding honors based on grade-point averages; in 1988, it switched to capping summa cum laude at the top 5 percent of seniors, and limiting magna and cum laude to the next 10 and 15 percent, respectively.

With these caps in place, Yale officials say, grade inflation is far less likely to end up boosting honors rates. Yale, like most schools, doesn't tell professors how to grade, though it urges them to give A's only for outstanding work.

Brodhead was skeptical that a small minority of Harvard students are performing at a notably lesser pitch than the vast majority. "One does wonder about that 9 percent at Harvard not doing honors work," he said. "I mean, really. Really."

At Princeton, all students must

complete a thesis and perform research to graduate. Each academic department, meanwhile, sets a formula and cutoff for honors, and may require extra for it — high grades and good marks on comprehensive exams, for example.

Nancy Weiss Malkiel, Princeton's dean of the college, said she and some professors have tried to rein in grade inflation and "make plain what it takes to get an A, a B, and so on." Her research found that at Princeton grades began to rise in the early 1970s; the honors rate, however, has been fairly constant, in part because departments shift the formula as grading trends change.

"Not every excellent student does his or her best work all the time," she said. "We need to make more discriminating judgments about that work — about the difference between very good, and outstanding, work."

Here is how Professor Lee Mitchell judges: He takes all the papers by his Princeton literature students, lays them on the floor, rearranges them from strongest to weakest, and grades accordingly. Visualizing a spectrum of grades, rather than grading in a pile, helps him give honest grades, he says.

Mitchell probed the grade inflation issue a few years ago when he was chairman of the English Department. Among other things, he noticed that some teachers, especially young ones, felt their tenure and salary prospects would rise if they received high marks from students on class evaluations. High grades have just become routine, he says, disputing the idea that students are simply better today than they were decades ago.

"We all like to think we're getting better," he said, "but I've been teaching for 15 years. There was no golden age."

Every spring, about 25 Princeton English professors sit in their conference room and

'Honors has clearly taken on a new definition at Harvard.'

ARTHUR LEVINE,
*president of Columbia
University Teachers
College*

debate exactly where to draw the honors line. The results can be brutal: A 92.07 grade point qualifies students one year, and it may be higher or lower the next, depending in part on grading trends and inflation. "Although students may have an A average, they still might not get honors," Mitchell said.

Harvard's high honors rate is an offshoot of grade inflation, he contends, and won't abate until the administration acts.

"There has to be a collective solution within a campus," he said. "I don't see anything short of university legislation and leadership that can solve this."

Mahalia Gayle has seen both the Harvard and Princeton honors system in action, and says Princeton's is more rigorous by far. Like almost all Princeton undergraduates, Gayle was required to write a thesis. She earned mostly A's and A-minuses and won a few academic prizes as well — and then had to go up against other students in her department for hon-

ors. She got it.

Now, as a Harvard graduate student in French, she says some undergraduates have come to expect grade inflation, while others are simply cut more slack for the work they do.

"At Princeton, if you write a bad thesis, it's noted," she said. "Here, you get points for anything."

Cass Sunstein, a University of Chicago law professor, recalls higher stakes at Harvard in the early 1970s, when he was consumed with writing his thesis as a student.

"I have to confess that I was on the cusp of summa, and some of my teachers were very disappointed that I didn't get it," said Sunstein, the author, most recently, of *Republic.com*. "I felt a little embarrassed, actually."

A leading Harvard literature scholar, Stephen Greenblatt, says many students today turn in work so exceptional that it's worthy of publication. He recalls one thesis last year on how Russian writers maneuvered around censorship rules during the past two centuries. Another recent thesis drew on unpublished Suffolk County probate records from the 18th and 19th centuries to tell the story of two slaves who fought for their own emancipation.

"There are lots and lots of people like this who are very gifted," Greenblatt said.

Yet even in the highly selective Ivy League, a nearly universal honors system is wrongheaded to some.

"If almost 100 percent of the population gets honors, it may suggest it doesn't mean anything," said Jamshed Bharucha, dean of the faculty at Dartmouth.

In Bharucha's Psychological and Brain Sciences department, the worthiness of an honors project or thesis depends on methodology: Can the student's scientific hypothesis be measured and proven? Are the measures valid and relevant? Honors-quality work, he says, comes from close working relationships between professors and students — which not all enjoy — and requires support from a

broad array of the department's faculty.

Dartmouth students can also earn general honors based on grades, though this is limited to the top one-third of seniors.

As one redress for grade inflation, Dartmouth employs an unusual strategy: Each student receives two grades per course on the transcript, the earned one and the median grade in the class. If a student receives an A in a class with a median A average, people can note that the A stands for average.

"That cuts right to the chase of grade inflation," Bharucha said. "Anyone reading a transcript can gain a greater sense of what grades and honors mean."

Susan Pedersen, the Harvard dean, said she thinks Dartmouth's grading approach is "a reasonable thing to do," but it may serve to sink the transcript in a sea of letter grades rather than preserve its integrity. Harvard faculty members considered a plan like Dartmouth's, but it floundered in academic committees.

More than a technique like Dartmouth's, Harvard needs "self-scrutiny" by its own professors about their grading habits, Pedersen believes. "We need more discussion within departments, working with students, about what professors consider grades to mean," she said.

Indeed, academic insiders like Bharucha have a much more sophisticated understanding of honors than many corporate recruiters. Both sets of people place a high value on honors, yet admissions officers in higher education — who realize the depths of grade inflation — know that the credential can sometimes represent easy A's rather than distinguished work.

"To be able to say that I graduate from Harvard magna cum laude certainly doesn't hurt," said Columbia's Levine, "but it doesn't mean as much to graduate schools — because every student we get from Harvard graduated with honors."

Yet M.J. Wheble, head of cam-

pus recruiting for Deloitte & Touche, said that honors is one example of excellence that she and her colleagues expect from applicants.

"We want to be sure we're hiring the best candidates, and honors are a first cut for us," Wheble said. "We won't talk to people with GPA's lower than an A in some groups, or A-minus in others."

Especially in a tough economy, honors remains an easy, dependable way for recruiters to separate the wheat from the chaff, Wheble

added. "We like to look at the Ivy League and top liberal arts schools," she said, "and honors is a way to be sure that we're hiring the very best candidates."

Wheble said she was surprised to learn Harvard had such a high honors rate, but assumed that by their mere presence at the university, students were capable of honors work.

Among professors, views about grades and honors have changed over time. When Tufts Provost Sol Gittleman was a baseball-obsessed freshman at Drew University in 1952, he received two grades on his first paper: an A, for content, and an F, because he misspelled "eight" and "negroes." Last spring, the students in his Writing About Baseball class were allowed to rewrite papers several times. Gittleman graded the final products.

"It's a sign of better teaching — do you know how much time kids have to take rewriting papers?" Gittleman said. He ended up giving six A's and eight B's. "No one did less than B work. We get kids today with 1450 SATs. Why does that kid have to get a C as part of a bell-shaped curve?"

Cornell may stand apart as an Ivy where students are less driven by honors. Only 8 percent graduated with distinction last spring. Officials say many seniors had grades that were in the honors

ballpark, but chose not to undertake meeting the requirements for honors.

"Some feel it consumes too much of their class time and energy, while others want to take a last stab at courses they haven't explored," said Isaac Kramnick, Cornell's vice provost for undergraduate education. He added that one-third of students attend Cornell's land-grant agricultural college, and fewer of them seek honors than other Cornell undergraduates.

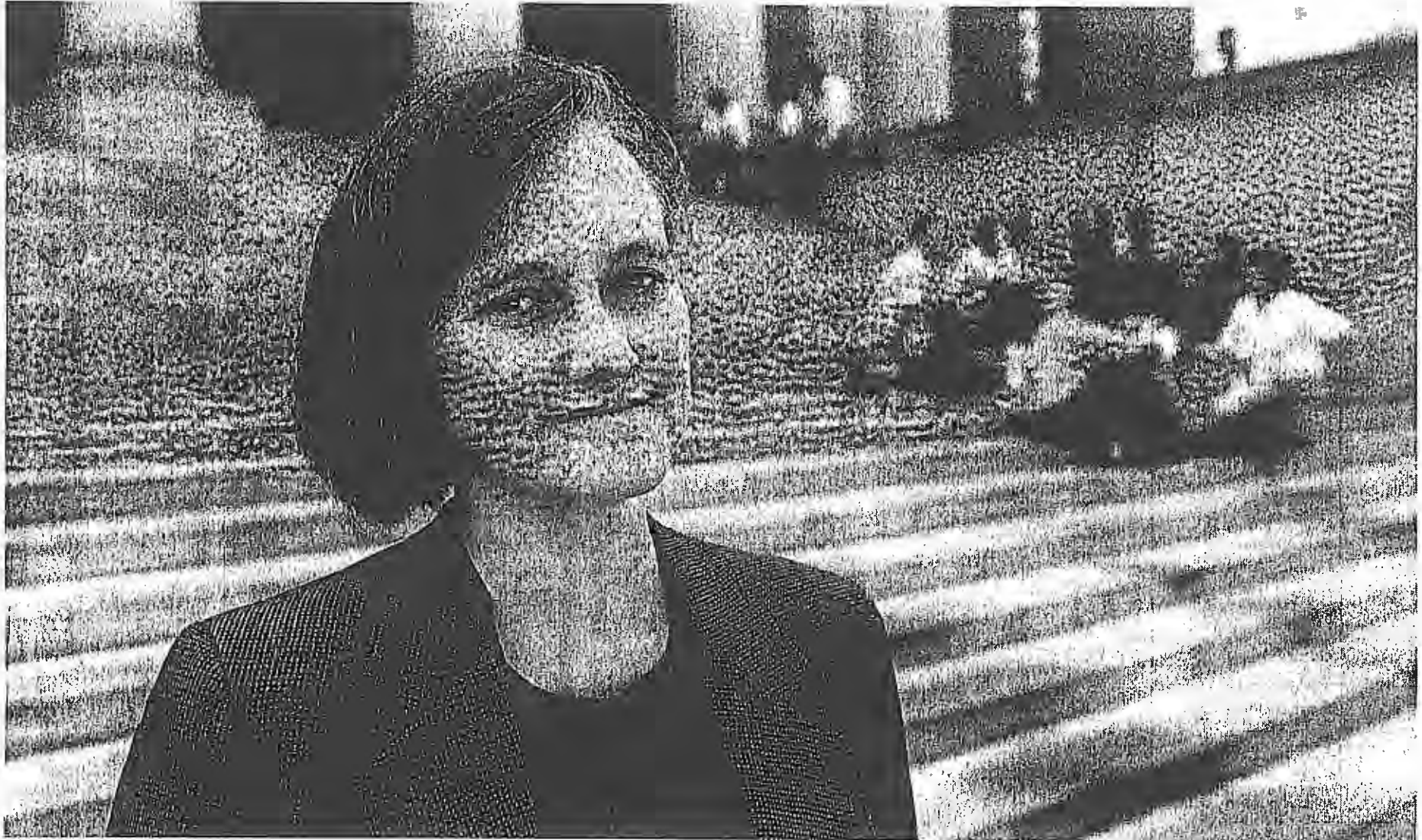
The Cornell government department has about 150 seniors majoring each year, about 15 of whom are honors students. A student must have a B-plus/A-minus average at the start of senior year to qualify as an honors candidate. Each writes a thesis, and three professors each assign scores for originality, research, quality of argument, style, and writing. Scores range from 1 to 10: low means no honors, while high can mean summa.

Then, the fighting begins.

"Sometimes the average thesis score of one reader is a 4.5, and another is 8.2," said Kramnick, a government professor, who graduated summa cum laude from Harvard in 1959 and is critical of his alma mater's high honors rate today.

"There can be real, very long debates, especially when deciding what's a summa versus a magna. But this is the diploma we're talking about. Honors is our prize in higher education, and we need to be very, very careful with it."

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO/DAVID L. RYAN

Harvard needs more "self-scrutiny" by its own professors about their grading habits, says Susan Pedersen, the school's dean of undergraduate education.



GLOBE PHOTO/CHRISTIAN FUCHS

Cornell's Isaac Kramnick, holding his undergraduate summa cum laude degree from Harvard. "Honors is our prize in higher education, and we need to be very, very careful with it."

The Boston Globe

TUESDAY, OCTOBER 23, 2001

Harvard asks faculty to justify grading methods

By Patrick Healy
GLOBE STAFF

For the first time, professors at Harvard University have been asked to justify the grades they give students as the university launches its toughest examination yet of grade inflation.

Susan Pedersen, dean of undergraduate education, gave faculty members a January deadline to explain their grading practices in writing. A committee will review the data and recommend whether changes to grading should be considered.

The plan was announced at a private faculty meeting last week, following a Globe study revealing that decades of grade inflation have made it much easier to graduate with honors.

More than half of Harvard's grades last year were A's and A-minuses, and a record 91 percent of students graduated with honors in June. Yale, Princeton, and other Ivy League and nationally ranked universities had far lower rates of honors, the Globe found.

Pedersen did not discuss honors at the faculty meeting, but the new president, Lawrence H. Summers, said through a spokesman afterward that he was "very concerned about both honors inflation and grade inflation" and would consult

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Harvard asks faculty members to justify grading methods

► HARVARD

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with professors about the issues. He declined to comment further.

The pattern of high grades and near-universal honors indicates that professors are not assessing students as critically or rigorously as the university's elite reputation would suggest, education specialists warned in the *Globe* study early this month.

Deans have previously warned the faculty about the upward trend in A's. But some professors say Harvard has sent mixed signals about the seriousness of grade inflation. In the past, for example, officials suggested that students receive more leeway in dropping classes, an option students sometimes invoke when the threat of a bad grade looms.

This latest review is the broadest and most explicit attempt in years to rein in grade inflation, Harvard officials and professors say.

"I'm not aware of anything untoward going on in our department, but we're under some pressure now to show it," said Oliver Hart, chairman of economics department.

Over the next few weeks, academic departments will receive data on their grading histories and patterns. Professors and graduate-student teaching fellows are expected to describe the ways in which they assess and mark student work, as well as to explain grading trends that may suggest

inflation. The Educational Policy Committee, which is made up chiefly of administrators and faculty, will discuss the data in the spring.

Deans would clearly like professors to grade more carefully and rigorously, but the officials cannot impose any new grading standard unless they or Summers want to start a dispute within the faculty. The faculty largely dictates academic policy and has traditionally enjoyed broad independence in how it evaluates students.

'Dealing with grade inflation requires knowing the extent of it.'

RODERICK
MACFARQUHAR
Chairman, government department

generally add that they think grade inflation is not a major problem. Many also see themselves as fairly tough graders who give high marks only because their students are academically extraordinary. Whether a problem truly exists, and how it might be solved, will become clearer once they see Pedersen's data, they said.

"Dealing with grade inflation requires knowing the extent of it — have your grades risen from C-plus to A-minus, or from B to B-plus? Is it big or small?" said Roderick MacFarquhar, chairman of

Short of challenging this prerogative, the deans and Summers can only direct departments and committees to study the issue, build a case for a proposed policy change, and then use the bully pulpit and private meetings to persuade the faculty to vote for it.

Many professors support the grading review, though they



LAWRENCE H. SUMMERS
Expressed concern

the government department.

Like other department leaders, MacFarquhar said it would be inappropriate for him to instruct his faculty members on how to grade their students. "All you can do is get professors to recognize that this has been delineated, officially, as a problem," he said.

Lawrence Buell, who heads the English department and once held Pedersen's job, said his chief concern is that grading practices vary by department, making grade inflation a problem in some classes but not all. He said he believes Harvard should adopt an anti-inflation strategy used by Dartmouth College and some other schools: Students receive transcripts with two grades for each class: the grade earned by the student and the median grade in the class. This way, graduate schools, corporate recruiters, and professors themselves know when an A

is a common grade or a rare one.

Harvard professors considered this idea several years ago, but it ultimately died in committee.

The outcome of the new study will depend in large part on Summers, given that deans have failed to solve the problem on their own. Summers says he wants undergraduates to meet high and rigorous academic standards, but whether grades will become part of his agenda is unclear. A data-driven economist and former US

treasury secretary who is known for forming his ideas on the basis of evidence and then quietly persuading others to see his point of view, Summers has been reluctant to speak publicly about the issue.

For example, after Pedersen unveiled her plan at the faculty meeting, a professor asked the president for a comment on grade inflation as well as any other academic matters.

It was his debut meeting as president, yet rather than make a

splash he was characteristically circumspect.

"These are important discussions and right now. I have observations on international relations and grade inflations, but I am going to defer those observations until next time," he said, according to an unofficial transcript of the meeting. The next meeting is on Nov. 13.

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