

Average Grades

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INTRODUCTION

In 1995, a report¹ was written on the general topic of grading at the University of Washington. The current report updates data on average grades by supplying values from the 1996-97 academic year. The comparable data in the previous report were based on the 1994-95 academic year.

In the initial report, data from a variety of sources were brought to bear on the issue of grading. These sources included historical averages, surveys of faculty, surveys of students, and grade data from the student transcript database. The conclusions drawn from the first three informational sources, briefly summarized, were that average grades rose from 1975 to 1987, and then leveled off. Even so, faculty almost unanimously thought that grades were too high and over 80% felt that measures should be taken to reduce them. Students thought that grades were too high, though not to the extent that faculty did. Faculty and especially students tended to prefer the 4.0 grading system over other alternatives.

In the tables to follow,² average grades for the 1996-97 academic year are presented in two ways:

- For *all students*, average grades, unweighted by course credits, are given by class level across the 1996-97 academic year.
- For *undergraduate students who have declared majors only*, average grades, weighted by course credits, are given across courses within students' declared majors and across courses *outside* of students' declared majors.

For both tables, the computational method is identical to that used in the 1995 report.

In [Table 2](#), which presents averages within academic units, the current report aggregates some programs that were presented separately in the earlier report.

DIFFERENCES IN GRADES OVER TIME

In Table 1, the averages across the entire Seattle Campus of the University of Washington are presented for the two years. One can see that generally, grades climb as class level increases and the average grade given is above a 3.0 for all levels. Further, students tend to receive higher grades in courses within their majors than in courses outside of their major, but the difference is not great. Finally, the averages for 1996-97 are essentially equivalent to those for 1994-9.

Table 1. Average grades: 1994-95 and 1996-97

	Seattle Campus		Course Level			Grades Given Major		Diff.
	100	200	300	400	500	Within	Outside	
1996-97	3.01	3.10	3.20	3.34	3.65	3.27	3.19	0.08
1994-95	3.01	3.11	3.20	3.35	3.66	3.26	3.18	0.08

DIFFERENCES IN GRADES GIVEN IN ACADEMIC UNITS

In [Table 2](#), average grades are presented within academic departments. As was evident in the 1994-95 data, considerable variation can be seen across departments. For example, average grades given in the Dance department are above 3.75 at all levels, while those in Mathematics are below 3.00 for the undergraduate levels; average grades in Arts and Sciences arts departments tend to be considerably higher than average grades in Arts and Sciences science departments. In interpreting these data, one needs to keep in mind that students in various curricula may differ in ability and courses may vary in difficulty; i. e., not all differences are the result of different grading standards. Certainly, differences exist in the restrictiveness of admission to various majors and the ability of students attracted to them.

Differences in the magnitude and direction of the discrepancies between courses within and outside of the major are also readily evident. Mathematics, followed by Biology, exhibited the largest negative differences (-.39 and -.30, respectively). In these and other units, students tend to receive higher grades in courses outside their major than in their major. On the other side, the largest positive discrepancies were in Pharmacy (.82), Music (.57), Dance (.54), and Materials Science (.52). In interpreting these differences, one need keep in mind that the non-major courses selected by students are not independent of the major they have declared. However, differences no doubt also exist in departmental cultures regarding the meaning of grades, in general, and the meaning of low grades, in particular. Efforts to lower grades will need to address departmental differences in standards.

¹ Gillmore, G.M. [Grades](#). OEA Research Notes, N-95-3, 1995.

² The data in Tables 1 and 2 were provided by the Office of Institutional Studies.