



Changes in Grade Distribution at Brown since 1975

Among the papers of Sheridan Center founder, Harriet W. Sheridan, was a file she made of *Brown Daily Herald* articles concerning the distribution of grades at Brown, and the possibility of grade inflation, since the establishment of the open curriculum. A March 6, 1975 article noted a drop in the use of the S/NC grade from 59.2% in 1969-70 to 27.2% in the fall of 1974. Between the spring term 1969-70 and fall term 1974-75, the assignment of As rose by 112% and Bs by 53%. Faculty were quoted as attributing this phenomenon to hard work by students, pressures by graduate school admission, and a tight job market. The author quoted one professor as saying "It's easier to give out high grades, no one bothers you."¹ An article the following year explored the issue of variations in the use of the S/NC by department. According to that article, the physical sciences gave the lowest number of Ss and the largest percentage of Cs. The languages gave the highest percentage of As at that time.²

The 2001 Annual Report of the Office of Instructional Research provides a clear account of the distribution of grades over the past decade. ³ "Since 1990, Brown's undergraduate student grade distribution has largely shifted from the S/NC option toward more traditional letter grades. In 1990-91, traditional letter grades accounted for 73.1 percent of all grades assigned. By 1995-96, 75.3 percent of all grades awarded were letter grades, decreasing slightly to 73.6 percent in 2000-01." With regard to grade inflation, the report notes the possibility of expanding grade

¹ Alex Wood, *Brown Daily Herald*, March 6, 1975.

² Andrew Glassman, *Brown Daily Herald*, May 6, 1976.

³ Katherine P. Lewis, K. Tracy Barnes, Martha S. Hayden, Kevin W. Sayers, *Annual Report of the Office of Institutional Research for the Academic Year ending June 2001* (September 2001), pp. 51-53

inflation, "there has been a clear increase in the percentage of A's assigned since 1990-91. Meanwhile, the percentage of both B's and C's assigned has decreased. The overall percentage of A grades has steadily increased from 35.5 percent in 1990-91 to 43.6 percent in 2000-01. Increases in the percentage of A's assigned, both large and small, are seen across all disciplines, but are less striking in the Humanities and Physical Sciences."⁴

The report observes that it is also in the Humanities and Physical Sciences that the percentage of S grades has not declined, "The greatest percentage of S grades assigned has consistently been in the Humanities and the "Other" course categories. It is noteworthy to point out that the percentage of S grades awarded in the "Other" category has again declined (34.6 percent in 2000-01) after a one-year spike rising to 50 percent in 1999-00." The use of the NC, however, has "declined in all disciplines." In the case of courses which assign a mandatory S/NC grade, the overall percentage has "remained fairly stable since 1990, though reaching a ten-year high of 13.8 percent in 2000. The Humanities and Life Sciences continue to offer the highest percentage of mandatory S/NC courses. In 2000, the increase in the overall percentage of mandatory S/NC courses offered can be attributed to the rise in the Humanities discipline, expanding from 18.7 percent in 1999 to 21.9 percent in 2000." *Ed.*

⁴ Lewis, et. al., figure 13: "Overall Percentage Distribution of Undergraduate Grades: 1990-91, 1995-96, and 2000-01".