OPINION

STAFF COLUMNIST

HANNAH OWENS PIERRE

Grades should measure mastery, not competition

Anyone who has taken a class in the Yale Economics Department has probably had the following experience. Before the midterm, as students become increasingly concerned about placing at the top of their class, professors express remorse, saying something along the lines of, 'If it were up to me, there would be no grade cap.'

Last week, the News published a piece by Sofia Heredia '29 titled "Value intellect, not high grades," in which the author voices support for "harsh action" to combat grade inflation. This includes a consideration by Yale College Dean Pericles Lewis of a Harvard faculty proposal to cap the number of A's at 20 percent of students in each class. While I sympathize with the desire to address grade inflation, capping A's would create a worse problem than it solves.

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Heredia is right that the "A should retain the value of excellence." To accomplish this goal, we must ask: What does excellence mean? When I envision a student producing excellent work in a class, I imagine someone who goes the extra mile. They attend office hours, ask thoughtful questions, engage deeply with the material, and apply it skillfully. In other words, an A should be attainable for any student who fully masters the content of a course.

A grade cap, however, ignores this standard of excellence. According to the proposal that Dean Lewis is considering, excellence means one thing and one thing only, and that's whether you happen to score higher than the students in your class.

The flaw with this system is clear. Some years, it would be more difficult to achieve an A simply based on the pool of students who happen to take the course. An A would no longer mean excellence, but instead be a measure of relative performance, based on factors that students cannot control. Yet, mastery of content should not depend on how well one's classmates perform. Multiple people — in fact, more than 20 percent of the students — can master a course's material simultaneously.

Heredia claims that "It will be on students and faculty to adjust over time." Here is what that adjustment would look like: Students will still fear getting low grades, and for good reason, as acceptance rates for prestigious post-graduate opportunities drop. Consequently, they will avoid more challenging classes and take courses below their ability levels. Smart students will realize that the best way to guarantee success is to study what they are already proficient at.

Such a system penalizes not only students but also professors, who know their students and are best able to assess their performance. It demands that they enforce rigid and arbitrary guidelines against their better judgment. A professor may be forced to choose between giving two students of equal ability an A-minus each, merely to conform to grading standards.

This problem would be especially acute in the humanities, where grades are rarely determined by raw exam scores alone. Professors grading a paper must weigh the originality of an argument, the quality of the writing, and the precision of the analysis. Those judgments are already difficult; requiring professors to sort students artificially into a fixed distribution would make them even more arbitrary.

An added harm of a grading cap proposal is the level of competition it will foster among students. In courses where class discussion is required, students will be desperate to one-up one another rather than engage in open dialogue and good-faith debate.

And not only will student relations decline, but the proposal would worsen an already severe mental health crisis among college students, in which over a third report symptoms of depression and anxiety. Data has consistently found that receiving low grades is a risk factor for stress, anxiety and depression among college students. The number of Yale students seeking mental health support — at least 20 percent of current students — would increase, causing long wait lines and shortages for Yale's services.

To be fair to Heredia, she envisions adopting a grade cap with some additional considerations. But the most fundamental part of this suggestion must go. By all means, Yale should take steps to improve grading practices — anyone who has taken Game Theory with Ben Polak knows that reexamining the Credit/D/Fail practice is one place to start — but to do so at the cost of student learning, well-being and intellectual growth would be unwise.

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GUEST COLUMNIST

BEN CARD

The virtue of the teaching fellow

Throughout four years as a teaching fellow, I've seen my colleagues do many kinds of work for their students. They've taught them tough concepts, trained them in research skills and advocated for them to faculty and administrators for honors, scholarships and extra attention during a crisis. William Barbee '26 argued in a recent column for the News that a new University committee should rein in liberal graduate students. His column offers an opportunity to reflect on the relationship of the TF, the undergrad and the academy.

Barbee wants intellectual diversity at Yale, which is a good goal. He also wishes that his history TFs would give conservative voices in the classroom more space. He argues that "promoting academic freedom" of this sort "may, in some cases, necessitate restricting it." The TF deserves less freedom in how they teach their section, while the conservative undergraduate deserves more room to share their opinion.

One observation here is that if Barbee came to Yale looking for intellectual diversity, then he's found it: his conservatism is jostling with the perceived liberalism of his TFs, making for what sound like frustrating but energetic exchanges in section that expose Barbee to views very different from his own. The subject expertise of the TFs, to say nothing of their authority in the classroom, may give them the final word in these cases. If by intellectual diversity Barbee means the freedom to argue his views without pushback, then Yale offers no shortage of additional venues to try it: not just the senior societies or the Buckley Institute, but office hours, the dining hall and, indeed, the News.

If departments are choosing their graduate students correctly, then the TFs you encounter at Yale will come from many backgrounds, from small colleges and state schools across the country to a range of international universities. Your intellectual culture is made richer by this diversity. This is true not least because schools that are unlike Yale are much better at recruiting talented students from backgrounds outside of the widening but still narrow identity groups that Yale College selects for. The independent-minded energy of the TF will rarely last into the first job that inaugurates them into the professoriate. Not too long ago an undergraduate and — with luck — soon to be a professor, the TF is bound to have issues with the academy just like Barbee does. Even if their solutions don't always align with yours, that spirit of critique is one thing you have in common.

> WHATEVER THE ALIGNMENT OF YOUR POLITICS, THE OVERBRIMMING ENTHUSIASM OF A PASSIONATE TF SEEMS A WONDERFUL THING FOR A STUDENT.

In my own experience, I can say that TFs try on different teaching personae. Some are able to cultivate a mysteriousness that obscures their relationship to course materials. For others, this practiced indifference either isn't possible — their subject position too clearly overlaps with the topics under discussion — or else declined in favor of a more direct approach. The sharp edges of a punchy TF don't make a "curricular hijacking." Their performance reminds us that graduate school attracts students for many reasons: an orientation toward the truth, the belief in the importance of the subject, an occasionally irrational enthusiasm for their research or the desire to persist through this cultural moment to rejuvenate embattled disciplines.

Controlling for politics in this bundle would neuter some of the urgent lifegiving energy of the classroom. Whatever the alignment of your politics, the overbrimming enthusiasm of a passionate TF seems a wonderful thing for a student.

Because some of Barbee's TFs are liberal, he worries "that the modern university has become a mere front for indoctrination." He also cites the spirit of William F. Buckley, Jr. as the genius loci of his column. Barbee will remember that for Buckley, there is no such thing as a university without ideology. In Buckley's "God and Man at Yale," he advocates that Yale replace the spirit of atheistic socialism suddenly dominant in the faculty with a return to his own preferred Christian free-market capitalism. We know that this is not the opposite of ideology but the swapping-out of one ideology for another. Meanwhile the suggestion of a hotline to report liberal TFs is probably a step too far toward the awful, self-destructive paranoia of Buckley's 1950s.

Nevertheless, TFs at Yale are lucky to have students like Barbee in their sections: bold, articulate, contrarian, mostly civil. If a TF gives a bad grade on a paper just because a student is conservative or disagrees with the TF's politics, that would be very bad indeed. I have seen no evidence it happens. If a student disagrees with a TF — or with a professor, or with the orientation of a field — then the very best thing they can do, and what I encourage Barbee to do, is what their TFs have done: take a risk on graduate school in order to correct the record.

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