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Increasing GPAs Among Undergraduates at the University of Georgia: Faculty Perceptions

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UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Autumn 2019

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A case study among faculty at the University of Georgia

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2019

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<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Trykk: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

Abstract

The grade point averages (GPAs) of undergraduate students in the United States are on the rise for many decades. Many scholars raised questions are these high GPAs well deserved. The Office of Institutional Research at the University of Georgia (UGA) produced a report in 2005 'An Exploratory Examination of Grade Inflation at the UGA' analyzing multiple factors that may have contributed to higher GPAs.

Taking into account the 2005 UGA report, this study explores perceptions of professors who teach at UGA about the rising GPAs of their students. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were held with seven professors. The data was analyzed using the thematic analysis method.

The findings from interviews suggest that most of the professors would agree that there is a possibility that adjunct teachers could grade leniently, while changes in the program organization (such as more choices of courses and allowing students to withdraw before failing) contributed to higher GPAs. The professors had mixed feelings about whether new teaching and learning methods are the factor which contributed toward the higher GPAs, and there was a total disagreement whether recent generations of students are better academically prepared, or do they show higher effort once they enroll in college. Finally, most professors agreed that there is slight grade inflation at UGA, mixed with many other factors that are intertwined with historic and socio-economic circumstances of the US higher educational system.

Acknowledgements

This thesis work would not have been possible without the efforts and good will of everyone who has been a part of my journey as a master's student. Thank you to all of those who made it possible for me to explore further on this topic and who helped me to grow both personally and academically during this time. A heartfelt thank you to my supervisor Elisabeth Hovdhaugen for all the advice, for helping me shape my initial thoughts from the research proposal phase into this final thesis and for keeping me motivated. I am grateful for your wise input and guidance.

I owe thanks to all the professors who took the time to take part in the study. Thank you for the interesting discussions and for sharing your viewpoints so openly with me. I also owe gratitude to the staff members from UiO and UGA, both academic and administrative, involved in the Higher Education master's program for all the work put in behind the scenes to make the program possible.

I would also like to thank my fellow classmates and Norwegian students from the Student Union for the friendships made over the past two years. Most importantly, a heartfelt thank you to my family and those closest to me. I am deeply grateful for the encouragement and support.

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List of Abbreviations

AP Advanced Placement

IB International Baccalaureate

GPA Grade point average

HEIs Higher Education Institutions

HOPE Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally

IECA Independent Educational Consultant Association

MIT Massachusetts Institute of Technology

NSD The Norwegian Centre for Research Data

STEM Science, technology, engineering and mathematics

UiO University of Oslo

UGA University of Georgia

UK United Kingdom

US United States

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1 Introduction

The constant rise of the grade point averages (GPA) of undergraduate students has been a concern for many scholars in the United States since the 1960s. Mathies et al (2005), after observing multiple intertwined factors, produced the report 'An Exploratory Examination of Grade Inflation at The University of Georgia' raising questions about whether these high grades are deserved or whether there is a case of grade inflation. The term 'inflation' is borrowed from the field of economics and it refers to the academic standards required for a student being lowered, so that it become easier to get the highest grade. This definition applies to situations in which: 1) The students are of the same ability 2) The same performance levels obtain higher grades than previously and 3) The students are on the same courses. Therefore, "the mere awarding of higher grades does not necessarily imply grade inflation if the comparisons are between students of different ability levels, working at different performance levels, and taking different courses" (Birnbaum 1977, 522).

Disagreement among the scholars in the United States about why students have been achieving higher and higher GPAs continued through the decades - is it because students are better prepared, they are working harder, their cognitive abilities have increased, or on the other hand, have the expectations of professors maybe lowered since the mass enrollment of students in the 1960s, or maybe has marketization led to the idea that students are seen as customers who need to be satisfied with their grades, or maybe even are adjunct teachers grading leniently because their promotion depends on it? The other factors mentioned are: changes in student demographics- having more female students who have higher GPAs could lead to better overall GPAs; the scholarships available to students have made them work harder (or have made the professors grade them more leniently because poor students could drop out if they do not maintain a B average), and high school grade inflation has overflowed into the higher education system.

Having read all these disagreements in the literature I wanted to ask professors who teach and grade at the University of Georgia what their perception of this very complex situation is, why the GPAs of undergraduate students are on a constant rise, what the most important factors are that are causing the increasing GPAs and whether they think their university or department is suffering from 'grade inflation'.

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Grading scale and the rise of GPAs at the US national level

My interest in the US higher education system was inspired by many public debates between university professors, not only from the United States but also from Canada and the United Kingdom as well. Public intellectuals such as MIT professor Noam Chomsky, the University of Oxford professor Roger Scruton, debates between the Harvard University professors Harvey C. Mansfield and Michael Sandel, and many other professors from Ivy League universities have shared their opinions on the state of the higher education, especially in the US, and in particular- whether it is moving in the right direction and does the high GPAs mean an increase in knowledge or ‘inflated grades’. Some think that “the USA had far too many degree-granting bodies, with the results that there were no common standards and an American first degree often meant nothing: real university work was not started until the postgraduate level” (Maskell & Robinson 2002, vii).

The US university grading system has five grades:

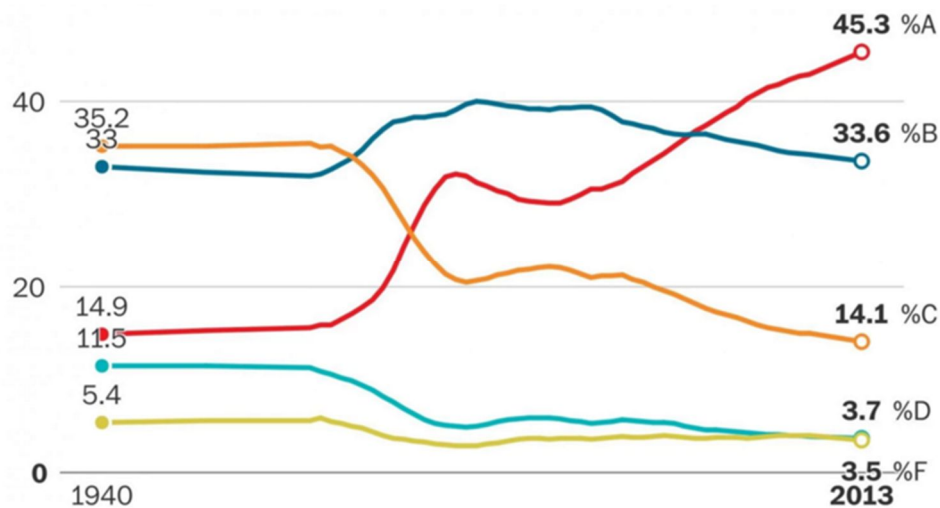
- A or 4.0 which stands for excellence
- B or 3.0 which usually stands for good
- C or 2.0 should represent average,
- D or 1.0 represents below average
- F or 0.0 is a fail or deficient. (retrieved from nces.ed.gov)

The letter grading system in the US higher education from A to F has been in wide use for roughly the last 100 years and gradually became the basis for the 4.0-grade scale. The grading system represent a value system and the belief that it will be an instigator and driving force for students to strive for excellence, but also a differentiator and a tool for graduate schools (e.g. medical schools and law schools) to be able to select the best students, as well as for employers to identify the ‘elite’ students or the best of the best. The widespread belief and expectation of university professors is that they will grade fairly, while university will regulate and have clear grading policies and practices, with common guidelines for professors to follow.

However, Rojstaczer and Healy (2012) in their report *Where A is Ordinary* claim that because of grade inflation, most university and college grading is in the range of A and B (4.0 to 3.0), while the grades D and F have become almost non-existent, and at some universities the situation is even more intriguing, with the average undergraduate grades awarded being much closer to an A than a B.

Between 1940 and 2008, the percentage of grades A's awarded increased from 15 to 43 percent, while the percentage of grade C's awarded declined by 21 percent and the percentage of D's declined by 7 percent.

Figure 1 shows the increase in the percentages of A's given from 1940 until 2013



SOURCE: Rojstaczer (2013) gradeinflation.com. Analyzing 70 years of transcript records from more than 400 schools, researchers found that the share of A grades had tripled, from just 15 percent of grades in 1940 to 45 percent in 2013. At private schools, A's account for nearly a majority of grades awarded.

Since the 1960s, US scholars have started to raise questions about why the GPAs of students are on the rise, doubting that every new generation is smarter than the previous one. Some believe that since they cannot notice any rise in the quality of students' abilities nor any higher effort by new generations of students while their GPAs are constantly higher, this must mean that the grades have been inflated, and even that this is "symbolic of a pathological condition in higher education which is weakening its basic values and academic standards" (Birnbaum 1977, 517), or even further that "a cynical account of the general grading practice today would be to describe the C as an indication of attendance, the B as attendance with work done, and the A as attendance with work done on time" (520).

Grade inflation would imply that it is now easier to get the highest grades because academic standards have been lowered, and this is exactly what Prof. Alan Bloom, who taught at the Cornell University from the 1950s until the 1980s, had in mind when he wrote his book *The Closing of the American Mind* (Bloom 1989). His colleague, also a philosophy professor, from Harvard University Harvey C. Mansfield claimed that there is grade inflation because in the 1950s only one-sixth of students received a grade B+ or higher, but by the 2000s more than 50% of students were receiving grade of A-minus or higher. He stated that "there is something inappropriate, almost sick, in the spectacle of mature adults showering young people with unbelievable praise" and then he added "I've had to adjust my grades upward over the years",

because grades have been inflated all over the US system, so he did not want to create a situation where his students suffer from having lower grades (Mansfield, 2001 ¶ 5).

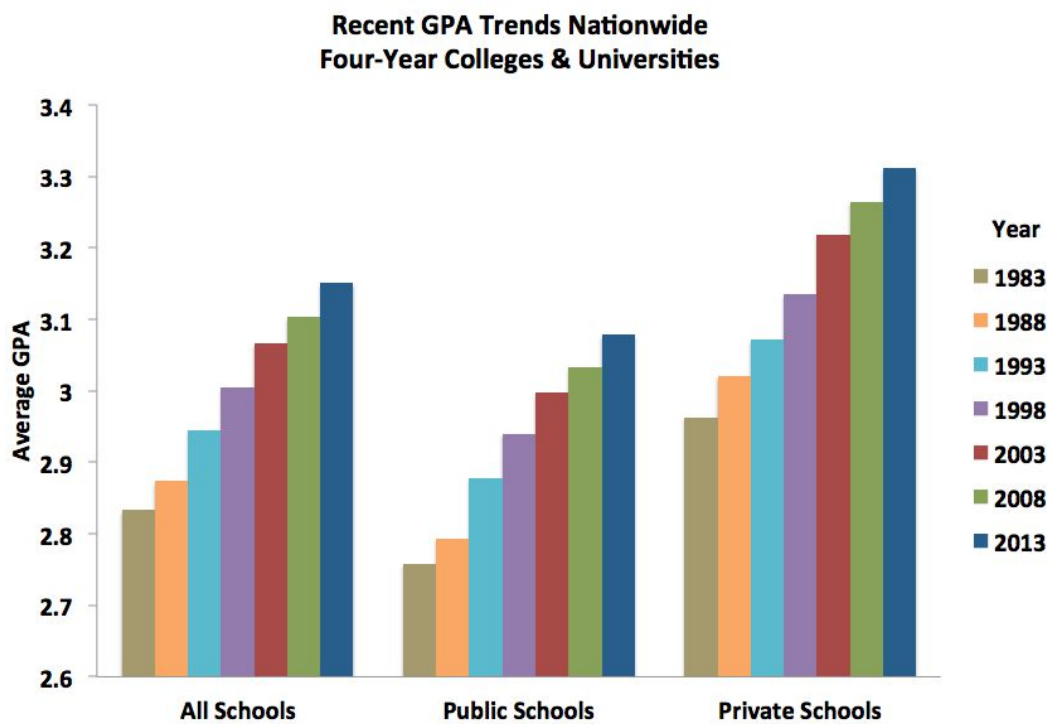
Their observations were that university professors, who have devoted their lives to their fields, and are top experts in those fields should not be so quick to find excellence in so many students, and that it just does not make any sense that more than 50 percent of a class can receive an A, which should stand for ‘excellent’, not for ‘average’. Mansfield even decided to give his students two grades, one ‘real’, and one which was ‘inflated’, and the real one goes into his notebook while the inflated one is used to calculate the GPA (Mansfield 2001).

Similar observations as Mansfield’s and Bloom’s appear in the books *The Shopping Mall High School* (Powell et al 1985) and *The Academic Crisis of the Community College* (McGrath & Spear 1991) where they voiced concerns about the struggle to educate a large number of extremely diverse and not always well-prepared students, believing that this has had some unintended consequences, such as undermining the quality of the education, and altering the purpose of education in the US, where access to education and rights of students are more important than creating world-class scholars or an ‘elite’

Trends in college-level average GPAs

Figure 2 shows the average undergraduate GPAs for four-year American colleges and universities from 1983 to 2013

Figure 2



SOURCE: Rojstaczer, 2013. gradeinflation.com

However, the situation could be more complex, since ‘grade point average inflation’ does not refer to performance on a single course, but to the mean rating of a number of courses aggregated for statistical purposes. This could mean that maybe one particular institution has attracted more able high school graduates, more students have majored in areas which traditionally gave higher grades, and fewer in areas which traditionally gave lower grades, because students are no longer taking the same courses, or because changes in the organization of the program allowed them to withdraw before failing without being penalized because of it, or maybe even that new teaching and learning methods created better prepared students (Birnbaum 1977). If there is interplay also from other components, it could be that GPAs have been rising naturally over the years, and in that case, no one should be blamed for ‘grade inflation’.

Three historical components need to be addressed here regarding the situation in the US since the 1960s and 1970s when the GPAs first started to rise significantly:

- 1) The Vietnam War - students who dropped out of college or failed to enroll in the next year had a higher chance of being drafted and going to war, and some think that this may be the cause for some of the faculty staff, who had political disagreements with the purpose of this war, to start to grade leniently in order to keep these students enrolled (Birnbaum 1977, Rosovsky and Healy 2002).
- 2) Student protests - students asked universities to change the course content and standards, to eliminate racism, sexism and elitism, as perceived by students (Barnett & Griffin 1997, Bloom 1987). Many protests were also in connection with the civil rights movement.
- 3) Changing demographics of the student population – higher enrolment of female students and non-white students (a new policy introduced - affirmative action).

Regarding social changes and the massification of the higher education institutions (HEIs), data shows that in 1950 in the US there were 190,000 academics, in 1960 there were 281,000, and by 1970 the number was 532,000; in 1998, there were 1,074,000 faculty members employed by universities; at the beginning of the 1900s only about 1 percent of high-school students went on to attend college; that figure is closer to 70 percent in the 2000s (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2). The structure, organization, and mission of the universities had to change too. Before the Second World War, higher education was mostly reserved for the relatively small upper-class elite so professors such as Bloom (1987) had fewer students in the class who were, according to him, more broadly educated. Studies show that since the 1960s curricular requirements that had once been obligatory, for example, a foreign language, mathematics, and science “were abandoned by many schools giving students the opportunity to avoid difficult courses that were less suited to their abilities” (9). Therefore, many higher education institutions adopted “freer distribution requirements, which gave students increased control over their curriculum and allowed them to avoid more demanding courses and the risk of a poor grade” (9).

Professors should always encourage students to strive for the highest possible grades. The only problem would be if these grades are not deserved. Do students have better cognitive abilities, are they striving more for more knowledge, do they come with better skills, are they highly motivated than ever before? According to several studies the answer to all these questions is no – US students do not possess on average greater cognitive abilities when compared to the previous generations. They actually demonstrate less mastery of basic educational skills, such as lower ability to read, write, think, and calculate-than their counterparts did a generation ago (Leo 1993; Wingspread Group 1993 in Stone 1995). It also does not appear that students are any more highly motivated today than in the past. It appears rather that the goal of an increasing number of students is to receive higher grades with the less amount of time and effort possible (Chadwick and Ward 1987,236-46). Many believe “that grades are more important for success in life than acquired knowledge, the ability to learn throughout a lifetime, and hard work on campus” (Wingspread Group 1993, 20).

Some scholars think that student grades are related to instructor rank (Ford et al 1987; Sonner and Sharland, 1993), since adjunct teacher job positions depend on the students’ evaluations. Since there is an increasing number of adjuncts, they can be easily replaced and fired especially if the number of students that have enrolled in their classes drops below a certain number, therefore it is better to keep the students enrolled and make them happy.

Not everyone is convinced that there is grade inflation in the US colleges, since nobody has actually managed to prove that students are not turning in better assignments, or maybe previous professors were overly harsh with their marks and now have become more reasonable and better pedagogues. Since students are not forced to take as many obligatory courses outside their primary interest and have more course choices this may lead to them achieving better grades cause higher GPAs. Some even think that grade inflation is a ‘dangerous myth’, and too much talk about this topic puts a bad social stigma on the US higher education system (Kohn 2002).

Undergraduate students from different disciplines at the same universities are achieving different GPAs. In general, there is a notion that in fields such as chemistry, mathematics, biology, engineering it is harder to obtain high GPAs, and maybe some students avoid these fields to maintain their GPAs especially since there is more freedom for students now in selecting their course choices.. Rask (2010) has drawn up statistics (table 1) where we see that students who study foreign languages and English are at the top regarding GPAs among undergraduate students, while students in STEM fields are at the bottom in the US.

Table 1 illustrates the mean grade and the spread in grades across departments in the sample studied by Rask in 2010 at an unnamed college (foreign language and philosophy are in bold, because professors from those two departments will be interviewed).

Table 1: Grade Distributions by Department: Fall 1997 - Spring 2007

Major	Average GPA
Foreign Language	3.34
English	3.33
Music	3.30
Religion	3.22
Arts	3.19
History	3.19
Computer Science	3.13
Political Science	3.11
Physics	3.10
Geography	3.09
Philosophy	3.08
Geology	3.03
Biology	3.02
Psychology	2.98
Economics	2.95
Math	2.90
Chemistry	2.78

SOURCE: Rask 2010

1.1.2 University of Georgia's background

The University of Georgia was selected for two reasons: 1) Matheis et al (2005) produced the report 'An exploratory examination of grade inflation at the University of Georgia'; 2) There is a cooperation between the University of Oslo and UGA and a guest lecturer from UGA Prof. Sheila Slaughter helped and approved this study.

Georgia has 85 public colleges, universities, and technical colleges in addition to over 45 private institutes of higher learning. Among Georgia's public universities is the flagship research university, the University of Georgia (UGA). It was founded in 1785 as the country's

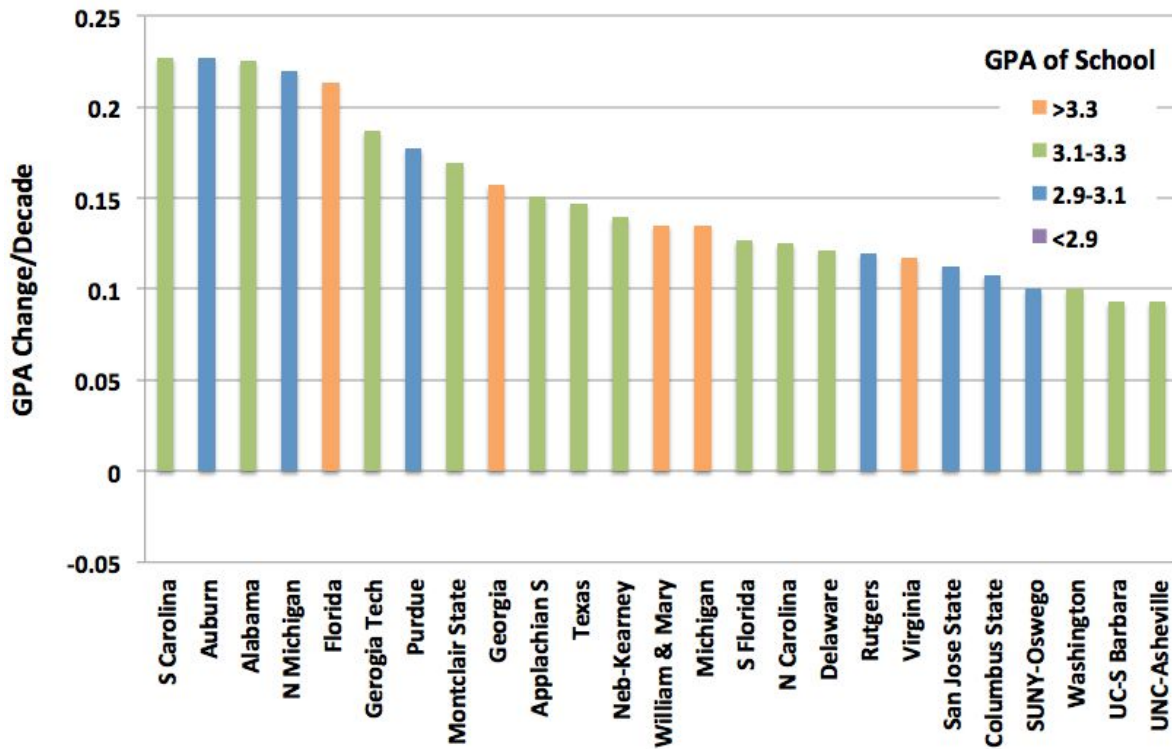
oldest state-chartered university and is the birthplace of the American system of public higher education, with its main campus in Athens, Georgia. The university is classified as an R1: Doctoral University with very high research activity (the highest classification), and as having a more selective undergraduate admissions, the most selective admissions category, while the ACT Assessment Student Report places UGA admissions in the "Highly selective" category, the highest classification (retrieved from uga.edu).

All the socio-economic and demographic changes that happened across the US higher educational system throughout the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s happened in Georgia as well: student protests, the civil rights movement, racial integration (Martin Luther King Jr. was from Georgia), a higher enrolment of female students, student protests during the Vietnam War, the marketization of HEIs, massification- an even higher number enrolment of students, changes in the program organization adding a greater number of free course choices – Georgia went through all of that.

Many questions in my study will be influenced by the report produced by Mathies et al (2005). Since tuition fees have been increasing over the decades, the state of Georgia in 1994 started to provide merit-based financial aid (HOPE scholarship) to students who graduated from high schools in Georgia who were attending either a public or private institution of higher education within the state (Georgia Student Finance Commission, 2005). Since college education in the US is expensive, many poor but good students are not be able to attend university. The HOPE scholarship provides full tuition, approved mandatory fees and a \$300 academic book allowance per year for students enrolled at public institutions. For students attending private institutions, HOPE provides \$3000 per year plus the Georgia Tuition Equalization Grant of \$900 per academic year (Georgia Student Finance Commission, 2005). Questions are being raised as to whether “faculties are reluctant to give low grades due to the fact that merit-aid scholarships are only available to students if they maintain a B average. In some cases, if a student loses their tax credit or merit scholarship, s/he will not be able to continue his/her education” (Mathies et al, 4).

Figure 3 shows the GPA changes from 2000 until 2009 in public schools, Georgia is at + 0.16. The average GPA change since 2000 at both public and private schools is 0.10 points per decade, but the range is wide.

GPA Changes Since 2000, Public Schools, Part 1



SOURCE: Rojstaczer (2013) gradeinflation.com

The general debates that are taking place throughout the US have affected the University of Georgia as well - while some cite student ability as the main cause for the rise of grades, others provide evidence that student ability does not account for the rise. Some other theories that have been examined and put forward as reasons for grade inflation include “educational credentialism and student consumerism, admission of a greater number of unprepared students, responding to diversity concerns -in an effort to keep poor and minority students on campus faculty graded them more leniently, faculty giving higher grades in return for higher teaching evaluations, and faculty having more interest (and spending more time) with graduate students and research” (Mathies et al 2005, 5).

GPA's were fairly steady from 1900s to 1950s. The first significant rise started in 1960s and early 1970s. GPA's were again steady through the 1980s, but a recent rise took place throughout the 1990s and 2000s, which will be the focus of this study.

Table 2 shows rise of the GPA's at the University of Georgia from 1913 to 2013

Table 2. University of Georgia Average grade awarded, Fall semester, left colon -Year, right colon – GPA

1913	2.33	1983	2.77	1997	3.02
1917	2.29	1984	2.79	1998	3.02
1950	2.40	1985	2.75	1999	3.02
1972	2.81	1986	2.72	2000	3.10
1973	2.87	1987	2.73	2001	3.12
1974	2.87	1988	2.74	2005	3.22
1975	2.86	1989	2.77	2006	3.21
1976	2.86	1990	2.76	2007	3.22
1977	2.83	1991	2.79	2008	3.25
1978	2.87	1992	2.83	2009	3.26
1979	2.86	1993	2.84	2010	3.27
1980	2.85	1994	2.91	2011	3.30
1981	2.81	1995	2.95	2012	3.33
1982	2.80	1996	2.98	2013	3.32

SOURCE: OIR grade reports & UGA Fact Book

The *UGA Today* news website reports that the acceptance rate at UGA is 54 percent, which means that the school is moderately selective. Students who are accepted have an extremely high GPA of 3.9, which means that they need to have attained almost straight A's in order to compete with other applicants. If a student's GPA is at or below the school average of 3.9, they will need a higher SAT or ACT score to compensate. However, the approximately 5,700 first-year students in the class of 2022 have an average weighted high school GPA of 4.04, which is a record at UGA (retrieved from news.uga.edu).

Since the grading scale goes up to 4.0, but the average high school GPA of the students accepted was 4.04, it means these students obtained extra grade points because they took more challenging classes, such as Honors, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) classes. For example, some high schools add 0.5 points to a student's grade for taking an Honors class and 1.0 points for taking an AP or IB class. Therefore, the scale can go up to 4.5 or even 5.0 in this case. Not only do the students strive for all straight A's in high

school, they also take extra courses in order to get extra points which leads to new generations breaking records for their GPAs. However, questions are being raised about whether high school grades are inflated, and whether students' mentality has changed by getting so many 'easy A's' from high school, therefore they expect that this will continue throughout their college education (Woodruff and Ziomek 2004, Ziomek and Svec 1997).

In November 2019, the Independent Educational Consultant Association (IECA) held a conference in Atlanta, Georgia where one of the topics was grade inflation in colleges. The same questions were being raised as in my thesis, noting that grade inflation has been on the rise for years, driven by parents, students, and administrators, while compressed GPAs are placing new pressures on the admissions process (retrieved from iecaonline.com).

1.2. Literature Review

In this literature review, I will try to present the most relevant literature on the topic about the rising GPAs of undergraduate students from 1980 until 2019. There are many intertwined factors that need to be included when debating this subject. It is interesting that something that should be a cause for celebration- many new young students are doing well and their GPAs show that every generation is better than the previous one - is actually causing much controversy across the nation, and in particular in states like Georgia. This part is divided into three sections: first, a review of literature written from the 1980s to the early 2000s, which reflects concerns about the rise of GPAs throughout the nation, followed by section in which I summarized a report on UGA's concerns on grade inflation produced in 2005, and the final section will present the most recent literature written on this topic.

1.2.1 Debates and discussion on the rise of GPAs from the 1980s to the early 2000s

The US higher education system went through several changes during the 1960s and 1970s such as the mass enrolment of students, marketization, student protests, changes in program organization etc. During the 1980s and 1990s several books were written critically reflecting on these changes and telling a story of how, in general, universities were 'dumbing down' or 'watering down' courses and academic standards in their eagerness to promote student success, increase their satisfaction and self-esteem, creating a strong sense of being entitled to easy success and good grades, even though they were often unwilling to work hard to achieve them. Some scholars concerned about grade inflation believe that current grade levels mean that students' work is no longer being assessed appropriately. Books reflecting these issues are

When Dreams and Heroes Died: A Portrait of Today's College Student (1980) by Arthur Levine, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987) by Alan Bloom, *The academic crisis of the community college* (1991) by McGrath and Spear, *Generation X Goes to College* (1996) by Peter Sacks, *The End of Knowledge in Higher Education* (1997) by Barnett and Griffin.

Open discussions and debates were held at universities, and some responses toward the concern that there is a possible case of grade inflation were that academia should go back to more rigorous academic standards “as the centerpiece of the academic enterprise” (Stone 1995, 12). Some researchers claim that many students in the 1990s started to believe that grades were more important for success in life than knowledge or hard work (Wingspread Group 1993). There is pressure on universities since there is an increasing degree to which higher education has an obligation toward the extra-academic market to please the consumer, and this pressure can be reduced significantly only if students begin to realize that the desire for a degree without the acquired knowledge is extremely short-sighted (Slaughter and Lesly 1997). Based on this literature, the question in my study is how professors perceive this notion on marketization and consumerism in higher education, where a student is being seen as a customer who needs to be satisfied.

Because most college grades today are A's or B's there is a concern that grades no longer reliably distinguish between various levels of academic performance. Still many believe that even if average grades have increased, the phenomenon of grade inflation is exaggerated and that the increase in grades between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s appears to be due to a combination of intertwined factors, only one of which is grade inflation (Hu and Kuh, 1999). Other possible factors that could explain the rise of the GPAs would be an improvement in teaching and learning methods, digitalization of HEIs, higher inner motivations of students, different selection of courses etc.

As already mentioned, several studies have shown that student grades are related to instructor rank (Ford et al 1987; Jackson, 1986; Sonner and Sharland, 1993; Williamson and Pier, 1985). The number of part-time faculty staff in the US increased by 91 percent compared with an increase of only 27 percent in the number of full-time faculty staff (Clery, 1998). The job position of adjunct teachers can be terminated at any time, giving universities flexibility when enrollment levels decrease, and their jobs may be dependent on students' evaluation of their work. Sooner's (2000) analysis showed that the average class grade on courses taught by adjuncts was higher than that in courses taught by full-time instructors: “the average grade given by fulltime faculty was a 2.6, compared with an average grade of 2.8 by adjuncts. Though the difference seems small, it is large enough to be statistically significant ($F = 16.41, p < .000$)” (6).

Grenzke (1998) reported that adjuncts are more likely to be evaluated by students than are full-time faculty staff. Another study shows that in general, students do not rate adjuncts as highly as full-time faculty staff and that full-time faculty staff are rated higher on their knowledge of the subject and presentation of the material (Jackson, 1986). Several other studies suggest that adjuncts are not as actively involved in scholarship, knowledge acquisition, or professional

development (Clery, 1998; Freeland, 1998; Rifkin, 1998) and feel less responsibility for maintaining academic integrity in the classroom (Freeland 1998; Rifkin, 1998). Regarding this literature, I would like to ask the professors about adjunct teachers grading habits in their department, whether they see there being any pressure on them, and if so, what the causes of this pressure are.

In 1999, the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) reported that academic disengagement of university students was on the rise, with a record-high 38 percent of students reporting they frequently felt bored in class, up from a low of 26 percent in 1985 (HERI 1999); in 1999, 75 percent of its respondents said they went to college in order to make more money, which is an increase of 21 percent since 1976, and by 2000, a record 40 percent of students said they frequently felt bored in class (HERI 2000, Wildavsky 2000). Does this mean that students see themselves as consumers, who need to be satisfied with a 'product'? One study showed that a "student culture subscribing to the idea that higher education operates as a consumer-driven marketplace, an idea most vividly demonstrated from the finding that over 42 percent of our sample believe that their payment of tuition "entitles" them to a degree" (Delucchi and Korgen 2002, p 104). Furthermore, since the US became the most market oriented higher education system, Slaughter and Laslie (2001) think that enrollment managers have started to talk about the undergraduate student market rather than about learners, so they have developed strategies to convince parents and students customers to "buy" a particular university "brand name", which has started to sound more like business talk. Therefore, student services professionals in the US became some kind of 'enrollment managers', selling a product (degree) to students who are customers or clients.

Many university professors have started being annoyed with talk of grade inflation. Kohn (2002) wrote about how all these complaints about grades in the US HEI system being too high and not deserved goes back to the past even as far as 1894, when a report by the Committee on Raising the Standard at Harvard University said that: "Grades A and B are sometimes given too readily — Grade A for work of no very high merit, and Grade B for work not far above mediocrity. ...One of the chief obstacles to raising the standards of the degree is the readiness with which insincere students gain passable grades by sham work" (Kohn 2002 ¶ 1). If someone thinks that there is such a thing as 'grade inflation', the burden of proof is on those who claim it to be so, and they should be required to prove that students are not turning in better assignments, and thus getting undeserved high grades, and that many other factors are not being taken into account: better teachers, better methods, digitalization, maybe students have more choice and better- designed courses and do not have to take ones outside their areas of interest, and maybe struggling students are now able to withdraw from a course before a poor grade appears on their transcripts (Kohn 2002). According to Kohn, there is no data that will prove and support such claims and has demonstrated that university students today get A's for the same work that used to receive B's or C's.

In the paper *Are We Doing the Right Thing?* Rosovsky and Hartley (2002) observe an increase in the number of academics and students during the decades since 1950s, pointing to the social

and economic turmoil in the 1960s and 1970s- where a high number of university students played an important role and had concerns about their lives and future career- as the start of the rising GPAs. Even though Kuhn (2002) pointed out there is no direct evidence, many have suggested that faculty members were reluctant to give poor grades to male students during those years because forcing them to drop out of school would have made them to go to war (Rosovsky and Hartley 2002). They summarize many factors from the past:

1) Obligatory courses for all students were abandoned (e.g. a foreign language, mathematics, and science) therefore giving students the opportunity to avoid courses that they do not like, or were less suited to their abilities.

2) Many universities opened up new courses and gave more free choices of courses, which gave students increase control over their curriculum. Students were allowed to withdraw from courses well into the semester (sometimes up to the final week). First-attempt grades were removed, letting students to take a class again and substitute the higher grade.

3) Student evaluations have played a role in promotion and tenure decisions

4) The rise of consumerism, universities operating like businesses for student clients, were the ones who resist 'grade inflation' could have problems enrolling enough students to be able not to cancel their courses

5) Watering down academic content (Rosovsky and Hartley 2002, 9).

At the turn of the 21st century many researchers found that at Harvard more than 91 percent of graduating seniors in 2001 were awarded honors (Dill 2003, 144). It is not just simply the case of 'grade inflation' but in the US a new term started to appear 'grade compression'- in which all students come to expect high grades, but differentiation will be made between A+, A, A-, B+ and so on. Questions are been raised as to whether 'grade compression' may lower students' motivation to study harder, since some think it is not that hard anymore to get an A. Furthermore, several scholars note that an increase in the quality of students starting university is not a sufficient explanation for this observed grade inflation because SAT scores are inflated too, as well as high school GPAs, overflowing into the college system (Dill, 2003).

There is a notion about the potential dangers of US-style market competition in higher education because less-selective colleges and universities may be motivated to imitate the practices of elite universities in order to compete, so they inflate grades. Dill (2003) points out that some professors think that Harvard is causing grade inflation in other universities,, because there is no nation-wide grading scale, so everyone assumes that a "B-plus from Harvard is better than a B-plus at [the college] where I teach... now that the GPA at Harvard is a 3.5, how can the average [college] student possibly compete in the world of work? So Harvard really compels everyone else to suffer grade inflation." (145).

1.2.2 Report on the University of Georgia, 2005

In the previous section I presented literature which raises concerns about the rising GPAs of undergraduate students from the 1980s until the early 2000s at the national level. In 2005, the Office of Institutional research at UGA produced report which raise questions and concerns about the same issues in their university.

The University of Georgia has 29,611 undergraduate students, of which 56,8 percent are female and 43,2 percent are male with the admission rate being 47 percent, and 88 percent of students who enrolled have a high school GPA 3.75 or above (retrieved from collegedata.com). The HOPE scholarship was introduced in 1993 and it stands for Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally. Since 1993, \$9 billion in lottery proceeds has been distributed to about 1.7 million Georgia scholarship recipients. To be eligible for a HOPE scholarship, which covers about 80 percent of tuition costs, high school students should have at least GPA of 3.0 and should maintain that through university, while the more lucrative Zell Miller HOPE scholarship pays 100 percent of the tuition fees, and requires a 3.7 high school GPA, which cannot fall below 3.3 once the student enrolls in a degree program (retrieved from gsfc.georgia.gov).

A report produced by Mathies et al (2005) examined the changes in GPAs from 1974 through to 2004 for 368,282 undergraduate student records. Descriptive analyses showed an increase in the term GPA and average SAT scores over the 31-year period.

Findings from the Mathies at al 2005 study point to three main conclusions:

- 1) An inncrease in GPAs from 2.77 in 1974 to 3.27 in 2004; the average GPA attained by students in this sample rose by 18 percent in the past 31 years, and much of the increase occurred in the latter 10-15 years. More specifically, in the late 1980s grades began to increase on a yearly basis (18).
- 2) The difference between the actual and predicted term GPA is that the actual GPA is lower than what was predicted in the earlier years (1984-1988) but the actual GPA is higher than was predicted for the more recent years. Data parallels that of other researchers who report female undergraduates earn higher grades than their male counterparts; the shifts in demand for certain majors may also influence the GPA. Coefficients also show that the relative contribution of HOPE scholarship increases in value over the years 1994-2004 (19).
- 3) The increase in grades over the 31 years of this study appears to be a combination of a number of variables. Although the literature suggests that students' background characteristics, students' ability, and the college where they enroll will explain to a large extent the variance of grades, the low R-square values in the preliminary regression analyses account for only about 20-24 % of the variance, indicates that other factors might be influencing grades (19).

Furthermore, with the growing number of females and non-white student within the student population, the possibility exists that these characteristics are influencing grades, and this leads to conclusion that "the influence of SAT, HS GPA, gender, race, and college of major are important yet only a part of the full answer" (20). Some also think that it is possible that students may be able to manipulate their grades by choosing the classes they take based on the knowledge of which professors grade more leniently, after that kind of data became available online.

In agreement with the general literature about the rising GPAs at the national level, Mathies et al (2005) also find that over decades, an ever higher number of undergraduate students have been taught by part-time faculty staff at UGA: in 1974, 51 percent of the lower-level undergraduate courses were taught at UGA by either full, associate, or assistant professors; in 2004, only 44 percent of lower level undergraduate courses were taught by full, associate, or assistant professors, and for upper division courses in 1974, 78 percent of undergraduate courses were taught by full, associate, or assistant professors, while in 2004, 66 percent of upper level undergraduate courses were taught by full, associate, and assistant professors (22). One of the questions for my study is- according to the personal insights of the professors, do part-time faculty staff and adjunct teachers assign higher grades? Since the promotion of adjunct teachers depends on the students evaluating their work, do they assign better grades in order to get better teaching evaluations?

This studied provided a rich insight into the situation at the University of Georgia, gave me ideas for my research questions and the basis for the interview guide. However this study has its limitations: it cannot take into account whether new teaching and learning methods have appeared in different disciplines and how important they were in the rise of GPAs, it does not provide any insights into inner psychological motivations of students and their behavior in the classroom, and cannot state whether a grade is well deserved.

1.2.3 Concerns continued after 2005 until 2019

In the paper with a provocative title *Does education corrupt?*, Oleinik (2008) states that from 1993 until 2008, in just 15 years, there were 84 publications in scientific journals discussing the issue of ever higher GPAs and raising the question about grade inflation, while "fourteen of these (16.7%) take the form of letters to editors and of editorial material, and only 56 texts (66.7%) present the findings of original research and theories" compared to the general public interest were "newspapers and magazines, by contrast, carried 989 items discussing grade inflation during the same period" (156). Oleinik concludes that "If grade inflation continues, the university will keep corrupting both students and professors instead of opening minds in the search for truth" (163).

Schwager (2009) raises concerns that if there is a case of grade inflation, it can hurt minority students and students from poor backgrounds the most because the students from the higher classes may benefit from grade inflation since this protects them from competition from those high-ability students who come from lower classes. For example, employers may think that since higher number of students have so many A's, those students coming from a non-white background have an 'inflated' GPA, or that they enrolled on the program because of affirmative action. This paper analyzed how a grading policy that awards good grades to mediocre students affects the labor market. Therefore, if there is a case of lenient grading, it will not help poor or minority students, it will reduce their chance of getting good or highly paid jobs and reduce their chances of social mobility.

Ju and Franz (2009) think that "student nuisance"- students badgering professors by asking them for higher grades- is also a factor in rising GPAs, and they collected several studies which show that grades directly affect students' well-being, so students rate professors according to the grades they have received. In order to get better evaluations from students some instructors could potentially "bribe" students by giving easy A's and B's. Their paper concludes that students are more likely to badger the professor if the professor is lenient and concludes that most of the surveyed professors agree that students' nuisance is annoying and costly because it is taking away their time and energy.

Bar et al (2009) report on an experiment carried at the Cornell University where Prof. Alan Bloom taught and published *The Closing of the American Mind*. They started publishing median course grades on the internet in 1998, and after 10 years, in 2008 an analysis found out after giving students this new information online, students paid attention and selected leniently graded courses, or in other words, they started to avoid courses were they saw that professor was grading 'too harshly', which, if not for this online information, students would otherwise have selected.

Hill (2011) published a paper raising concerns about how free academics are in regards to grading, and concludes that the number of part-time academics or those employed for one-year continues to increase on university campuses as the administration attempts to cut costs, and these instructors do not enjoy the same employment protections as tenured academic staff which could lead to a loss of academic freedom. Jewell et al (2011) ask the question whose fault is it for this situation and who should be blamed for grade inflation, stating that departments seem to find that raising grades is in their best interests, perhaps because at some point the department has become a service department, and that this sort of inflation may result from "national or regional trends in competition for students" and some universities "may find it counterproductive to actively discourage grade inflation" (1199).

Rojstaczer and Healy (2012) claim that a "consumer-based" approach to undergraduate education has also resulted in a desire to keep students pleased, and the way to measure the

degree to which students are satisfied is to allow them to evaluate their professors and instructors, (if the instructors are young their future job may depend on it), and since there is absence of oversight from leadership, grades will „almost always rise in an academic environment where professors sense that there are incentives to please students“ (17-18.) Furthermore, many believe that when college students perceive that the average grade in a class will be an A, they will not try to give their best, and maybe even have the attitude that that class is an 'easy A' (Babcock, 2010).

Pattison et al 2013, after looking through the great body of literature on grade inflation titled their article *Is the Sky Falling?*, but contrary to much of the existing literature, they could not find the exact support for the existence of grade inflation in secondary or postsecondary education, or any reason to believe that US grading standards are different now than they were 40 years ago.

According to Stroebe (2016) many university professors believe that the average student prefers courses that are “entertaining, require little work, and result in high grades, they feel under pressure to conform to those expectations“ (800). Some professors would argue that teaching evaluations that they get from students are biased and present only students attitude toward the course and reciprocal satisfaction with the grade they get from professor rather than teaching effectiveness (Birnbaum, 2000; Ryan et al 1980; Simpson and Siguaw, 2000), one way to improve ratings was to grade more leniently and lower the academic standards. This argument has been made by others in the 1990s (Greenwald and Gillmore, 1997; Krautmann and Sander, 1999) and it continued to be emerging in the newest literature throughout the 2000s (Babcock, 2010; Braga et al 2014; Carrell and West, 2010; Felton et al 2008; Johnson, 2003; Weinberg et al 2009; Yunker and Yunker, 2003).

Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) claim that new generations of students, especially after 2013, have increased demands for “safe spaces”, “trigger warnings”, but more importantly for my study, that one UGA professor, Richard Watson, tried to introduce a “stress reduction policy”, to allow students to decide their own grades in an effort to ease their stress. This was all over the news in Georgia and across the US, and apparently the point of this policy was that if any student felt “unduly stressed by a grade for any assessable material or the overall course,” they can “email the instructor indicating what grade [they] think is appropriate, and it will be so changed” with “no explanation” being required” (Downey 2017 ¶ 4). The question is raised do students need to be ‘coddled’ with good grades?

US HEIs developed grade appeal policies during the 1980s, and these policies according to Klafter (2019) came about just as the transition of higher education into a mass consumer market was completed, and colleges felt compelled to present a more “nurturing and softer image” (331). Klafter further explains how college students have mastered these procedures and deadlines that provide the possibility of higher grades, which has promoted grade inflation.

Regarding rising GPAs at the UGA and across the nation, frequently mentioned factors are:

- a) High number of adjunct teachers are giving 'easy As' in order to get higher evaluations from students, and these can be important for promotion, especially for younger instructors in the US colleges.
- b) The marketization of HEIs – the student being seen as a customer who needs to be satisfied with their grades
- c) Students are better academically prepared than previously, they are studying harder; new teaching methods appeared leading to higher GPAs; digitalization helped students become better prepared higher GPAs
- d) Massification has lowered expectation and caused grade inflation
- e) Merit scholarship in Georgia- only students with B average can get this. Does this cause some pressure on professors' grading because students could lose this scholarship and they would not be able to continue their studies?
- g) Recent generations of students are more stressed, fragile, and need to be 'coddled' (overprotected), with good grades
- h) Changes in the grading policies and practices; changes in the program organization that could affect GPAs – more course choices and allowing students to withdraw before failing
- i) The changing demographics of the student population, such as a higher number of female students is causing higher overall GPAs

Turning now to the significance of this study after careful review of the literature, very little was found about the experiences of professors, because quantitative studies that focus specifically on the rise of GPAs cannot take into account the experiences of the particular professors who give grades in a particular department, and cannot take into account new teaching methods, quality of the students effort, effects of digitalization, new learning methods of students, motivation of a student etc. The rationale for investigating academics perspectives on the rise of the GPAs is that they are the ones who can provide us with insights about: a) whether do they see students becoming like customers who needs to be pleased with their grades, b) whether they feel economic pressure in a market-driven higher education system in a such a way that could cause them to grade leniently c) whether mass enrollment has lowered their expectations from students, d) whether part-time teachers feel more pressure because of the evaluations by students which can affect their job, e) whether HOPE scholarship is causing them to grade more leniently, f) whether their department has had any changes in grading policies and practices, and g) whether something has changed in terms of the organization of the courses and programs in their department. Since there is a lot of harsh criticism regarding grade inflation, particular attention will be paid to the professors' perspectives whether their department suffers from 'grade inflation' and whether something should be done about it.

1.3. Research Problem and Research Questions

This study will address the perceptions of UGA professors about the causes for GPAs of undergraduate students being on the rise. As mentioned in the previous section, much of the literature is based on quantitative studies where it indeed is shown that GPAs are on the rise, but not much is known about the perspective of the professors – those who themselves decide which grades should be given to students. Since there are disagreements in the literature about whether students are just better or there is a case of grade inflation, it would be interesting to find out professors' opinions.

Universities have a process of grading that is based on an 'honor system' which is unregulated, but professors are expected to grade fairly. Grading in the soft fields can be very complicated and sometimes very arbitrary. Reading the literature on higher education student assessment I see that there are opinions that "the fundamental judgments teachers make about the quality of student work remain subjective and substantially hidden from the students' view" (Sadler 2005, 175). Sometimes, the policy may not contain a section with detailed guidance on how, and on what bases, judgments about the quality of student performance, and the if the policy contains this type of guidance, it is "rare to find an explicit, coherent and well-argued account of the supporting philosophical or educational principles" (175).

Since professors could grade freely and at UGA, and there is no 'university wide curve' (such as at Princeton University where they admitted that there is a grade inflation and the maximum number of the students getting A's is now 35 percent), it would be interesting to find out what professors at UGA perceive are the causes of the increasing GPAs of their undergraduate students.

This study thus seeks to address the following research questions:

- 1) What are UGA professors' perceptions of why the GPAs of their undergraduate students have been on the rise, especially in the last three decades?
- 2) What are the most and least important factors mentioned in the relevant literature as being contributors toward the increasing GPAs? Do professors think there are other important factors not mentioned in the literature?
- 3) How have the professors experienced this rise in the GPAs - for example as an improvement in the teaching and learning methods, as 'grade inflation' that is corrupting the US higher education system, or a mix of complex intertwined factors?

1.4 Thesis Outline

This first chapter provided the historical background and a literature review of the rise of the undergraduate students' GPAs in the United States and at the University of Georgia, with the notion that GPAs are higher in the humanities and social sciences than in STEM fields. It points out disagreements in the literature whether there is a case of grade inflation or teaching and learning methods improved, or maybe there is an interplay between many other factors. The second chapter will provide an empirical map of the factors related to the rise of the GPAs and conceptual framework related to problems of grading and GPAs. The third chapter discusses the research methodology providing details about the research design as well as how data was collected and analyzed. The fourth chapter provides the findings from the interviews by means of describing the patterns that emerged, professors' responses about the concerns from the literature and their additions to it. The fifth chapter includes the overall discussion, linking the findings to relevant literature. The sixth and final chapter includes the conclusion with limitations and suggestions for future research on the topic.

2 Theory and the conceptual framework

College grading is an exceptionally complex phenomenon because it is subject to multiple factors. It could be that many external social forces are in interplay such as the Vietnam war, marketization of higher education institutions, mass enrolment, as well as internal changes of the participants such as students and faculty staff, changes in the grading policies and practices, changes in the department organizations and other factors. Therefore, without a clear comprehension of which factors are related to individual grades and a thorough discussion about the changing nature of those factors over time, one is “unlikely to decipher the facts from the myths in the college grading controversy” (Hu 2005, 9).

What makes it very hard and complex to determine whether there is a grade inflation are notions that we need to consider from educational researches, psychologists, and sociologists:

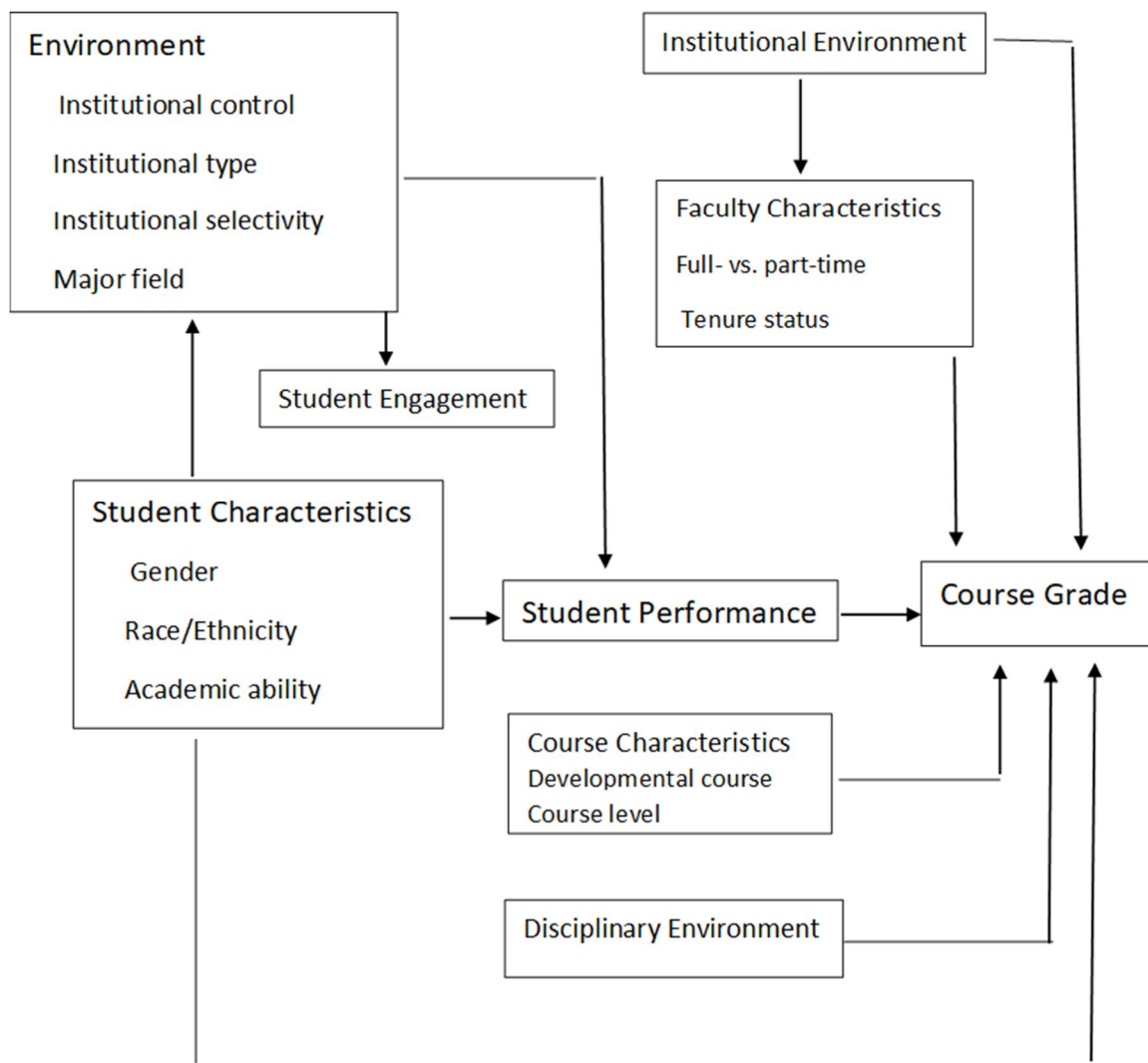
- 1) As already mentioned, educational research work uses a combination of disciplinary perspectives examining grade inflation (Kuh and Hu 1999)
- 2) Psychologists suggest that the inner motivations of students could vary and change from time to time (Bandura 1994)
- 3) Several sociologists think that what we need to take into consideration is also the background characteristics of a student such as gender, race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status in understanding academic performance and college grades (Coleman et al 1982; Farkas and Hotchkiss, 1989; Van-Laar et al 1999).

Hu (2005) states that the grades professors give to their students are an indicator of student performance in the eyes of the faculty member, therefore “for this reason, students, faculty, contextual measures of the course, discipline, and the institution are major components in determining college grades and explaining the differences among college grades“ (10).

Figure 4 taken from Hu (2005) represents all the factors that influence grades: the course characteristics, faculty characteristics, student characteristics, the institutional environment, disciplinary environment and student engagement.

Figure 4

The Determinants of the Student Course Grade



SOURCE: Hu (2005), 11.

Several researchers have pointed out the lack of other direct measures on students' performance, so there is no way of determining the changing quality of undergraduate work, because researchers would need "subject by subject, samples of student work responding to the same 'prompts,' judged by the same faculty members using the same criteria, over two or three decades in order to determine the changing relationship between grades and performance" (Adelman, 1999, 198).

Selection of courses by students impacts grades in the sense that the smaller the class is, the higher the grades are, and different levels of courses create differences in student grades- the higher the course level the higher the grade (Sooner 2000). There are differences in the grading

practices in different disciplines, especially between the STEM fields and arts and humanities. Data shows that grades for courses in the humanities and social sciences are higher than grades in other departments (Kuh and Hu, 1999, Johnson 2003), while fields related to science and mathematics tend to have rigorous grading practices (Willingham et al 1990, Rojstaczer 2012). A study by Willingham et al revealed that “biology, physical science, engineering, and calculus had the strictest grading policies, whereas physical education, studio art, music, theater, and education maintained lenient grading systems” (Hu 2005, 13).

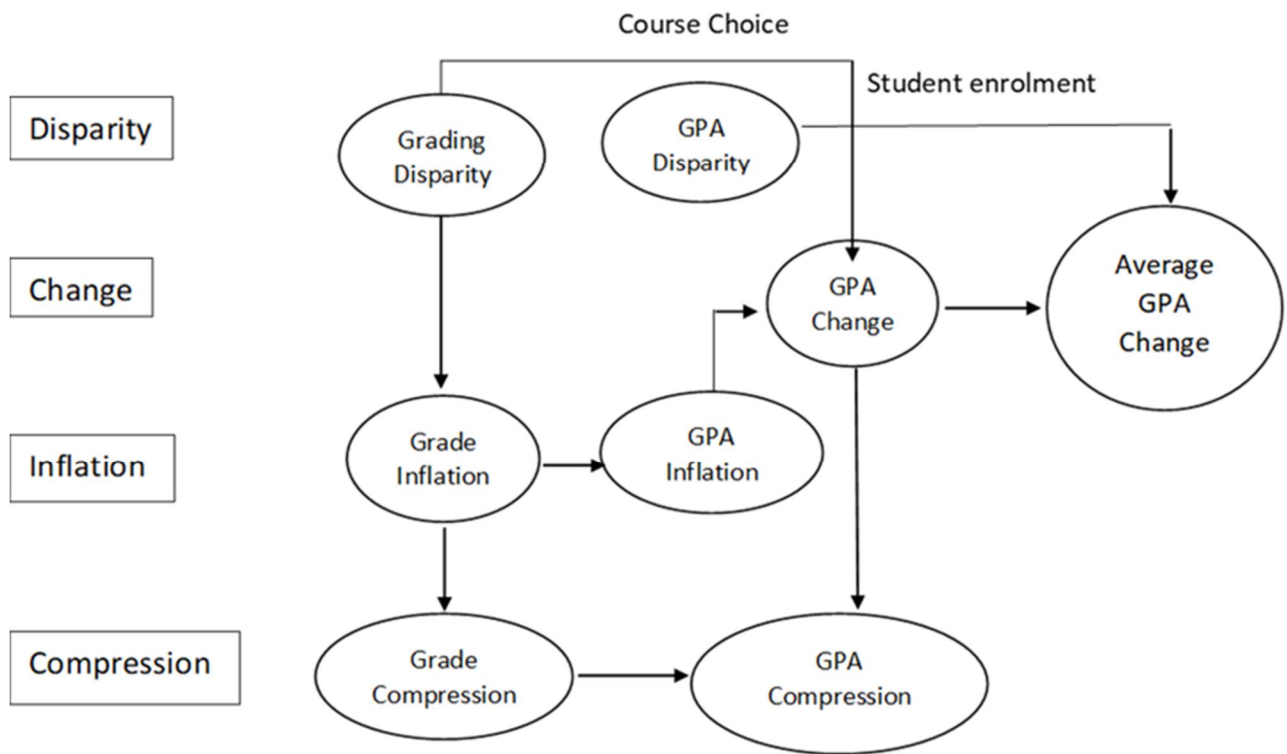
Hu (2005) states that cross-sectional analyses reveal that college grades are influenced by a variety of factors: the characteristics of the student, faculty, course, institution, and discipline, therefore “this understanding forms a foundation for an improved conceptualization of grading problems in higher education“ (14). Most research in the area of rising GPAs or ‘grade inflation’ is not based on a clearly stated conceptual framework.

Going carefully through my literature review there was no shared common ground which guided these studies. Only Hu (2005) tried to develop a conceptual framework, with explanation of the links between grade disparity, grade increase, grade inflation and grade compression:

- Grade Increase- Average grades in a given course increase over time. The consequence: The grade increase itself is not necessarily a problem, as long as this increase is accompanied by appropriate increases in the students’ performance or other types of merit-related indicators
- Grade Inflation- A similar quality of academic performance in a given course is awarded higher grades at the present time than before. It refers to a “mean shift” upward in student grades in the given coursework (19). The consequence: grade inflation favors more recent generations over the previous ones.
- Grade Compression- Variations in student course grades are limited so much that grades can no longer differentiate student performance. It refers to a “decreased correlation” in students’ course grades and underlying merit-related measures such as student academic performance. The consequence: Grade compression diminishes the function of grades in differentiating students’ academic performance and effort and violates vertical equity in college grading processes. (19).
- Grading Disparity- Similar academic performances may be rewarded differently in different courses or in different academic units. Grading disparity affects student course choices in college and can also lead to GPA and grade inflation (19).

Figure 5 Conceptual framework

Conceptual Framework: The Interrelations of Grading Problems

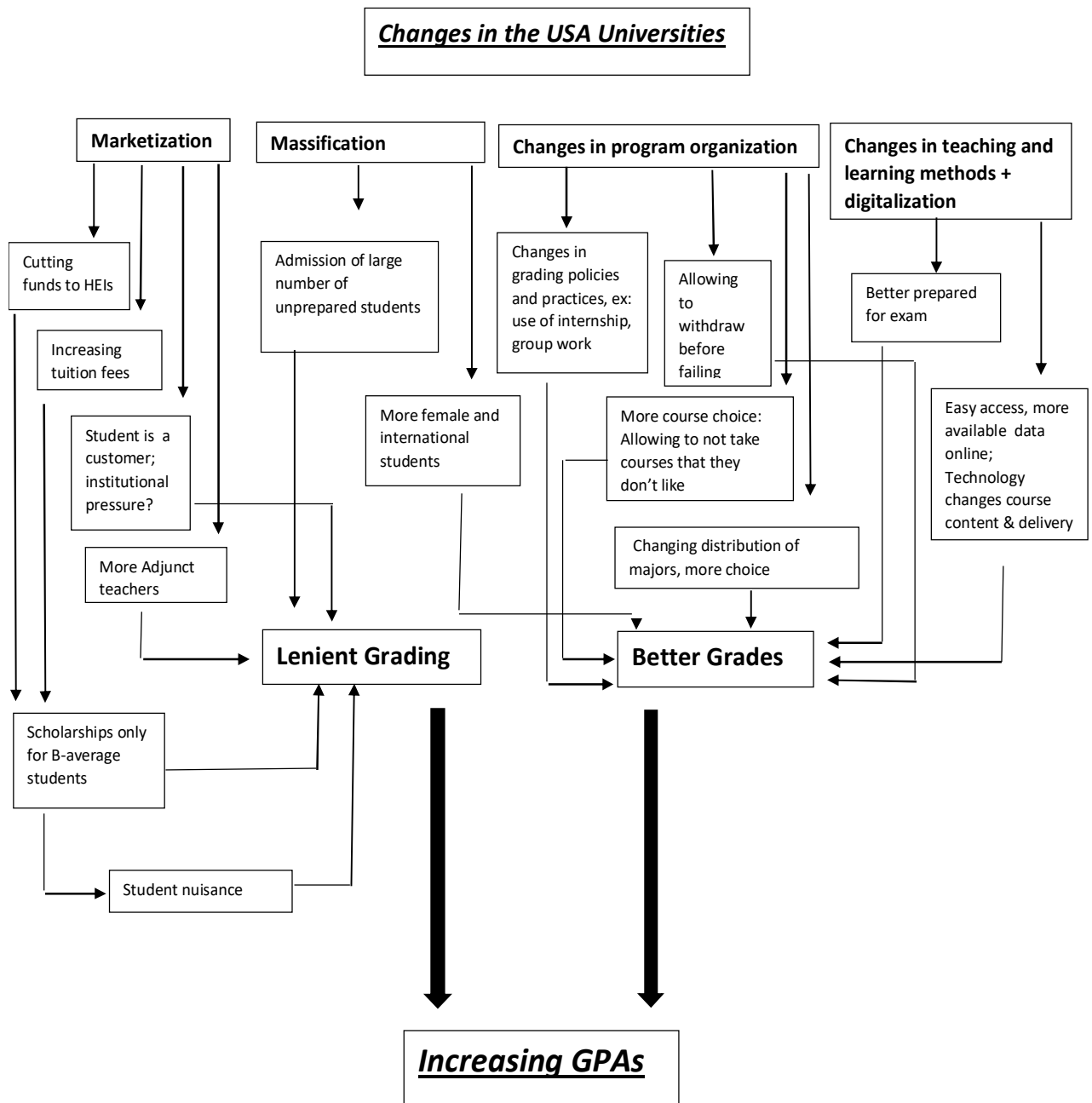


SOURCE: Hu (2005), 21.

Reading the literature, I realized how complex the situation is when I tried to develop the empirical map of the factors that are possible contributors toward the increasing GPAs of undergraduate students:

- 1) The marketization of HEIs has led to the cutting of funds from the government which then had an effect on increasing tuition fees, which further leads to students being seen as customers or consumers who needs to be pleased (Barnett and Griffin 1997, Deluchi and Korgen 2002); another effect of marketization was the hiring of more part-time instructors, who possibly grade leniently trying to please students, because their future promotion could depend on the evaluations from those students; since tuition fees have increased, students from lower income families need scholarships in order to be able to continue their studies, which some suggest could lead toward lenient grading too (Furedi 2010, Mathies et al 2005, Rosovsky and Healy 2002, Slaughter and Lesly 1997).
- 2) Massification has led to the changing demographics, and some think to the enrolment of a higher number of academically unprepared students. In an effort to keep them on campus, the faculty is grading them more leniently; at the same time, a higher number of female students has contributed toward the higher GPAs; overall there are concerns that massification, together with the marketization of the HEIs has led toward teachers giving 'inflated' grades in return for higher teaching evaluations which lead to promotions, increased salary and tenure (Birbaum 1977, Bloom 1987, Mansfield 2001, Delucchi and Korgen 2002, Bar et al 2009, Arum 2011, Rojstaczer 2012).
- 3) Changes in the organization of departments and programs has led to students having more course choices and selecting those that match their interests better, avoiding courses which they find uninteresting or difficult, and they have more information on the grading habits of the teacher; there is also a new possibility - withdrawing before failing or receiving the final grade up to almost the end of the course (Birbaum 1977, Sabot and Wakeman 1991, Merrow 2004, Matheis et al 2005)
- 4) Changes in teaching and learning methods in the era of the digitalization – students are better prepared, they have more online data, easier access to documents, teachers are better prepared to present the course material (Kohn 2002, Matheis er al 2005, Pattison 2013)

Figure 6, empiricial map of the factors



These four major themes appeared in the literature and every one of them has small branches that have possibly led to either lenient grading or better grades that were deserved. Joined together, all these factors led toward the constant increasing GPAs. However, it is important to warn that this is not an explanation, but just a mapping of the factors mentioned in the literature. Professors are free to reject or add more factors onto this map, while this serves as an orientation in the interviews on this topic so complex full of contradictory statements.

Figure 6 shows the way that many factors could potentially lead toward: 1) **Lenient grading** and 2) **Better grades** - which are not 'inflated'. Both lenient grading, and better grades which are not inflated could together lead toward increasing GPAs.

Connected to lenient grading is the marketization of HEIs which has led to the cutting of funds and increasing tuition fees, while Slaughter and Lasely (1997) claim that this has caused students to be increasingly seen as customers. Also, the cutting of funds has led to universities having more part-time and adjunct teachers who, according to the literature, may grade leniently. At UGA, the HOPE scholarship is only available to those students who can maintain at least a B average and according to the literature, this may cause student nuisance and also lenient grading. Massification has led to the admission of large numbers of students, and it has two components – one is that colleges have larger portions of students not so well academically prepared, the other one is that female students on average have better GPAs which has led to institutions having overall better GPAs (Barnett & Griffin 1997). Changes in the program organization led in many ways toward the better grades and better overall GPAs as well as changes in teaching and learning methods. This empirical map of factors helped me organize the themes and topics in my semi-structured interviews.

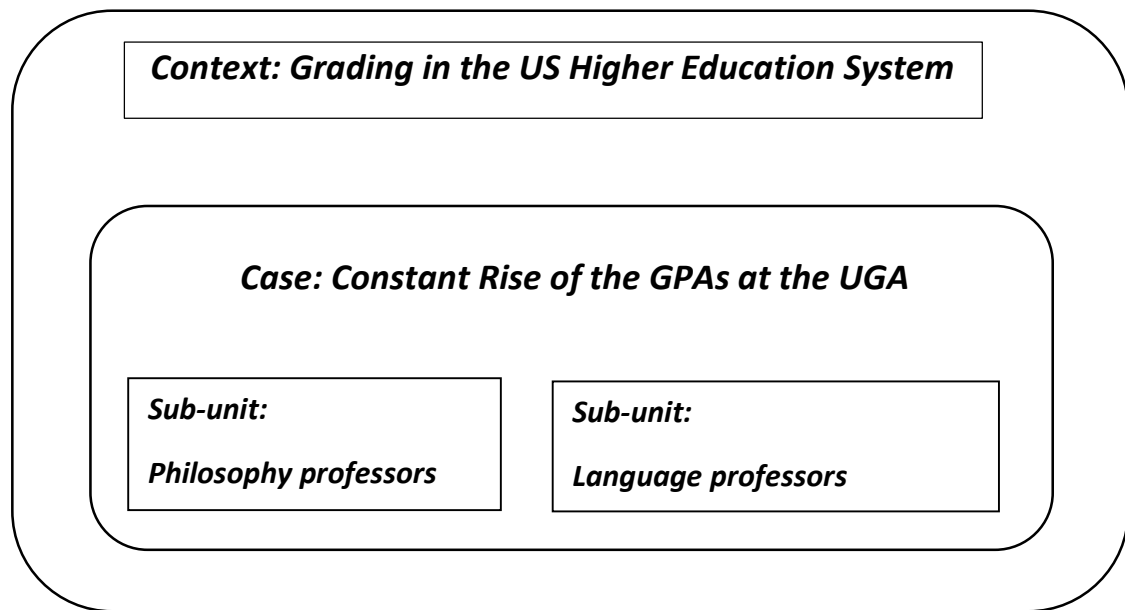
3 Research Methodology

3.1 The research paradigm and research design

This study is situated within the constructivist research paradigm in which phenomena and their meanings are understood as being socially and historically constructed (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2009) and individuals contribute to making of meaning within the context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The constructivist research paradigm provides a firm foundation for research especially in humanities, education and other behavioral sciences because meaning and reality is constructed by social and historical actors. My role as a researcher was to explore in depth the viewpoints of the professors by posing open-ended questions allowing participants to construct meaning in a given situation (Creswell, 2009).

The case study research design approach has been adopted in this study because it corresponds to the constructivist paradigm. The case study design seemed appropriate for this study as it will allow for a rigorous, thorough analysis of the perceptions of professors about why GPAs of the undergraduate students are on the rise. According to Yin (2017, 15) a case study is “an empirical method that investigates real-world contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident”. The case study method is frequently used in qualitative research and involves an “in-depth study” of the unit of analysis (Creswell, 2009, 43) through a "detailed exploration of a specific case" (Bryman, 2012, 45).

A case study research design can either be classified as holistic or it can have embedded units of analysis (Yin 2003). A holistic case study focuses on one single case, whereas an embedded case study can have more than one unit of analysis or sub-units. The contextual setting for this study is the broader context of grading in the US higher education system and the case refers to the constant rise of the GPAs of undergraduate students at UGA for decades (or grade inflation) where the most common grades is an A. The participants represent the embedded sub-units of the case study.



SOURCE: Adapted from Yin 2003

3.1.1 Definition and selection of the cases

There are four main groupings that characterise academic disciplines, namely, hard pure (natural sciences), soft pure (humanities and social sciences), hard applied (science-based professions) and soft applied (social professions) (Becker 1994). The programmes selected for this embedded case study- philosophy and language undergraduate programmes are categorised as soft pure according to this typology. The disciplinary context is of relevance to the selection of the case for this work as professors from the soft pure disciplines especially may have harder time defending the grade they give since this policy may or may not contain a section with detailed guidance on how, and on what bases, judgments about the quality of student performance should be made and appropriate grades assigned, and ‘if the policy contains this type of guidance, it is nevertheless rare to find an explicit, coherent and well-argued account of the supporting philosophical or educational principles’ (Sadler 2005, 3).

The main target of this study is on the following two groups of UGA professors who teach at the Franklin College of Arts and Sciences – Department of Humanities:

- Philosophy professors (3)
- Language professors (4)

The rationale for selecting the Department of Humanities is due to the fact that rise of GPAs is higher in that field, and most of the literature produced points to ‘grade inflation’ being most visible in humanities (Birnbaum 1977, Bloom 1987, Mansfield 2001, Mathies et al 2005). The

case study design method is used to explore how they experience the constant rise in the GPAs of their undergraduate students due to the fact that in the literature there are polarized opinions with multi-varied explanations. This, along with the exploratory nature of the study, justifies the use of the case study method. The particular advantage of using the case study method is in asking a “how” or “why” questions about “A contemporary set of events, over which a researcher has little or no control” (Yin 2017, 13).

3.2 Recruitment of Participants

As recommended by the professors contacted from UGA, the participants that were recruited include full-time employed professors at the University of Georgia’s Franklin College of Arts and Sciences from the department of philosophy and languages. Through contacts that the UiO and UGA have I got in touch with professors who work in these two departments. The response was slow, but I managed to get seven participants in total, three philosophy and four language professors. Purposeful random sampling was used as a strategy to recruit participants as it involves targeting a specific group of participants to gather data from (Creswell, 2009), and it adds an element of “credibility” to the study and “reduces bias” (Patton, 2002, 244). In this study, the philosophy and language professors were the specific groups that were focused on. I sent an email with details regarding the study and the consent form. When approval was granted by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), the recruitment of participants began.

Philosophy professors were recruited after sending out 15 emails, of which five responded that are interested in my study, but two of them were too busy, so I selected those three that had time to do interviews. The language department is much bigger than the philosophy department, and so I sent 50 emails to professors and got eight responses, of which two said that they were very busy but interested in my study and sent me papers on grade inflation, two said that they will not give me an interview but had a thorough response on the US grading system, and four accepted to give me an interview which was enough for my study. The interviews were carried out via Skype.

3.3 Participants

The personal names of the professors and the courses they teach in their departments will not be identified by this study in order to protect their anonymity.

The three professors from the philosophy department had been teaching at the University of Georgia for:

- philosophy professor A, long-term employee at UGA
- philosophy professor B, short-term employee at UGA (previously long-term at another university)
- philosophy professor C, long-term employee at UGA

Four professors from the Language department were teaching at the University of Georgia for:

- language professor A, long-term employee at UGA
- language professor B, short-term employee at UGA
- language professor C, long-term employee at UGA
- language professor D, short-term employee at UGA (worked at another university)

All seven university professors were aware of their rights as participants of this study, as they themselves had conducted these kinds of studies and were participating in other studies as well.

3.4 Data Collection

Interviews

The core source for data collection in this study were interviews with philosophy and language professors. This was the most appropriate method for an in-depth exploration of professors' perceptions about the rising GPAs of their students. Investigating university professors' perspectives is important in order to explore the questions raised in the body of literature. It is also important to investigate whether or not philosophy professors' views on these phenomena are similar to the views of language professors.

Before interviews started with the UGA professors, a pilot interview was conducted with two professors from the University of Oklahoma in order to test the questions. The pilot interview was useful in that it revealed areas where improvements to the interview guide were necessary, and it was identified that there were no problems such as unclear or confusing questions (Bryman, 2012). Before the interview, I sent an email to the professors stating that my interview guideline would be based on the UGA report produced by Mathies et al (2005), and some adjustments were made to the interview guidelines to ensure that questions were reasonable, appropriate for the study aims and unambiguous prior to the commencement of the interviews

with the participants. The interviews were semi-structured. Semi-structured interviews were most suitable to ensure that respondents are not limited in their responses, but that they have the freedom to express their views (Bryman, 2012). The questions posed in this study were open-ended allowing the participants to describe their experiences as well as raise additional opinions. According to (Creswell, 2009) the use of open-ended questions allows participants the freedom to express their views. The interview guides contained elements of “probing, specifying, and direct questions” as suggested by Bryman (2012, 497), to evoke in-depth views from participants.

The interview guides also provided structure while at the same time allowing flexibility for participants to openly express their opinions. Towards the end of the interviews, participants were also asked if they wanted to provide any further information regarding the discussion. The interviews were held in October 2019. The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 50 minutes in length.

3.5 Data Analysis

All seven interviews with professors were audiotaped and transcribed and further analyzed into various themes. The thematic analysis approach was used in this study. Thematic analysis is used in qualitative research and focuses on examining themes or patterns of meaning within data (Daly, 1997). The thematic analysis approach is often used in qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2012) and is used to make sense of shared meanings and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). Furthermore, this approach can be used for “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into, patterns of meaning (themes)” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, 2). Rather than allowing the themes to emerge passively, thematic analysis goes beyond simply counting phrases or words in a text (as is the case in content analysis) and explores explicit and implicit meanings within the data (Guest, 2012)

A six-step thematic analysis approach designed by Braun and Clarke, (2006, 2012) was used to guide the analysis in this study.

The steps taken in this study are detailed below:

- 1) Becoming familiar with the data – engaging carefully into conversations, after each interview I wrote down the aspects of the interviews that were most relevant to this study. I transcribed the data, ensuring that the participants own words were used. Transcribing took place directly after each interview had been held and resulted in a total of 54 pages. I read through the transcribed interviews, highlighting sections of the transcriptions that were basic and crucial to the aims of the study, as the participants sometimes drifted away from the topic. I started noticing similarities and differences both inside the units and between the units in their perceptions.

- 2) Creating initial codes - this was useful during the writing phase as I was able to compare and contrast excerpts with relative ease. The codes were created through re-reading each interview transcript and by creating a label for each initial code that appeared interesting and meaningful.
- 3) Searching for perception patterns of meaning - Themes were identified through carefully organizing each code into relevant categories.
- 4) Reviewing themes - after I merged related topics, I then refined the patterns and combine similar patterns together. This was a detailed process of ensuring that the patterns best represent the participant's views and perceptions.
- 5) Defining and naming the perception patterns - labelling the patterns appropriately and ensuring that they represent the essence and core of participants' views and perceptions. The patterns were then defined and named appropriately. This involved revising and paying attention to the terminology used to name each pattern to best represent the data. After further refining, I noted more similarities and differences in perceptions and views across the two groups.
- 6) Reporting - writing up the findings, discussion and conclusion by providing explanations of the data as well as by using interview excerpts to support the findings. During the data analysis, it was important to ensure that multiple perspectives were considered. I considered the similarities and differences in perceptions and experiences between two groups of professors, by paying attention to the words or use of language by the participants, in order to better understand their experiences and viewpoints.

3.6 Quality Criteria

This section describes how quality criteria were maintained in the study. Validity standards in qualitative research are more challenging because of the “necessity to incorporate both rigor and subjectivity as well as creativity into the scientific process“ (Whitemore et al 2001, 521). Validity in qualitative research involves the use of procedures that check for the accuracy of the findings (Creswell 2014), with one of the strategies suggested for ensuring validity in qualitative research includes using “rich, thick description to convey the findings” (251). In order to ensure richness and rigor detailed descriptions of the findings will be given, with including aspects such as selecting appropriate “samples and contexts” (Tracy, 2010, 841). The participants, in this case philosophy professor and language professors seemed appropriate for the aims of this study. Furthermore, trustworthiness and rigor are seen as an important means

of ensuring validation of qualitative research, as trustworthiness can be used to assess quality in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Qualitative research has been criticized for lacking rigor when compared to quantitative research, which uses experimental, objective methods, with common criticisms that qualitative research is subjective, anecdotal, biased, and lacks generalizability (Cope 2014). One of the criteria used to strengthen quality and establish trustworthiness is credibility (Bryman, 2012). For this study, the first method used for achieving credibility is thick description. Tracy (2010) advises researchers to show credibility by providing rich, descriptive detail about the data rather than telling the reader what to think. I tried to describe the findings in an in-depth way and to show the complexity of data by providing sufficient detail and paying attention to the subtlety of professors' perceptions. Transferability can be strengthened with detailed findings and discussion at the end of the study. Instead of generalizability, qualitative research should provide rich in-depth descriptions so that readers can make their own judgements about how the results could be transferred to other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The second method used to gain credibility in this study is multivocality, as it involves making use of various voices thus providing multiple viewpoints to support the credibility of the research (Tracy 2010). Professors from two different programs, who had different lengths of teaching experience were all selected to provide a diverse viewpoints. I was careful to not put words into the participants' mouth, as careful attention was paid to ensuring that the participant's own views and opinions were reported and that the questions posed were not leading. In addition, probing was used to ensure that participants describe their views and opinions in detail and in their own words. The strategy used was to start the discussion with the topic from literature and keep it conversational, while making sure that the professors did not drift away from the topic, therefore simultaneously following the interview guide in which the topics and categories were decided in advance.

3.7 Ethical Issues

Approval for this study to be conducted was obtained from the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD). In accordance with the UiO's and the NSD's guidelines, an information email about the project and a consent form for the participants was compiled. The university professors from UGA were already familiar with these types of studies, however I provided them with detailed information about the project, the type of data being collected, what participation in this project would involve, how the information provided would be used and the duration it would be kept for. The participants were recruited only after approval from the NSD had been granted and professors from UGA who cooperate with the UiO had given their

approval as well. Participants were notified of their right to opt out of the study should they wish to do so. In order to keep the data anonymous, the names of the professors have been delated, as well as which courses they have been teaching and for how long.

4 Findings

This chapter is organized around the themes that appeared during the interviews with the professors. Thematic patterns were found in the literature and were used as a basis for semi-structured interviews. Many new topics emerged during the interviews that were not specifically mentioned in the literature, but these topics belong to the themes already discussed, and serve more to enrich the theme rather than to open up a new one. In some ways, the answers from the philosophy and language professors were similar, therefore in some sections all seven professors are grouped together, and if they talked about the same theme but their answers pointed in other directions, I created two sub-sections.

4.1 Pressure on professors

4.1.1 Pressure on philosophy professors

The first common theme for most participants was that there is some underlying pressure on professors caused by many factors, because most students expect to get a grade A. As mentioned in the introduction, most of the freshmen students come to UGA with almost straight A's and with the GPAs of 4.0 or more.

All three philosophy professors were familiar with the literature on the rising GPAs and the notions on 'grade inflation' at their university as well as at the national level. The questions taken from the literature review were only the starting point, the professors were free to express their opinions on grading in their department and to summarize their perceptions on this topic. None of the topics mentioned in the literature needed further explanation, as these professors already have long experience of teaching and grading experience and had already discussions with their colleagues about the same topic and read papers about it.

These following statements illustrate the pressures they notice among professors:

I have heard that other colleagues have been approached by students...about the HOPE scholarship and the B average. That is a real phenomenon...if a student falls below a B average, they lose the HOPE scholarship, and that is quite a significant amount of money. (Philosophy professor A)

Another professor thinks that grade inflation starts at high school, and with freshmen students coming to university with all A's, and he states:

We reach the point where you need to explain to them why they do not get an A, and a lot of that has to do with the high school, where there is grade inflation and ego inflation... There is this kind of expectation, if you give someone, let's say a B or B minus, which are perfectly good grades, they think that we owe them a really long explanation about why they didn't get an A.

So there is this expectation...what I would call an average performance in their minds is an A.
(Philosophy professor B)

The same professor concludes that there is some “*conscious and subconscious pressure that students place on teachers, by basically letting them know in some way, that they expect high grades. They come into college from a system that gives them inflated grades, and then... teachers, especially, less experienced teachers, may give into this pressure, and I would think that that’s a factor.*”

Philosophy professor C was most familiar with the HOPE scholarship as it was introduced in 1994 while he was teaching, while the youngest, **philosophy professor B** was not familiar with any discussion about the HOPE scholarship. The explanation from **philosophy professors C** about why **philosophy professor B** had never heard any discussions about the HOPE is that this scholarship, in terms its effects of maintaining a B average is “*mostly a thing of the past*” because “*grade inflation has long since surpassed the B average*”, adding that it “*used to be that students considered a B pretty good grade, they worked to get B’s, now if a student gets a B...it’s beyond the line for them, an utter failure*” concluding that students get so many A’s, that even grade C would not change anything on their GPA record.

It has been a transformation, students are viewed as customers, there is a pressure to keep them happy, they are voters, their parents are voters...I have tried not to lower down my standards, I don’t know how well I have succeeded. I can feel the pressure from the students, and I can feel the pressure from their expectations and it manifests itself on course evaluations.
(Philosophy professor C)

He further explains that students can so easily drop out of courses without talking to him, without hearing his words of encouragement, they just never show up to his class and he never sees them again. ... *each class is told that they are the best class ever, and it’s not a good environment for a teacher, they are not prepared psychologically, to deal with challenges.*

The next statement is about the recent problem created by letting students know professors’ grading habits by publishing them online:

My courses use to be very, very highly enrolled for my department. And now, I have a problem with enrolment actually. This semester, for the first time ever, I had the course that was cancelled. I have never had a course that was cancelled before. And I think what typically students would do is, everything is online, and before they register for course they will look me up and they’ll see what percentage of As I gave last semester, or that I gave in the other courses, and I think that keeps a lot of students away. **(Philosophy professor C)**

4.1.2 Pressure on language professors

Language professors also talked about the pressure but added some different angles to it.

The following statements are about the pressures on language professors:

You know, if you have students who aren't wealthy, you don't want... you see that they might lose their scholarship you think about it. We don't have enough doctors, but many people who want to go to medical school cannot go to medical school because they don't have the high enough undergraduate GPAs, and I have gotten pressure from student about that. (Language professor A)

Most professors have had experiences with students who need to maintain their HOPE scholarship but not a single professor was convinced by this 'student nuisance':

During my first couple of years there were instances of students who told me that they had a HOPE scholarship and that they needed to get X grade in order to be able to keep their scholarship and I told them...well, my opinion of that was "I guess, you should've studied harder", and that was it. I was not persuaded by this. (Language professor B)

Students were concerned about getting a certain grade because of the HOPE scholarship so they might have mentioned it to me, but of course, I always explain to the student "it's not your grade in my class that's the problem, it's the grades in all of your classes". (Language professor C)

The US HEIs are the most heavily marketized educational institutions in the world, and one professors explained following concerns:

If you don't get a certain number of students in your class your classes are cancelled. You have to have minimum of 12 undergraduate students signed up for the class, so eight students...they might be cancelled. So you think of ways of describing the material so that students can understand why it might be relevant for them. So yes there is the marketing aspect, because...the university wants you to...fill those seats with students and you get rewarded for that, and you get penalized if not very many students have applied. (Language professor B)

Language professor D had the same experiences and a similar answer, but also notices regarding pressure that:

Students are much more likely to complain now, in comparison with 20,30 years ago. The idea of appealing a grade to a professor, and if the professor doesn't change the grade appealing to the department chair and then to the dean, the students just go on and on. So there are some students that will appeal and appeal and appeal. So the professor assigning a certain grade, may have to deal with certain consequences, so they are going to be particularly conscientious about giving a grade that they know they can back up.

A common theme was that some students use websites where they can see other students posting comments about specific professors that are known to be harder graders or easier graders and "most students very heavily research different instructors before they enrol in a particular course....I know that students have other means, like word to mouth from the other students... but yes, they think about that in relation to their GPA."

Yeah, there is a lot more pressure to not anger students...it can be perceived that it's not worth it for you to anger students with very harsh grading... there might be a tendency to give higher grades than someone you know has a guaranteed job in the following year, because if they

have terrible student evaluations and all the students are angry, it might look as if they are not really a good teacher, which might not actually be the case....

4.2 Pressure on students

Another theme which appeared in the interviews was pressure on students to have the highest possible grades. Pressure in this sense is the psychological stress associated with expectations of performing well in a situation. They come into university with very high GPAs, and many of them want to continue into graduate schools which are highly selective. Their parents can elicit pressure by wanting their child to perform well and get good jobs.

Philosophy professor A claims that *“the stress, especially after the crash in 2008, to perform well, to get a job, is very, very high”* (by crash in 2008, he means global financial crisis 2007-2008). The professor further adds that parents have become overprotective, being stressed themselves about the future job of their kids – *“It is often said that the way they have been brought up, so the parents becoming overprotective, that has an influence on the students... with their ability to deal with difficult issues... stress to perform well is extremely high. Because, everybody is worried about their future, the students are extremely worried... and it’s a real possibility not to get a job after school.”*

Philosophy professor C had a strong statement to make on that too: *I believe that the increase in stress is directly related to grade inflation. Because now, anybody who doesn’t get an A, there is something wrong with them. If you get A minus, or B, it’s just terrible.... a lot of professors think that they are doing them a favour by giving them high grades, but the reality is just the opposite... I had comments last year, and they don’t even sound believable, but this is what the comment was: “I earned an A minus in this course, and it ruined my life” ... To me, that says here is a student who is under extreme stress...*

The professor continues by explaining that there is another dimension that needs to be added to this topic, which is that even those who get As are incredibly frustrated, because they have no way to distinguish themselves:

In any group you’re going to get the range of students, some of them are going to be better... they feel like there is no way for them to make a difference, to distinguish themselves, to actually achieve something. And they have got frustrated with school in general.

Philosophy professor C explained how intertwined the pressure on professors and the pressure on students are:

So you have this huge inflation that I think started in high schools, the students come into university, and really they are stressed. The college professors feel like, “Well, they are coming in with such good grades they will be so disappointed and so distressed, and it will be reflected on my evaluation. The expectation now is that everybody is going to get an A, so I need to lower my standards and I’ve got to make sure that these people are not too stressed out and I’m

concerned about them as human beings, as individuals, and I want to do what I can to help them out.

This professors thinks that it is not just the college level, “it’s a rot that goes all the way through the system, which probably started decades ago, when there was a policy in elementary schools that “nobody was going to fail anymore”, because the social stigma attached to failing the grade in elementary school was “so great, that we couldn’t put anyone through that. So they passed along a lot of people that, they couldn’t read, they couldn’t do any basic math, and they got into the next level, and they got good grades so they could go on and...and it just, it became a sham. It’s phony, and it’s all the way through.”

The language professors think that pressure on students is also caused by their parents to get good grades and find a job, since the employment rate, especially after the financial crisis could be lower in the humanities. A lot of students are used to very high grades and GPAs, and now they want to be professionalized rather than have a broad education.

Yeah, I think that students’ parents have told them that they should study subjects in which they are going to have secure jobs, and parents don’t always know what they are talking about. They could be leading the students, their children, into doing STEM fields, because things could be replaced with AI or robots, but I think that...I think generally the change in what students want to study after the crises is caused by the fears of their parents. (Language professor A)

Probably in that period of time the numbers of majors in languages have been going down, and business schools are getting way more students. So maybe...I don’t know whether they are competing for grades more but they are trying to major in something, my husband sometimes talks about them majoring in “creating wealth” (Language professor C)

Look at the rate of admissions, so it’s harder and harder to get in, you have to have a higher GPA and higher SAT score, to be able to make the cut, just because there are so many more applicants than there are places... They feel the need to become professionalized very quickly, and they want to focus on getting into the professional school that their trying to get into... So there is a lot of pressure on students, and that affects how they perform in certain classes (Language professor D)

4.3 Changing teaching environment

Another common theme was changes in the teaching environment, mostly because of a) digitalization, b) changes in the program organization and c) students concentrating less on

getting a liberal arts education and concentrating more on business and ‘money making’ degrees.

4.3.1 Digitalization of HEIs

In general, their answers were similar in the sense that digitalization has positive and negative aspects in relation to how much does it help students to be better prepared for exam, and everyone could agree that

Too much electronics actually interferes with direct communication (Philosophy professor A)

Philosophy professor B added that digitalization had *decreased their ability to deal with abstract concepts, they have not read very much, the amount of reading that you expect from students coming into the freshmen year is clearly less and less. I can't give the same books I gave the students five years ago, I think that's very clear. So technology basically...it may be good for other disciplines, but here it is more of an impediment.*

Philosophy professor C noticed that everything is available online, so students don't go to libraries:

The idea of doing a good research has come to mean for them to do a Google search, or maybe even a Google scholar search. They only use what's available online, the idea of looking for something in the library is just completely alien. They don't need anything that's not in English, that's not surprising, most of them do not speak other languages, they don't feel that they need other languages. They are, they have the attitude that anything that is really important they can 'look it up'.

Students have also changed because access online is quick, all information is easily available, and they want fast results with immediate gratification.

They understand school as something with hurdle, to jump through over and they are very willing to do the things that I asked them to do as long as they get pretty much immediate gratification which is to say, they'll try for a few minutes, and if they'll get it that's fine, they'll be happy with it. But the idea that they would work on something and it would take a long time for them to master it, is really alien to them... (Philosophy professor C)

Regarding digitalization as a factor contributing to the teaching and learning environment language professors stated the following

It has created obstacles for them to do research, because they have so much more to choose from, and they can make poor selections. I now take my students physically to the library into the stacks to look at the books, and after, I explain to them that not all scholarship is online. And that's very different from what I did years ago. I think peoples' abilities to use a material library has declined. (Language professor A)

This one is a bit of a challenge for students because they have to actually go, physically go to the library. I think that's perhaps a bit of the downside of digitalization. I have students writing research papers and I told them they're going to have to go and consult a grammar book from a library. They are pretty freaked out by that. Many of them have never actually gone to the library before, they have not consulted a book. I feel that they have an opinion like "oh, well that's just the old stuff". **(Language professor B)**

I think there are some things that are detrimental to students, such as writing, when they are use to doing short searches and texts, and some thing like that. They are not use to long-form writing so that has suffered I think with technology. **(Language professor D)**

Several professors noticed that students are spending less time in the library and recent generation of college students may be more computer-literate, but they are not that research-literate. Because of its downsides, they all exclude digitalization as being a factor in rising GPAs in their fields.

4.3.2 Changes in organization – more choices of courses and allowing withdrawals before failing

Another change in the teaching environment that has affected professors and could have an influence on increasing GPAs is changes in the program department where now there is more free course choices and it is permitted to withdraw before failing or getting a bad grade.

Philosophy professor A explains: *Allowing to withdraw before deadline...so this term it was March 21st, they could withdraw in my course X, they could even withdraw after the 3rd assignment, and I have 4 tests, so that means the number of fewer F's for sure, because some people who would not have done well withdrew. So that increases the GPA...*

He continues by explaining how students having more course choice can lead to higher GPAs: *it is known that some of those courses are easier to do than others. So I would say yes, because of the larger selection of courses, offering of courses, sometimes they could do better than they would otherwise do.*

Philosophy professor C states that the university has made it easier for students to drop courses. When he first arrived, it was not a digital university, so in order to drop a course student needed to come by with a little slip of paper, and he would ask the student:

"Why do you want do drop the course?", and sometimes I would get good students who would come by and say "well I'm working really hard I just don't think I'm really getting it" and I said "well, I think you are doing very well, why don't you give it another shot" and some of them did, some of them stayed, and I remember some of them said "thank you for encouragement, you made me stay in the class, I learned a lot", but that doesn't happen, it

can't happen now, everything is electronic, and I never even found out that they dropped, until I go and look at the roll, and they are not in the roll, so they've must have dropped. It's kind of crazy. It a system that by doing things that are supposedly helping the students, the university has really created an environment that is difficult for the students.

The language professors all agreed that changes in the department, especially the greater choices of courses and allowing students to withdraw before failing (or before they receive a bad grade) has influenced the overall GPAs.

Yeah, I think so. And if you look at different institutions, their graduating seniors have very different course choices. I think it has to do something with the culture of the institution.

(Language professor A)

There has been some worries, in my department, when certain courses have been created, that've been seen as less...hm...sort of, core concept related... So as they've been created, we want to try, we want to add, but we don't want to make the major easier either **(Language professor B)**

Language professor C agrees with his colleagues and adds another change in the UGA

There was some point, at UGA, where we went to a plus-minus (+/-) grading system... Instead of just giving A,B,C we started giving A+, A, A-, so when we did that, you have to have C in order to have a course count for your major, and so, with this new plus/minus system, a C minus is actually not 2.0, it's actually 1.7, so we made it so that a grade of C goes all the way down to 70. I give them a chance to, improve their grade on their test, so I tell them "if you get a better grade on that sections, you can keep those points." Or I'll say, 'you can rewrite a section of your exam and you can get the half the point that you lost'. So, I give them a chance to do that, obviously, that's going to increase their grades.

Agreeing with her colleagues, **language professor D** adds:

I think there are some students who will definitely drop a class...some students use websites on which students post comments about specific professors that are known to be harder graders or easier graders and most students very heavily research different instructor before they enrol in a particular course.

4.4 Professors on students' improvement

Discussions with the professors about student improvement being a factor in increasing GPAs led to division into 2 groups: four of the professors think that students have improved over the time which has naturally led to better GPAs, while three professors think they cannot see any improvement, moreover two of them think that students' abilities decreased in regards to academic requirements. Also, their opinions vary on how better or worse they are.

4.4.1 Students are better

The following extracts show four professors' opinions on how and why students have become better:

The quality of students entering UGA has dramatically improved. And part of the reason for that is the HOPE scholarship. Because that actually allows many good students who would have gone to other universities actually to come here. Teaching at UGA has improved dramatically... hiring better people, improving the education in general. So a better admission process, and I would also think that discussions about pedagogy have improved teaching **(Philosophy professor A)**

They say every year that, you know we get a better and higher rate incoming class, with higher SAT scores and higher GPAs and higher this and that, and it makes me wonder, how much better they actually are... I mean anecdotally, I think the students are better, I think they are more serious. I think they are more openminded, that's my personal experience with them. I don't know to what extent. **(Language professor B)**

I feel like our students have always been good, but I think the level really has gone up, it's hard to say when that got started... they are two ways that students have become better, one, I think, may be they are just better able to learn, they are just kind of, more intelligent, but generally we have students now with better study skills, they just really good at, preparing for class, studying for exam **(Language professor C)**

The selectivity of UGA has gone up significantly, over the past 15-20 years, in that sense yes, you have students who are higher achieving. If you teach in the exact same way, they are going to earn higher scores. And think there are a lot of instructors incorporating contemporary scholarship on teaching methods into their classes **(Language professor D)**

Out of the four professors who think that the students are better, three of them were from the language department. They think that UGA selects better students, who have higher SAT scores and higher high school GPAs, the students are more skilled and intelligent, and they are eager to work hard. Also teaching methods have improved helping students to be better prepared for the exams.

4.4.2 Students are not any better

The other group of professors thinks that students are not any better, but they also differ in regards to how much worse they are.

I think there is a grade inflation and there is a kind of mentality that even "A happens to you", definitely "B happens to you", you don't have to, sort of, work or anything, and, so...it's really across the board. **(Philosophy professor B)**

Philosophy professor C thinks that high SAT scores and high school GPAs are very deceptive, and he states:

The students are not any better, they tend to be actually worse, they are worse trained, they come in with really less ability, I don't know what really people are talking about when they refer to this. I have heard this many, many times, they come in with the great GPAs, because they have grade inflation in high school, and they come in with the higher SATs because there is an inflation of the SATs, they have made the SAT easier for the students, so they do better on it. But the quality on of the students, not better, it's probably a little worse. Because the students are told when they enter that it's actually a very competitive, that they've overcome the competition, that they are accepted because they are very good, each class is told that they are the best class ever, and it's not a good environment for a teacher.

Language professor A also sees that students have better high school GPAs but on the topic of students' improvement causing high college GPAs, he states:

No. I don't think this is true, except for, if you would look at the student body at UGA in general, it's more, we are more selective, we have a tendency to select people with higher high school GPAs and higher standardized test scores, so that might be true. But I don't think they work harder than students in past generations and I don't think our teaching methods are particularly better.

All the professors are aware of reports about how every new generation is coming into UGA with record-breaking SAT scores and record-breaking high school GPAs, but as one group of professors uses this data to prove that students are better, another group of professors thinks that these facts just point out how high school grades have become inflated as well, and furthermore, this creates a difficult teaching environment, since students who are not as well prepared are convinced that they are, therefore these students expect the highest grade for mediocre work.

4.5 Professors' perceptions of adjunct teachers

The next common theme was about teaching evaluations- students giving grades to their teachers and how this affects grading. There is a notion in the literature that, especially at the beginning, when the teachers are young and only part-time employed, they could be giving a lot of 'easy As' in order to get good teaching evaluations from students, which will help them to keep their job or even have a promotion. In the US some think that tenured professors could be more interested in research because there they get rewards, while there are no rewards for good teachers.

The following extracts capture the philosophy professors' views on teaching evaluations being a factor in the rise of students' GPAs:

That might very well be a factor. Because with teaching evaluations, at least in our department, we don't have a peer review process, some institutions have peer reviews, other faculty members observe your teaching and review it. For us, part of our annual evaluation includes also promotions to tenure, or promotion to professor, including student evaluations. I think there is definitely pressure there. I think a better thing would be to change... to use student evaluations to improve your teaching and get feedback from the students which is important, but not use them directly for promotions. (Philosophy professor A)

You don't get any great rewards for being a good teacher, but that is what really matters, so it totally works that way... but especially when one starts as a teacher, when he is kind of unsure...you know after like 20 years, or whatever years added, you don't really worry too much about evaluations, but especially for colleagues who are starting, it might be a very strong consideration (Philosophy professor B)

Philosophy professor C explained that the whole of the faculty staff gets evaluated on their teaching, but the only standard that is used is student evaluations. He states that “*no one has looked at his syllabus in years*”, and if someone wants to know what is going on in the course, the best way to find out is to look at the syllabus, at the course requirements and at written assignments in order to tell whether the course is a good course.

He continues: *But if you look at the student evaluations what you are measuring is students' attitudes towards the course. In an ideal world, student attitudes would be good if they learned a lot, and if would be bad if they didn't learn anything. But it's not exactly an ideal world. So, the measures that they use to value adjunct professors and other professors are contributing to grade inflation. If you really don't have time the easiest thing to do is give everybody an A, nobody is going to complain, everybody will be happy, it will be reflected in the student evaluations.*

The professor agreed with his colleague that *good teaching is absolutely not appreciated at the university. They will say “we value teaching”, for a promotion you need teaching and research, but when it comes to teaching they measuring it by student evaluation, they do not measure good teaching. There are no rewards for good teaching and there are no sanctions, no consequences, for giving everybody an A, it is really sad, and it has really corrupted the university.*

The language professors were milder in this regard, but they all stated that students evaluating adjunct teachers could have an effect on increasing GPAs:

There is not very much support in the parts of the administration for creating standards for grades; the faculty staff are left very much up to themselves and the faculty staff are evaluated by students, so student evaluations... have a lot to do with how students perceive how you grade them. And your raises and your promotions are based on students' evaluations. (Language professor A)

I guess if you are junior lecturer you know, that in order to be promoted to a senior lecturer position student evaluations will play an important role...in your evaluations in that promotion... I mean...their livelihood depends on that. (Language professor B)

Some people think “if my students have better grades then they will like the class better, and they will not complain as much, and they will not take up too much time”, so maybe that’s true.” (Language professor C). This professor continued further by explaining how satisfied students sometimes do not fill in teaching evaluations, while dissatisfied students are more eager to do so. Therefore, unhappy students have disproportionate power, and according to him: *Student teaching evaluations? They cause huge problems. These evaluations tend to reward professors who give a lot of good grades, tend to reward nice professors’ ones who give them cheeps and snacks. I think there is a big problem with relying on anonymous student evaluations, especially for purposes like promotion, or awards, or whether ones contract is renewed etc.*

If your employment is contingent on student evaluations which tends to be the case for adjunct instructors, and some of them are never observed in the classroom, the only evaluation they have is the comments of students. So yes, I think in that case, if you do not have the permanent position, whether is a tenure track or just a continuing permanent position like as a lecturer. (Language professor D)

All seven professors agreed that, in their experience there could be some pressure on adjunct teachers not to give bad grades because their future job and promotion depends on it. They confirmed that they had discussions about this with other faculty members, and thoughts that these evaluations should not be used in the way they are used now, in the sense of being the only thing to determine the quality of teaching since students could be very biased and emotional, therefore these evaluations would be better used only as a feedback.

4.6. Grading practices and grading on a curve

Five out of the seven professors think that the amount of A’s should not be limited, and they would not support a policy which would force them to do that. Even though in a normal distribution only 10 to 15 percent of students would get an A, most professors would not only be against that, they would be against the ‘university - wide curve’ which Princeton University introduced, where professors can give maximum 35 percent of A’s in a class. The answers also differ between departments since all four language professors would be strongly against policy forcing them to reduce the ‘number of As from 50 to 35 percent, while one philosophy professor thinks that he would probably be against it. The other two philosophy professors would be strongly in favor of it.

4.6.1 Professors strongly against the grading on a curve

Here are the thoughts of the professors on grading practices and grading on a curve:

I think that it isn't a solution. I have never graded on a curve myself, but it would probably allow grades to spread...I would ask to get rid of grades, which one could also consider in philosophy for example... but you want to make distinctions, if students apply for graduate school, or they apply for jobs, there really is a difference between students who are exceptionally good and students who work hard and those who don't. I think the grading system if it is maintained, should reflect those differences. (Philosophy professor A)

All four language professors were absolutely against grading on a curve:

I think curves are...I'm not very excited about that. I think what would be much better is to have a paragraph standard, that is interpretable. So "this is the standard for an A, this is what your work has to be, this the standard for a B, this is the standard for a C", and to really write out a description for different disciplines, maybe for humanities, for social sciences. And then give that to professors to use that as a way of distinguishing between B and C and F, rather than forcing some students to have F. I don't think that that's fair. (Language professor A)

I'm against that. I have 9-10 kids... and they are all hardworking students so I think it's unfair to dictate, to be told, like in the classroom of 10 you can only get 3 As. I mean if they are all doing A work, really? If they all studied hard, if they all have written really good term papers, that would otherwise be deserving an A, it doesn't seem fair to me. I mean, look, I have told students, there is 10 of you, and I could give 10 As or 10 Fs, you know, it's your call, so... (Language professor B)

In my opinion is not a good idea, because I think it just increases the competition amongst the students, I think it would make a learning environment a very adversarial place, would make it a very unfriendly place. It would be kind a like "oh if this person gets a better grade then I get a worse grade" I really feel like if students meet the standards that you set out for that course, they should be able to get an A. (Language professor C)

I would be against it, because I don't know how would you decide which 35 percent would be those that would be the ones who would get the A's. Which means if you have 50 students and then you say we could only have 20 that are actually going to get A's. Then you are trying to find strange factors how to distinguish between them... It is just possible that there are a lot of high achieving students and there is just a reflection and it's an accurate perception of their performance. (Language professor D)

All four language professors were against limiting the number of A's to the 35 percent or any kind of grading on a curve. The interesting thing here is that **language professor D** thinks that giving 20 A's in a class of 50 students would be 'only 20 A's', referring to it as a very small number of A's. **Language professor C** thinks that, if differentiation needed to be made between all these A students, it should be done by giving the best students A+, but grading on a curve increases competition between students which in her opinion, is not a good idea. **Language professor A** would like everyone to have better, more thorough descriptions of what each grade actually represents, but thinks that there are not enough agreements about that in her department, especially not across the university, while at the national level, agreement would be impossible.

4.6.2 Professors strongly in support of grading on a curve

In opposition to the majority, two of the philosophy professors would accept the ‘university wide curve’, because they are already unintentionally grading on a curve, simply because students’ performance are ‘normally distributed’.

Actually, I give less than 35 percent of A’s, I give maybe 10 or 15 percent. I could see that among the current crop of students I’m an outlier. So, I think UGA should take very drastic action to reduce grade inflation. But as I said. it’s a very systemic problem, so if UGA introduced what Princeton did, there would be huge, huge difficulties, the student stress would skyrocket and you’ll find suicides increasing, and you would just find unbelievable consequences. (Philosophy professor C)

This professor added that for the first time in his career his course has been cancelled because of the number of students registered for class was lower than 12, and he has suspicions that students are using websites where they saw comments from others students about how his grading habits are harsh.

I would be in favor of it strongly... it makes the grade more worthy, more real, yes, I would very strongly support, you know, such sort of percentage of grades. (Philosophy professor B)

In addition, I asked for further explanation from philosophy professor C, since he had stated that he thinks some students would not enrol at UGA if the grading on a curve was introduced. He stated:

They would go somewhere else, and I’m happy if they do, that’s not my problem, but I think that there just needs to be kind a re-education. And I think that it really needs to start before they get to UGA. But the UGA does a terrible job of orienting students. You know they arrive, and they tell them “you are the best class we’ve ever had, you are really good, you are all great” and students think “Oh, I’m going to get an A, we are all going to get straight As” and the real problem is, they probably not need to work really hard. It’s just the wrong attitude.

He likes what Princeton has done, and if UGA did this it would create a lot of disturbance, with some students leaving, but the product would be a “different student population.”

If UGA wanted to do something like that, they would need to really to re-orient students to learning. And you may do this for some years, before you introduce a policy like this. (Philosophy professor C)

4.7 Perceptions on the changing demographics of the student population

The demographics of the student population in the US has changed over the decades, in particular there are more female students and more non-white students. Some professors such

as Bloom (1987) and Mansfield (2001) blame grade inflation on the policy affirmative action, but in my pilot study I was advised not to bring up affirmative action myself, because of the sensitivity of the topic and the current social situation in the US, unless the professor alone himself/herself started to talk about it. Therefore, the conversation was most about the increasing number of female students as a factor contributing towards increasing GPAs overall, and affirmative action was not mentioned as one of the possible causes for grade inflation.

Most of the professors noticed that the better students at UGA tend to be females and the increasing number of them is a contributor toward higher GPAs overall.

These are the extracts of their thoughts on the increasing number of female students being a contributor toward higher GPAs:

It was very clear to me that women were doing significantly better than the male students. Well I don't know whether that's just a fluke, a coincidence... it looks like that female students are doing better in general. That would be confirmed by my observations. (Philosophy professor A)

It is true that the better students at the UGA tend to be female. But they are just as stressed out about grades, they are just not as connected to learning as males, I don't know do they work harder, they are as involved as males are in jumping through the hoops and doing the things they need to do they'll have careers they want later in their lives. Overall I don't think it makes a difference, I don't think it contributes (Philosophy professor C)

I am essentially at the foreign languages department, Romance languages, where the vast majority of the students are female and I would say that yeah... a big factor in grades being so high is excellent female students, so yeah, they've been very great students (Language professor B)

Yeah, it's possible. In the languages especially, the overwhelming majority of our students are female. This semester in my class there are 22 students, only four of them are male. And all the others are female...and they are pretty good students...(Language professor C)

The number of students of female students who fail in my classes I almost non-existent. I don't know what reason is but yes more female students could push up GPAs, absolutely. (Language professor D)

Language departments usually have one of the highest disproportions of female-to-male ratios where female students largely outnumber males, and that is also the experience of these four language professors. Therefore, regarding this department, it could be a more important factor if, on average, females do have higher GPAs than males, overall in this department that caused higher department GPAs. Two philosophy professors think that this is a non-factor in regards to increasing GPAs.

4.8 Thoughts on grade inflation

The final topic that they all mentioned was grade inflation. Five professors think that there could be some mild grade inflation intertwined with other factors mentioned before, while two

professors think that there is a strong case of grade inflation and the university needs to do something about it.

The following extracts represent the thoughts of the philosophy professors:

I think because of the evaluations, the correlation between the grades and the evaluations, that the instructors are probably tending to give easier, higher grades. (Philosophy professor A)

I think there is grade inflation, although, I am sure the university can work this out... The major factor is... conscious and subconscious preassure that students place on teachers, by basically letting them know in some way, that they expect high grades. They come into college from a system that gives them inflated grades, and then... teachers, especially, less experienced teachers, may give into this preassure, and I would think that that's a factor (Philosophy professor B).

I don't think it's just the college level, it's a rot that goes the way all through the system. And it probably started years and years and years ago, when there was a policy in elementary schools that nobody was going fail anymore, because the social stigma attached to failing the grade in elementary school was so great, that we couldn't put anyone through that. So they passed along a lot of people that, they couldn't read, they couldn't do any basic math, and they got into the next level, and they got good grades so they could go on and...and it just, it became a sham. It's phony, and it's all the way through. (Philosophy professor C)

All three philosophy professors think there is a grade inflation which contributes towards high GPAs, but their responds vary on how big of a factor it is and how it happens. One philosophy professors is more focused on teaching evaluations as a factor in grade inflation and thinks it could be a minor factor among many others, while two others think the whole US education system set up is responsible, where getting A's is a habit throughout primary and secondary school where grades are also inflated, so the mentality of students is changed.

The language professor were more reserved in their answers:

We have arguments between faculty members about the grade inflation. Some people think that their colleagues inflate their grades, other people think ah, you know...there is no clear standard that everybody is aware of. People set their own standards. (Language professor A)

Do I think there is a grade inflation? Maybe...we have non-fulltime staff, we have graduate teaching assistants, they all want to get good evaluations, so they can get better jobs later and...and you know, maybe they do 'inflate' grades... I imagine that some teaching assistants and instructors are more demanding as far as grading, and others are little more relaxed. Although, I don't expect at the end of the day it's a huge problem. (Language professor B)

We want to be cautious as professors, maintaining standards, we don't want to give in to pressure from students. There are certainly faculty members who might be more susceptible to pressure... I can imagine that there are professors who might feel more vulnerable... So I think we want to be aware of, protecting faculty members from pressure from students so that we could all try to grade students fairly and not feel like "well if give better grades we will avoid problems or we will get better evaluations" or something like that. (Language professor C)

If they limit the amount of a certain grade that they are going to have, there are going to be students that won't take that class. Absolutely. Unless it's an institutional issue, if entire

institution does it that's one thing, but if it is an individual professor, yeah, that's going affect that professor's enrolments... I don't think there is conscience grade inflation... but I do think there is a lot of other factors part of which is higher student achievement... but I also think there are some things, like including student expectation, that have slowly led grades to trend up upwards... And most instructors and professors I believe would say that there is a level of grade inflation, but I don't know many individual instructors who would be the first to start lowering grades. You can say yes, across the academia there is a real problem, but you are not going to be the first person to start lowering, you bear all the negative consequences... (Language professor D)

The language professors' explanations are leaning more towards multiple factors contributing towards increasing GPAs, where more female students, more course choices and student effort are major factors, while also students' evaluations of teachers could cause some grade inflation, so all these factors combined contributed to higher GPAs.

4.9 Summary of the findings

Most professors considered that the pressure to maintain the HOPE scholarship is a thing of the past, while one professor explained that this is because it is not that hard for students to maintain the B-average anymore, so there is no need for this kind of pressure. A few years ago, they all had some students approaching them in order to discuss a grade received in a class in regard to this scholarship, but all professors had a similar response - students should study harder, and one grade cannot change much in a total GPA score.

Regarding the marketization of the HEIs and that kind of pressure where the student is seen as a customer who needs to be satisfied with their grades, they all stated that there is no direct pressure but most of them think that there could be some underlying pressure. All seven professors agreed that students should not be seen as a customer or consumer, and they do not accept the 'business' mentality at university, nor that they should be 'selling students a product', because college students enrol in order to learn something more valuable and not to 'buy grades'.

Most professors think that in the US system, students expect that they will receive high grades if they show up to every class and do what they are told to do. A grade B is not considered a very good grade anymore, therefore professors need to explain to their students why they received a grade B. Since students' SATs and high school GPAs are getting higher and higher, students are used to getting the highest grades, and are told by the administrators that they are the best generation ever with record-breaking high school GPAs, so not receiving a lot of A's would be a shock for the high percentage of them. Professors perceive that students are now more eager to appeal about a grade, and if the professor doesn't change a grade, they will continue to appeal to the department chair and then to the dean. Another pressure on professors is that they need to have at least 12 students in an undergraduate class, therefore if students see

online that professors are 'harsh' when grading, the number of students enrolled could drop below 12, and that class is cancelled.

Most professors mentioned different kinds of pressures on students to have the highest grades. The pressure is not necessary towards learning as much as possible, but to 'score' the highest grade, therefore their focus is on having the highest GPA because that is something which stays on their CV, while learning for the sake of learning, slow, but deep critical and creative thinking could suffer especially in philosophy courses. Students are more scared for their future after the financial crisis in 2008, and their parents are pressuring them to think immediately about their future jobs. Since so many students have high GPAs, in order to get to graduate schools like medical and law schools, students need to distinguish themselves by having even more A's, or if possible, all straight A's in their record, which puts pressure on both students and professors. Students are aware that some jobs would be replaced with Artificial Intelligence (AI) and they could be more focused into business and 'creating wealth' now than on the humanities.

Regarding the topic of mass enrolment, there is a general notion that it needed to happen, and it was unavoidable, with two philosophy professors' being cautious about the effect of changing mentality and atmosphere on learning. One philosophy professor complained that students' attitudes are no longer about learning, but college is becoming *as something with hurdle, to jump through over*. One change since the 'old-time days' is also that professors think they are not educating students to be a 'tiny elite' of world-class scholars, but they are more educating the general public. Therefore, it is now understandable that students do not enter with such a broad education about 'high art' or great works of literature while speaking several foreign languages, they more strive for majors that lead to jobs. The language professors concentrated on how mass enrolment has brought diversity to the classroom, but also noticed that students strive more towards professionalization than toward liberal arts education.

There is total disagreement whether they have better students, which is further leading to higher GPAs. While philosophy professor A thinks that students are 'dramatically' better, according to other two philosophy professors' students are actually much worse, therefore neither higher students' abilities nor effort is visible to them, and this cannot be an explanation for the rise in the GPAs. Philosophy professors B and C think that grade inflation starts in high school and that it is easier now to get the best grade, so it has changed the mentality of students. In particular, professor C thinks that students are worse now while they are being told they are better because of the inflated SAT scores and high school GPAs. Therefore, this creates a very difficult environment for teachers- grading a student who is not on an A-level but for sure expects the best grade.

The language professors thoughts regarding better students and improved teaching methods were leaning more towards the fact that students are slightly better, and teaching methods improved (only one stated that this is a non-factor and didn't see that either they are better or working harder, nor any new teaching methods that could have led to the rise of GPAs). They mostly based their opinion about students' improvement on UGA's selectivity, since students

are required to have higher and higher SATs scores and high school GPAs in order to enrol at this university. Some of them also said they see increased effort in their classes.

Each of these seven professors sees positive and negative sides of digitalization. Positive sides are easier access to information and creating comfort because students could do their work from home. The negative sides of digitalization are that students less often going to libraries, and since not everything is online, they can be undertaking poor research from home. The other negative effects are that long-form writing has suffered with introduction of technology, students are now used to fast click-baits. Therefore, deep, patient, critical and creative thinking would be better nurtured if they would spend more time in libraries. In regard to increasing GPAs, they think that digitalization in their courses is a non-factor since the positive and negative factors even things out.

All seven professors agreed that students' evaluation of teachers is a cause of grade inflation, and this is the only factor that they all agreed on, especially if we are talking about adjunct teachers. The future jobs of part-time teachers depends on these evaluations, their livelihood and careers depend on it, and they agreed that there is no reward for good quality teaching, while there are rewards for good research. One philosophy professor emphasized that no one judges his teaching qualities on his syllabus or assignments, while teaching evaluations are merely the students' attitudes toward a course, so this cannot be a valid or reliable judgement about the quality of teaching. They confirmed that they had discussions about this with other faculty members, and that evaluations should not be used in the way they are used now, since these evaluations are a major, or sometimes only factor determining the quality of teaching. Since students can be very biased, evaluations should be used only as a feedback.

Regarding changing policies on grading, UGA has added pluses (+) and minuses (–) to grades, which could cause grade compression at the top. Since many students expect the highest grade, and a grade C, or even B is viewed as a failure in today's students' eyes, some think that differentiation between excellent, good and average student can be done by giving A+ to excellent student for outstanding work, a grade A to students who try hard and come to every class presenting very good work, and grade A minus for good work. Another change in departments is that there are more course choices, and this could be a factor toward the rise of the GPAs since students could take the courses that they are more interested in, avoid the ones that they don't like, but also check out the grading habits of the professor before enrolling. Websites such as *Rate my professors* contain comments from students about professor's grading habits, and there are many YouTube videos of UGA students recommending this website to other students to 'check it out' before enrolling in a class. Withdrawal before getting a bad grade or failing is allowed in their classes up until to two-thirds of the course, so that might be one of the factors contributing to the higher GPAs.

Most of the professor, five out of seven, would not vote for a policy where they would be forced to grade on a curve, or limit the number of A's to 35 percent such as Princeton University did.

One professor thinks that the philosophy department should get rid of grading altogether, since the subject is more about having a conversation about ideas. The language professor were absolutely all against grading on a curve because they believe their classes could be full of excellent students. Therefore, it could be that half, or more than a half of the class usually deserves an A, so in their eyes, introducing a policy where you will have a limit where only 35 percent of students can get a grade A would be unfair. I asked them how they would distinguish who the best students in the class are if half of that class would get an A, and the response was that the ones at the top deserve an A+. This corresponds with the literature that mentions grade compression at the top (Kuh and Hu 1999, Rosovsky and Hartly 2002) – it doesn't necessarily mean that professors have lowered their expectations or 'watered down' the course content, they just distinguish between students giving them pluses and minuses. Two of the philosophy professors claim that this is the reason why a grade B is not appreciated anymore, so recently they had students complaining about getting an A-minus and requested further explanations. This is understandable, since in a competitive environment where many students could get an A-plus or straight A's, grade A-minus is not really a success, relatively speaking.

On the changing demographics of the student population, in particular the increasing number of females, four professors, three of them from the language department, think that this is an important factor in regard to increasing GPAs. Language departments in general have more female students and larger disproportion in the female-to-male ratio, therefore this may have been a bigger factor in this department over the decades. Other professors see this as a slight factor or a non-factor.

Five of the professors think that maybe there is a slight grade inflation, but other factors are intertwined as well, such as students' competing for job security, better selected students from high school, more female students at their classes and more choices of courses. The problem of grading more harshly is in the whole system setup, because if a single professor decides to give fewer A's student enrolment could drop immediately in that class. At the undergraduate level, you need at least 12 students in order for a class not to be cancelled, and if that continues, professors' job could be in danger. It is worse for young teachers, where harsh grading and bad teaching evaluations from students could get them fired, and they are easily replaced. Two of the professors think that UGA suffers from serious grade inflation, while other factors contributing toward the higher GPAs are of little or no importance.

Table – the summary of findings

The table 3 below is a very simplified version of the professors responses, and it serves to show perhaps more clearly that the only absolute agreement between all seven professors from the two university departments was on the factor ‘**student evaluations of teachers are contributing towards the rise of GPAs**’, and the possibility that adjunct are teachers grading leniently, which would be with agreement with the paper ‘*A is for Adjunct*’ (Sonner 2000).

Most would agree also that the HOPE scholarship today has little or no impact, but the reasons why is it so extremely vary- from the **philosophy professor C** who states that grade inflation is so high that it is so easy to maintain the B-average, to **language professor C** who think that UGA students are just great, so it’s a non-factor in terms of whether they will maintain the B-average because they are academically very able. There is almost total agreement with the notion that the important factor is changes in the program organizations where it is easier to drop a course and have more choice of courses which leads to higher GPAs. There are no agreements about the connection between mass enrolment and lowering down standards, and there is a total disagreement about whether students are actually better, whether they should grade on a curve, or whether the higher number of females has contributed to higher GPAs.

Table 3, the summary of findings

Professors	HOPE Schol.	Mass enrol.	Stud. Improv.	Teach. Evaluat	Progr. Change	Curve	Female GPA	Inflat
Philosophy A	No impact	Maybe	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Maybe slight
Philosophy B	No impact	Maybe Yes	No	Yes	Maybe	Yes	Not aware	Yes
Philosophy C	Little impact	Yes	No	Yes	Not really	Yes	No	Yes
Language A	Little impact	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	Not aware	Maybe slight
Language B	Little impact	Maybe	Maybe Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Maybe	Maybe slight
Language C	No impact	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Maybe slight
Language D	Little impact	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Maybe slight

Contributing factors: HOPE Schol. – HOPE Scholarship; Mass enrol. -mass enrolment, Stud. Improv. -student quality improvement; Teach. Evlaut. – teaching evaluations; Progr. Change – changes in the program organization such as more free course choices and withdraw before getting a bad grade; Curve – would they grade on a curve; Female GPA – did enrolment of females contributed to overall higher GPAs; Inflat. -is there a grade inflation

In order to further explain this table, it looks like the issue of maintaining the HOPE scholarship is almost thing of the past because GPAs have been rising significantly for three decades, and one professor mentioned that it is not hard at all anymore to maintain a B-average. Data shows that in 1993 GPA was 2.84, but in 2013 it rose to 3.32, while B-average is 3.0 (See table 2, page 10).

Secondly, going back to the 1960s and reflecting on the increasing number of students over the decades is not easy for professors, but anecdotally, reflecting the time since professors were students themselves, they understand that some obligatory courses have been dropped, socio-economic changes have happened, such as massification, marketization, changing of the student population, the way departments are organized etc., so they are divided in their answers about whether mass enrolment has led toward lenient grading. The philosophy professors' answers lean more toward yes – it has led to lenient grading, and language professors' answers leaning more towards no - it has not.

Thirdly, the language professors were more certain that both students' abilities and teaching methods have improved, while the philosophy professors were divided, with two of them stating that they cannot see any improvement, and only one stating that students improved 'dramatically' and that professors' knowledge about new teaching methods had contributed towards that.

As already mentioned, everyone sees that teaching evaluations could be a contributing factor to the higher GPAs, although they differ on emphasizing how important is this factor. Also, there is almost absolute agreement between professors that changes in the program department, such as more course choice and withdrawing before failing are factors that are leading to students getting better grades without the grades necessarily being 'inflated'. Five out of seven professors would not grade on curve since they think it would not be fair to their students, but most professors agreed that there is some slight grade inflation.

5 Discussion

The main focus of this study is on the views of philosophy and language professors regarding the rise of GPAs at the University of Georgia, especially in the last three decades (the period 1990–2019), the way they perceive all the factors mentioned in the literature as contributing factors to the rise of GPAs, their thoughts on what could be added as factors, and their conclusions about whether they think there is grade inflation. The viewpoints of the professors are important, as they represent the key stakeholder group involved in fostering knowledge and skills. The findings of this study contribute to knowledge in the field and literature written on the rise of GPAs and grade inflation in US colleges. This chapter provides discussion based on each of the research questions of the study. It also provides a discussion of the findings. The similarities and differences between the two groups of professors will be connected to the relevant literature about this topic.

5.1 Discussion of the findings

For the last 60 years there have been many debates and discussions about the causes of increasing GPAs of US college students. There has never been agreement about the causes, while answers varying from the better student abilities and teaching methods to ‘grade inflation’ and corruption of the higher educational system. Many quantitative studies were done, but they were lacking professors’ perspectives on their own grading and their own perceptions of what is going on in the classrooms in which they teach.

The first research question was aimed at discovering the perceptions of the teaching staff regarding why the GPAs of undergraduate students have been on the rise, especially in the last three decades. Most answers mentioned students checking the grading habits of professors before enrolling in a class, and students’ evaluations of teachers, which cause adjunct teachers in general to grade leniently, as well as changes in the organisation of the program with more free choices of courses and easier possibilities of withdrawing from a course, which does not count towards the students’ final GPA.

The second research question was aimed at answering what the most and the least important factors are at UGA, out of all the factors mentioned in the relevant literature, that have contributed to the increasing GPAs and in addition, whether they think that there are other important factors not mentioned in the literature. There was total disagreement about what the most important factors are, while there was more agreement on which factors are less important or not important. It seemed that, if one professor decided to grade more harshly then the whole system set-up could go against that, because no single professor can just decide to give very

few A's, because student enrolment could drop immediately in that class, and at the undergraduate level you need at least 12 students in order for your class not to be cancelled, therefore your job could be in danger. The least important factors today were the HOPE scholarship and digitalisation – the HOPE scholarship, because it is not hard to maintain a B average, and digitalisation, because it has its downsides too. Additional factors that they mentioned as potential factors contributing to the rising GPAs of undergraduate students were: a) The global financial crisis in 2008; b) Students and parents being voters in the state of Georgia who should be kept happy; c) More pressure from students who want to enrol in medical school; d) A less-than-good teaching environment because students' orientation is towards getting A's and not towards learning; e) Professors trying to be 'cool' with their students in order for them to like them more; f) Higher female enrolment causing male students to compete harder; g) Students appealing their grades all the way up, more often now than ever; and h) Students using websites like *Rate My Professor* and other means, not to inform themselves about the syllabus and the professors' books and awards, but to find out the professors' grading habits which will decide whether they should enrol or not.

The third research question was about how they experience the continuous rise of the GPAs of the undergraduate students at their university (e.g. as an improvement in teaching and learning that they should be proud of, as 'grade inflation' that is corrupting the US higher education system, or a mix of complex multi-variate intertwined factors) – most of the participants answered that it is a mix of complex intertwined factors, along with slight grade inflation being only one of the many factors causing rising GPAs, while two professors think that both their university and the US education system as a whole have a huge problem with grade inflation.

A lot of discussions in the interviews were about topics that had already been mentioned in the research done by previous scholars. However, many things were sporadically mentioned in conversations by one or two professors, which had not been mentioned in the literature. However, these topics still fall under three themes already found and described:

- 1) Pressure on professors
 - Students appealing their grades 'all the way up' more often now than ever
 - Students and parents being voters in the state, so they should be kept happy
 - Students dropping a class if it's not an 'easy A' – professors could find their course cancelled
 - Students using websites to inform themselves about professors' grading habits
 - A 'non-fail mentality' from elementary school that was 'silently introduced' into college
 - A new generation being overprotected by their parents
 - The professors today need to explain why they gave an A minus to a student

2) Pressure on students

- The global financial crisis has pressured students to study harder
- Parents are now more worried about their children's future, which is interfering with the selection of their majors

3) A changing teaching environment

- Students are almost constantly online
- A lower percentage of students are going to the library
- Students' orientation is towards getting A's, not towards learning
- Students who used to get all A's, in order to keep it like that, transfer from a class where it is hard to get an A and enrol in another one, regardless of how much they are learning

Walker (2019) from the Pew Research Center claims that younger adults in the US are far more likely than their elders to often get news on a mobile device: "About seven-in-ten (72%) adults ages 18 to 29 often get news this way, compared with with 34% adult ages 18 to 29 in 2013, and comaperd with 38% among those age 65 or older" (¶ 4). Cohen (2019) claims that The Association of Research Libraries' aggregated statistics shows that libraries across the US are seeing steady, and in many cases precipitous, declines in the use of the books on their shelves, even as student enrollment at these universities has grown substantially. The data presented by Walker (2019) and Cohen (2019) matches the experiences of UGA faculty staff.

5.2 Implications

Drawing on the findings of this study, the following implications are suggested:

Firstly, maybe teaching evaluations from undergraduate students should only be used as feedback, or one small factor in deciding future job positions, so that adjuncts feel no pressure to please students. Additional quantitative research is needed to calculate the difference in grading patterns in the last decade between grades given by full-time employed professors and adjuncts at UGA.

Secondly, questions need to be asked and discussions need to be started about whether students should be informed online about the grading habits of the teachers, as this can lead to unfortunate situations where a good teacher with '*not such easy grading habits*' needs to cancel a class because of the small number of enrolled students, while the ones who give '*a lot of easy A's*' could get promoted.

Thirdly, two professors mentioned that SAT scores and high school GPAs do not realistically reflect the quality of the enrolled students in college, as these test scores are inflated themselves and, according to them, UGA cannot claim that they are selecting better students now than before. It would be interesting to find out whether the high results on the SAT test are really inflated as well as high school GPAs.

Furthermore, most of the professors used the word 'stress' in relation to grades, and several of them mentioned the increasing number of students who are reporting to the disability office. Additional inquiries by psychologists would be necessary.

Finally, as most of professors agreed there is at least some slight grade inflation, it is suggested that further research and discussions should be made at the department and university levels.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Limitations

It is believed that this study has contributed to research into the debate about why the GPAs of undergraduate students are on the rise by providing nuanced and descriptive viewpoints of professors' perceptions. It was important to represent the voices of both philosophy and language professors who are at the centre of day-to-day higher education activities.

The findings of this study should be considered in the context of the following limitations:

Some limitations in the research methodology include the sample size. A total of seven participants were interviewed for this study. This small sample size poses a limitation for the transferability of the study's findings to other contexts.

Secondly, a more thorough investigation about many aspects of the study would provide better insight, including investigating the rise in the GPAs and SAT scores of elementary and high school students in connection to rise of the GPAs of undergraduates.

Thirdly, the study is limited to one disciplinary context, due to time constraints. The study would have benefited from a comparison of various fields to highlight and contrast differences in professors' perceptions, which could have potentially shown interesting results. In addition, a comparison between students' perceptions on their GPAs could potentially elicit interesting insights.

While acknowledging these limitations, the results of the study do provide a richness and depth to better understand what is experienced, practised and perceived by university professors, who are the ones noticing the causes of the rising GPAs of undergraduate students at UGA.

Moreover, the qualitative findings of this study can add an additional perspective to the previous quantitative findings by scholars and researchers on higher education GPAs.

6.2 Suggestions for future research

There are several potential directions for future research in this area.

Future research could focus on larger contexts, such as including other departments within the university to allow different disciplinary fields to be compared and contrasted, comparing the perceptions of professors from other departments and areas as well.

Secondly, further research could also seek to investigate the views of students on the teaching evaluations they write about professors, and the way they grade teachers – what value system students have, how they select courses, whether they check websites such as *Rate My Professor*, whether they check their grading habits online, or whether they check the biography and books written by professor and his syllabus. In addition, students could be asked what they see as the purpose of today's college education and grading. It would also be interesting to see whether going to libraries has declined, as that was mentioned by four of the professors.

Thirdly, several professors mentioned that they had seen an increasing number of students reporting to the disability office. It would be interesting to find out the statistics about the last two decades, and possible causes if the data indeed shows a significant rise. One professor mentioned the impact of the global financial crisis 2007–2008 in relation to stress.

In addition, research on the difference in grading habits of UGA instructors between full-time professors and adjuncts will be interesting to look at, for example over the last two-three decades, as well as the changes in the ratio between full-time and part-time employed professors.

Finally, further research could include comparison of the tests given now and the tests given decades ago, while comparing the grades given for these tests, since there is disagreement about whether the courses are more demanding today or whether they have been 'watered' down.

6.3 Concluding remarks

It seems that both groups of professors would agree with the paper ‘A is for Adjunct’ (Sonner, 2000) and other research done on this topic (Delucchi and Korgen, 2002; Dill, 2003; Ford, 1987; Freeland, 1998). They all more or less agree that there is underlying pressure on the ‘adjunct world’ not to grade too harshly, or even to make the students happy, because adjunct teachers’ livelihoods, future promotions and careers could depend on these teaching evaluations given by students. Apparently, no one is judging teaching qualities by measuring students’ knowledge after the class, nor is anyone checking the syllabus and assignments of professors. Rather, teaching evaluations are just students’ attitudes towards a course, and cannot be valid or reliable as judgments about the quality of teaching.

The professors who based their opinions on the fact that, nowadays, students are better academically prepared because they have better SAT scores and higher high school GPAs were challenged by the other professors’ opinions that these tests are also inflated and deceptive. Differences between disciplines and the culture of the department may also come into play. The philosophy professors agreed more with Bloom (1987) and Mansfield (2001), who were also philosophy professors and wrote papers on grade inflation. While the labour market conditions and socio-economic context may push undergraduates to focus on more lucrative majors where they can be professionalised, Bloom (1987) and Mansfield (2001), as well as two of the philosophy professors from my study dislike the mentality brought by the marketisation and massification of HEIs.

The language professors may have different experiences in mind, since in a global world it is easier to travel and speak foreign languages with native speakers and more talented female students naturally lead to high GPAs. Furthermore, digitalisation of HEIs has brought different things to different fields, especially the philosophy professors were not that thrilled with this new addition since, in their perception, it has stopped students going to the library and research has been simplified to ‘Google searches’. The professors think that students should be re-oriented from just getting A’s towards more learning, creativity and critical thinking, because university education should be seen as a place where human capital is enhanced and fostered to develop not only the expertise required in the labour market but also the cultural values needed in society.

To better understand the different perspectives and the role of academics, both the philosophy professors’ and language professors’ perspectives were used in this study to acquire some insights on the differences. The findings suggest that differences in disciplines are important even within the humanities departments when we talk about the rise of GPAs. However, it needs to be noted that professors could be giving biased answers, so the potential situation can be that, in a course where there is slight grade inflation, professors are more open to talk about it, while in the courses or departments where they have the highest percentage of students attaining A’s, the professors could simply answer that there is no grade inflation and their students are doing a great job. Therefore, only comparing tests and scores from today and the

past in the same course could answer whether the courses have been ‘watered down’ and whether the students are getting higher grades for lower effort.

Regarding the marketisation of HEIs and that kind of pressure where the student is seen as a customer who needs to be satisfied with their grades, the professors all stated that there is no direct pressure on them, but most of them think that there could be some underlying pressure identified as ‘student expectations’. Higher education in the US has had more focus on the labour market in recent decades which, according to the professors’ perspectives, has pushed students toward business studies and getting a good grade for the sake of a grade or – using sporting language – to score, while institutions are more managed along business lines. These attitudes are often at odds with disciplines such as classical philosophy or medieval French literature. All seven professors therefore agree that the student should not be seen as a customer, they do not accept the ‘business’ mentality at universities, nor that teaching is a product and the student is a consumer, because college students enrol in order to learn something more valuable and not to ‘buy grades’.

Not surprisingly, according to the participants in this study, an important factor in the increasing GPAs is students having a greater selection of courses and being allowed to withdraw before failing, which has already been mentioned by several researchers (Birnbaum, 1977; Hu, 1999; Rosovsky and Healy, 2002). This explanation reduces concerns about huge grade inflation, because this factor naturally leads to higher GPAs – the students do not have to take courses that they don’t like, they can enrol in ones in which they feel they will be more motivated, and if they see, for various reasons, that they don’t want to take that exam, students can drop out of that course without being concerned that their GPA will suffer. Together with the notion that adjunct teachers may be grading more leniently, this was the factor which participants in this study most agreed on as being a contributing factor to the high GPAs.

Because of the strong disagreements on various other factors (e.g. whether students are much better or much worse, whether SATs and high school GPAs are deceiving) the findings further suggest that there is a lot of room for many future discussions and research on this topic amongst the various stakeholders concerned.

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Appendices

A. Interview guide

- 1) HOPE scholarship at UGA - only students with B average could get it. Does this cause some pressure on professors' grading habits because students could lose this scholarships, and they will not be able to continue their studies?
- 2) Marketization of Higher Ed – student being seen as a customer who needs to be satisfied with grades. What are professors' experiences with this?
- 3) Are recent generations of students better than the previous ones, do they study harder, did new teaching methods appeared causing higher GPAs?
- 4) Effect of digitalization on students' abilities and effects on higher GPAs
- 5) Did mass enrolment of student lowered down expectation and caused grade inflation?
- 6) Perceptions on adjunct teachers grading habits (giving higher grades in order to get higher evaluations from students, and these can be important for promotion, especially for younger instructors in the US Higher Ed system)
- 7) Were there any changes in the grading policies and practices?
- 8) Would they accept the 'University wide curve' policy where the maximum number of students getting A would be 35%, example from Princeton University?
- 9) Were there any changes in the program organization that could affect GPAs?
- 10) What about the changing demographics of the student population, in particular the higher number of female students, does this cause the higher overall GPAs?
- 11) What are the most important factors that contribute to higher GPAs?
- 12) Does UGA suffers from grade inflation?

B. Request for participation in research project

Background and purpose

The purpose of the project is to see what are UGA professors' perceptions of why the GPAs of their undergraduate students have been on the rise, especially in the last three decades. There are disagreements in the literature why are GPAs of undergraduate students on the rise therefore it is important to hear professors' perceptions on this topic.

What will happen to the information about you?

All personal data will be treated confidentially and anonymously. I will be the only person with access to this data. The data will be recorded on my personal device and later kept on my personal laptop, both of which are password protected but the recording will be deleted as soon as the anonymized transcript is written. The project is scheduled for completion by January 2020. After this date, the data will have already been made anonymous and will be deleted after my thesis defense is complete.

Voluntary participation

It is voluntary to participate in the project, and you can at any time choose to withdraw your consent without stating any reason. If you decide to withdraw, all your personal data will be made anonymous. If you would like to participate or if you have any questions concerning the project, please contact Ilija Asanovic at + 47 939 45 920, or email ilijaa@student.uio.uv.no. The study has been notified to the Data Protection Official for Research, NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data.