

The Academic Rigor and Grading Task Force 2015 Report

The Provost's Charge

The Rigor and Grading Task Force (hereafter RGTF), which is composed of Christian Reich (SSHS), Chair; Roark Atkinson (SSHGS); Gordon Bear, (SSHS); Clyde Johnson (TAS); Catalin Martin (TAS), was charged with the following duties:

Produce a whitepaper that responds to the following:

1. Review the 2003 Task Force Report on Grading; work with Institutional Research to review similar data for 2008-2009, 2010-2011, and 2012-2013, and compare conclusions;
2. Review available scholarship on academic rigor in college and develop a working definition of academic rigor at Ramapo College;
3. Review available data (see IR and GECCo websites) and draw conclusions about the existing standards of academic rigor across the College;
 - (A) Make observations/recommendations
 - (B) What is the current state of academic rigor at Ramapo College?
 - (C) What if any differences exist between current and ideal academic rigor?
 - (D) What steps should be taken to improve (if necessary) academic rigor at Ramapo College?

The Problem: Survey of Literature on Rigor

What is broken, and what does this mean in general terms? A recent *New York Times* article suggests the big picture of rigor in the America. Educational attainment is rising more slowly in USA than elsewhere in the industrialized world. While Americans ages 55-65 demonstrate literacy, numeracy, technical aptitude at levels that are above average worldwide, Americans ages 16-24 now demonstrate literacy, numeracy, and technical aptitude that are near the bottom. The article suggests that as a result, for the first time in the United States the middle class is growing less wealthy than other industrialized nations.¹

According to a 2010 article published by the AAUP, graduates of USA universities not prepared adequately for post-graduate employment or graduate studies. Only 1 in 4 employers believe American students are ready for global economy. This is difficult to address on college campuses since college teachers fear low student evaluations. Even teachers who are rigorous are challenged by student behavior. Many teachers expect 24-30 hours of student preparation per week. However, studies show that students average only 14 hours. Moreover, one study of three universities in the 1990s reported that roughly one-third of the students were absent from a typical class meeting. Among the obvious prescriptions (take attendance, grade harder) was one that was more interesting: Avoid low scores on student evaluations of professors by giving exams prepared and graded by faculty who don't teach the course (to lessen tendency in student evaluations to be influenced by expected/actual grade outcomes).²

New Federal policies, designed to improve the quality of education, may actually impact rigor in negative ways. according to a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article. The so-called "Completion Agenda" may diminish academic quality. Some states are using ETS "Proficiency Profile" tests. In MO provosts are pushing for state-wide standardized tests (vs. GPA). MO, along with MA, CT, IN, KY, MN, OR, RI, & UT have created a

¹NYT The American Middle Class Is No Longer the World's Richest
APRIL 22, 2014

²<http://www.aaup.org/article/spare-rigor-spoil-learning#.VB3s0L5H2Rc>

consortium to develop better tests. Faculty and other education experts worry about tests being tied to funding. According to the article, Troy D. Paino, president of Truman State, values some aspects of the assessments, but worries that "People want to find some kind of silver bullet that's going to improve the quality of education, and they think performance funding is going to turn things around." In his view, "It's not going to work that way."³ If college and university faculty began teaching to the test, it is likely to have a negative impact on rigor (or worse— lead to the cheating scandal that is plaguing GA).⁴

Almost everyone seems to think rigor is a good thing. However, there are challenges to examining and improving rigor:

1. Rigor is hard to define.
2. Rigor is not confined to the student's work in college. It is systemic, and interlocks with faculty rigor and the academic climate of the campus.
3. There is little agreement on how rigor can be measured.
4. It is hard to find concrete examples of how rigor can be fixed, even when it is defined and measured.

There are several significant problems that may be associated with a lack of rigor in colleges generally and Ramapo College in particular:

1. Rigor, according to many measures, appears to be in decline.
2. There is a sense in society at large that declining rigor can have negative consequences on both macro and micro scales.
 - (A) On the small scale, students who graduate Ramapo College without meeting standards of rigor will not be competitive with graduates from rigorous institutions when they apply for the same jobs.
 - (B) On a larger scale, society may degrade, and our nation will no longer be competitive with other nations that have rigorous educational standards (Finland, South Korea, etc.).

The Working Definition

The earliest references to rigor in the English language (*OED*) date from the 14th century (ca. 1395). This speaks to the rigor applied by a teacher, or that which a student applies to her/himself.

"Harsh inflexibility (in dealing with a person or group of people); severity, sternness; cruelty.

c1405 (► c1395) Chaucer Franklin's Tale (Hengwrt) (2003) l. 67 Pacience..venquysseth..Thynges that rigour [v.rr. Rigor, rigoure] sholde neuere atteyne."

In listing examples of modern usage, the *OED* also suggests that (like college grades over the past several decades) the term rigor has experienced inflationary forces that have weakened its original meaning. The closest modern definitions for our purposes in the *OED* are these:

"The requirements, demands, or challenges of a task, activity, etc."

"Extreme strictness or stringency (of standards, conduct, etc.); scrupulousness or rigidity in the application of rules, principles, or precepts"

³http://chronicle.com/article/States-to-Colleges-Prove-Your/142651/?cid=cc&utm_source=cc&utm_medium=en

⁴<http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-cheating-trial-20140907-story.html#page=1>

These definitions are unhelpful for our purposes. As a result, RGTF has defined rigor as a *process* composed of three interlocking parts. That is, rigor is not fixed but evolving, changing (growing or lessening), and inextricable from other functions of the college.

That said, we measure rigor in concrete ways all the time. The grades professors give to their students are a measure of rigor. The general expectation is that a student with a “C” average (GPA of 2.0) is completing course work with an average amount of rigor. Seen from a slightly different perspective, the work the student does is *college-level work* (i.e. not at the high-school or grad-school level, and not some watered-down version of undergraduate work) when they receive a “C” or above. An appropriate (or average) amount of effort is required to maintain rigor. A student who expends more than the average amount of effort in his or her studies at home and in the classroom may expect a higher grade (though other factors will influence the outcome; such as the student’s ability, or a student’s willingness to utilize campus tutorial services and/or other resources).

Rigor is related to grades, but the terms are not synonymous. Greater rigor may generally yield higher grades, but not in every case (certainly not on a campus where cheating is rampant). The same can be said for *student effort* and *rigor*. Greater effort may not translate exactly to higher grades, though the general expectation is that it will. Nevertheless, there is a general sense that increasing rigor means increasing one’s effort (spending more time studying, being more engaged in class discussions, etc.), and that overall this yields higher grades– the ultimate measure of the student’s rigor. This ignores the faculty side, however. Faculty may also increase rigor in all of their courses by introducing more rigorous assignments, grading assignments with more rigor, enforcing academic integrity standards with greater severity, and by conducting research (or, as in the performing arts, creating and displaying art, directing theater performances, consulting in the private sector, etc.) in their own field. The latter is the way that many faculty hone their skills and keep their knowledge in the discipline up-to-date, which is then imparted in the classroom (as when faculty update their syllabi or add new course materials). Alternatively, faculty may engage in the scholarship of pedagogy, particularly as it applies to one’s unique discipline.

Faculty have primary (but not exclusive) oversight with regard to student rigor. Each faculty member lends his or her expertise in an established discipline (or set of disciplines, or interdisciplinary approach), which varies widely but shares the same goal: to serve the education of a student at the college-level. This is done by teaching and grading the student’s work rigorously.

Rigor works in lockstep with academic integrity. As with the recent scandal at Harvard University, students may feign rigor by cheating.⁵ The Ramapo College’s administration (especially under the leadership of the Provost) contributes in significant ways to rigor on the campus. This includes (but is not limited to) the maintenance of a rigorously enforced Academic Integrity policy.

We propose the following framework of three interlocking pieces as a working definition of Rigor:

Student-Level Rigor
Faculty-Level Rigor
Institutional-Level Rigor

The Student Level: A rigorous education is challenging, immersive, and disciplined.
Student Workload expectations include:

⁵<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2014/9/4/freshman-survey-academics-extracurriculars/>

1. Sufficient Class time. Regular class attendance and participation are vital. Student absences both undermine and are evidence of a lack of rigor.
2. Sufficient out-of-class study time. This goes beyond “assigned homework,” though the necessary time may vary by discipline.⁶ The amount of study time will also vary as a function of a student’s ability and previous experience with the material.
3. High level of Academic Integrity. Student must be careful to understand Academic Integrity in order to avoid committing violations.

The Faculty Level: Faculty are expected to design a curriculum and courses that are challenging, engaging, comprehensive, immersive, and disciplined. To do this effectively, faculty must:

1. Provide clear expectations of what the student must do in the class to meet or exceed standards of rigor.
2. Make clear what the student should expect from their professor.
3. Enforce academic integrity.

The Institutional Level: Administrators and Staff are expected to support faculty and students in meeting or exceeding standards of rigor.

1. Provision and maintenance of safe and modern facilities.
2. Provision and maintenance of current technology and adopting state-of-art technology as appropriate.
3. Provision and maintenance of resources and funding for student and faculty development.
4. Provision and maintenance of a rigorously enforced Academic Integrity policy.

Current State of Rigor at Ramapo College

With this three-level operational definition of rigor, we wanted to assess the *perceived* current state of rigor at both the Faculty and Student levels. First, we generated a faculty survey to elicit faculty input on rigor and Grading practices. We emphasized the word *perceived* in our survey to highlight the subjective nature of defining and measuring rigor.

Faculty Survey: In the Fall 2014 semester, we posted a questionnaire using Qualtrics and emailed to 213 full-time faculty members an invitation to answer it. After two additional requests, we had 109 respondents, who constituted 51% of the full-time faculty. If these 109 had been selected through simple independent random sampling, the margin of error for extrapolations from them to the entire faculty with 95% confidence would have ranged from ± 4 to ± 7 percentage points, depending on the percentage observed in the sample. Because the 109 were, however, a self-selected sample, we are unable to attach to a margin of error to our numbers.

Despite some answers and comments indicating some flaws in the survey construction, two major conclusions were determined: 1) 94% of faculty respondents (n=109) believe they apply rigorous standards in teaching and 2) 82% of respondents believe that a grade of A reflects a student excelling beyond the average class expectation See next page.

⁶ One standard measure is the Carnegie unit, which has traditionally been calculated as two hours of work outside the classroom for every hour of time spent in the classroom.

I apply rigorous standards in all of my classes, as appropriate for the level of the course.

	N	Percent
Strongly Agree	70	64.8%
Agree	31	28.7%
Neutral	6	5.6%
Disagree	1	0.9%
Don't Know	1	
Total	109	

The grade of "A" at Ramapo reflects the fact that the student has far exceeded the average amount of rigor in his/her work in my class.

	N	Percent
Strongly Agree	51	48.1%
Agree	36	34.0%
Neutral	6	5.7%
Disagree	10	9.4%
Strongly Disagree	3	2.8%
Don't Know	2	
Total	108	

While these numbers appear to provide a clear picture on faculty perception of Rigor and Grading, interpretation is limited given the following: 1) only 57 % of respondents believe that other faculty are applying rigorous standards. It is worth noting that 25.6% of respondents answered "I do not know" and 26% answered "Neutral" to this question. 2) Only 45 % of respondents believe that students are held to rigorous standards. Again, this is tempered by 17% responding "I do not know" and 38% answering "Neutral". Finally, 53% of respondents believe that a grade of "C" reflects a student performing at an average level of Rigor, with 43% disagreeing.

Other faculty at Ramapo College apply rigorous standards in their classes.

	N	Percent
Strongly Agree	11	13.6%
Agree	35	43.2%
Neutral	21	25.9%
Disagree	13	16.0%
Strongly Disagree	1	1.2%
Don't Know	28	
Total	109	

Students at Ramapo are held to rigorous standards in their classes.

	N	Percent
Strongly Agree	6	6.7%
Agree	34	37.8%
Neutral	34	37.8%
Disagree	14	15.6%
Strongly Disagree	2	2.2%
Don't Know	18	
Total	108	

The grade of “C” at Ramapo reflects the fact that the student has performed his/her work with an average amount of rigor in my class

	N	Percent
Strongly Agree	13	12.3%
Agree	43	40.6%
Neutral	4	3.8%
Disagree	39	36.8%
Strongly Disagree	7	6.6%
Don't Know	2	
Total	108	

In summary, the survey suggests that overall faculty perceive that Ramapo College is delivering a Rigorous educational experience. However there also appears to be a level of ambiguity and vagueness in our grading culture and perception of how other faculty are delivering rigor. These points will be discussed below in the Grand Summary and Recommendations sections.

Student Data on Rigor and Grading: In the interest of time, we did not formally survey the student body. Instead, we opted to use the Ramapo College Graduating Student Survey and the National Student Survey in Student Engagement (NSSE) data as indicators of students' perception of rigor and grading. *The data from surveys presented below indicate that Ramapo Students: 1) feel that they were provided with high quality instruction, 2) report classes were rigorous, 3) that they learned a lot in their classes, 4) “often” worked harder than they thought they could in their courses and 5) reported that approximately 45% of their grades were in the A range and 45% in the B range. Importantly, as observed in the NSSE data, our students are comparable to national trend. However, these surveys may suffer from a self-selection bias and should be interpreted with caution.*

Graduating Senior Survey:

Academic Assessment /Office of the Provost - Graduating Senior Survey 2012 - Highlights

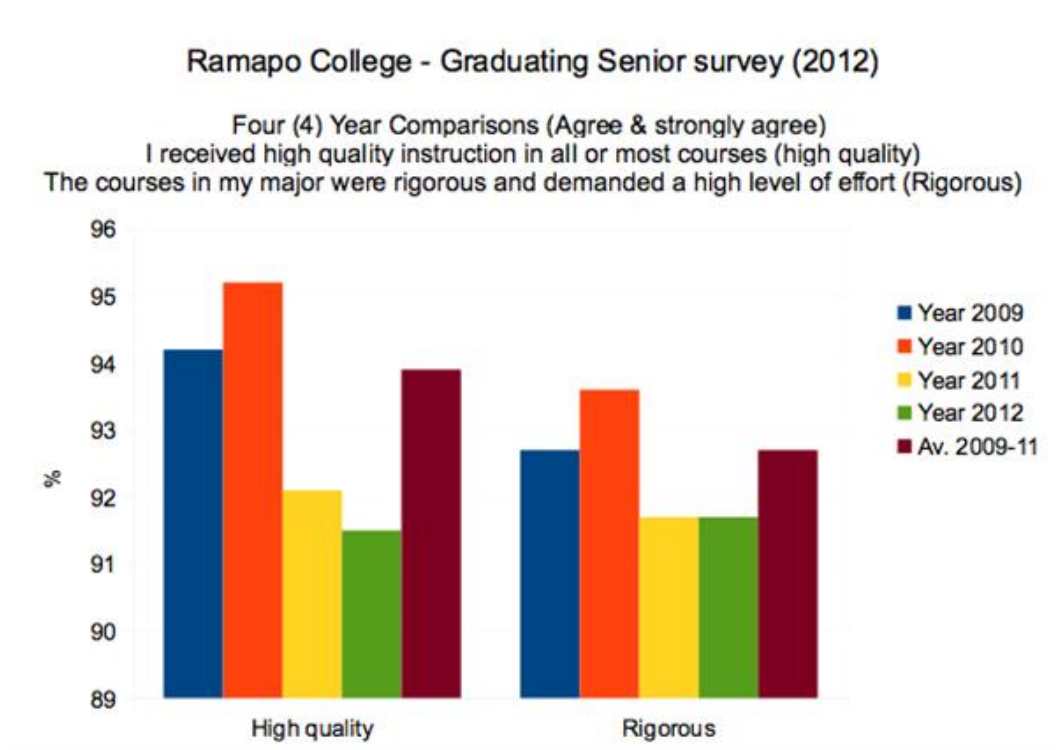
Quantifiable items from Graduating Senior Survey 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012 are presented below in the table and students' responses for 2012 are compared with the previous 3-year averages and 2012 responses. For 2012, the same as the previous 3 years, a large majority of students (90% and higher) are satisfied in the following areas:

- The courses in my major were rigorous and demanded a high level of effort 92%
- I received high quality instruction in all or most courses 92%
- I learned a lot in all or most of my courses 90%

Table 1: LONGITUDINAL COMPARISONS - Four (4) Year Comparisons for Ramapo College

Strongly agree/ agree	2009 Valid Pct.	2010 Valid Pct.	2011 Valid Pct.	2012 Valid Pct.	Previous 3-year average 2009+2010+2011/3	Compared with 3-year average Pct.pt.change (2012 - average)	Compared with last year Pct.Pt.Change (2011 - 2010)
I received high quality instruction in all or most courses p<.05	94.2%	95.2	92.1	91.5	93.9	-2.4	-0.6
The courses in my major were rigorous and demanded a high level of effort	92.7	93.6	91.7	91.7	92.7	-1.0	0.0

Figure 1



Ten (10) year comparisons:

Responses from the past 10 years are presented in the table below. Comparison of 2012 responses with previous 9-year averages is included in the table.

Table 2: Ten year comparison for Ramapo College graduating seniors who strongly agree/agree when answering the following question: I received high quality instruction in all or most courses

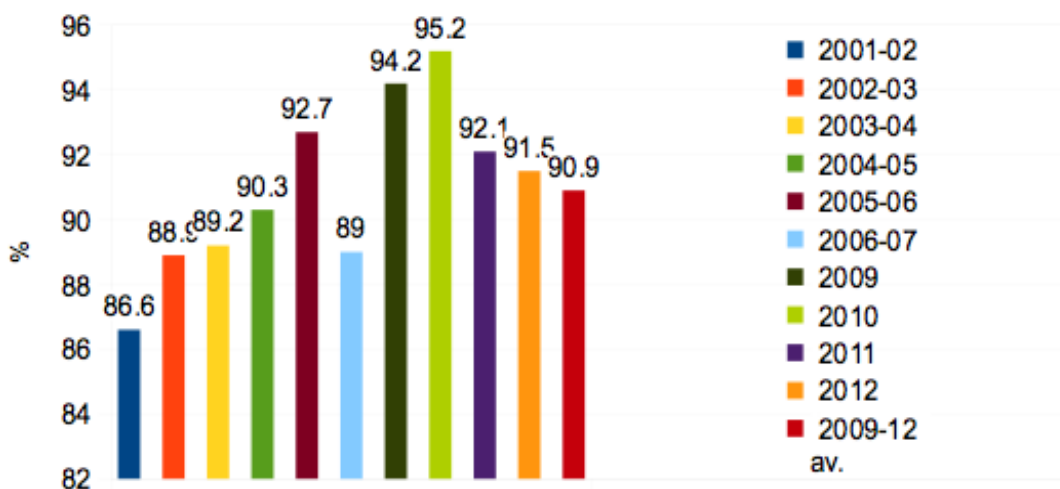
2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06	2007-08	2009	2010	2011	2012	Previous 9 year average	Compared with 9 year average. Percent point change 2012-average
86.6%	88.9	89.2	90.3	92.7	89.0	94.2	95.2	92.1	91.5	90.9	0.6

Figure 2: Ten year comparison for Ramapo College graduating seniors who strongly agree/agree when answering the following question: I received high quality instruction in all or most courses. The Ramapo College Senior Survey data (Table 1 and Figure 1) shows that 92% of students for 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012 strongly agree/agree that the courses they took in their major were rigorous and demanded a high level of effort. Also, 93% of seniors strongly agree/agree that they received high quality instructions in all or most courses they took. These are overwhelming percentages and would seem to suggest that courses in the major during that four-year period at Ramapo College were rigorous.

Over 91% of graduating seniors (range 86.6 to 95.2%) for the years 2001 to 2012 strongly agree/agree (Table 2 and Figure 2) that they received high quality instruction in all or most of their courses. As seen in Figure 2, the general trend shows an increase in the number of students, who agree that they received high quality instruction during this period, from 86.6 % in 2001-02 to 91.5% in 2012.

Graduating Senior Survey 2012 - Ten (10) Year longitudinal Comparisons

I received high quality instruction in all or most courses (Ramapo College)



The following were also noted in the survey:

- 1) Ramapo /my major prepared me well for employment (2012: 79.5%)
- 2) Ramapo /my major prepared me well for graduate school (2012: 81.9%)

NSSE:**Table 3 and Figure 4: NSSE 2012 Mean Comparisons - Ramapo College of New Jersey* compared with Mid East Public, Carnegie Class and NSSE 2012**

First year students responded to the following:

In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done the following? Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations?

1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very often

	Ramapo College		Mid East Public		Carnegie Class		NSSE 2012	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Never	14	6	373	6	522	5	6370	6
Sometimes	89	33	2126	33	3260	31	36517	33
Often	124	44	2602	39	4154	39	45288	40
Very often	48	17	1484	22	2481	24	24688	22
Total	275	100	6585	100	10417	100	112861	100

Figure 4

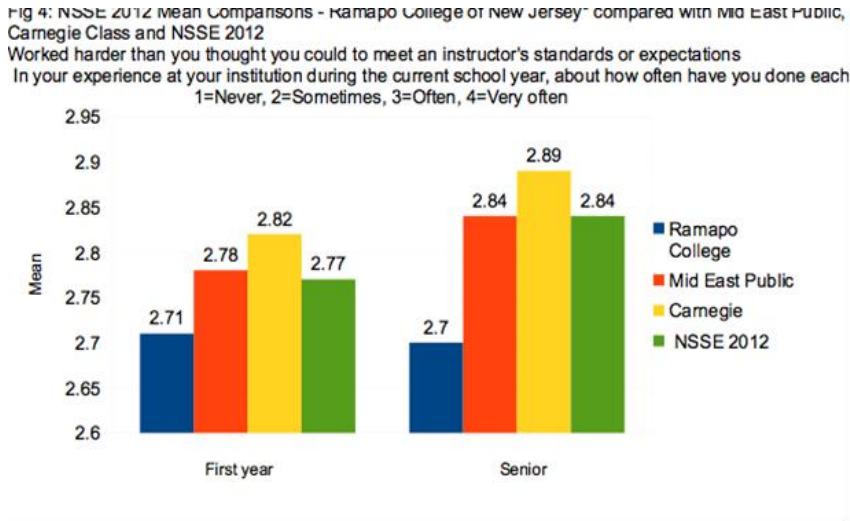


Table 4: NSSE 2012 Engagement Item Frequency Distributions -Ramapo College of New Jersey* compared with Mid East Public, Carnegie Class and NSSE 2012

Senior Students responded to the following:

In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done the following?

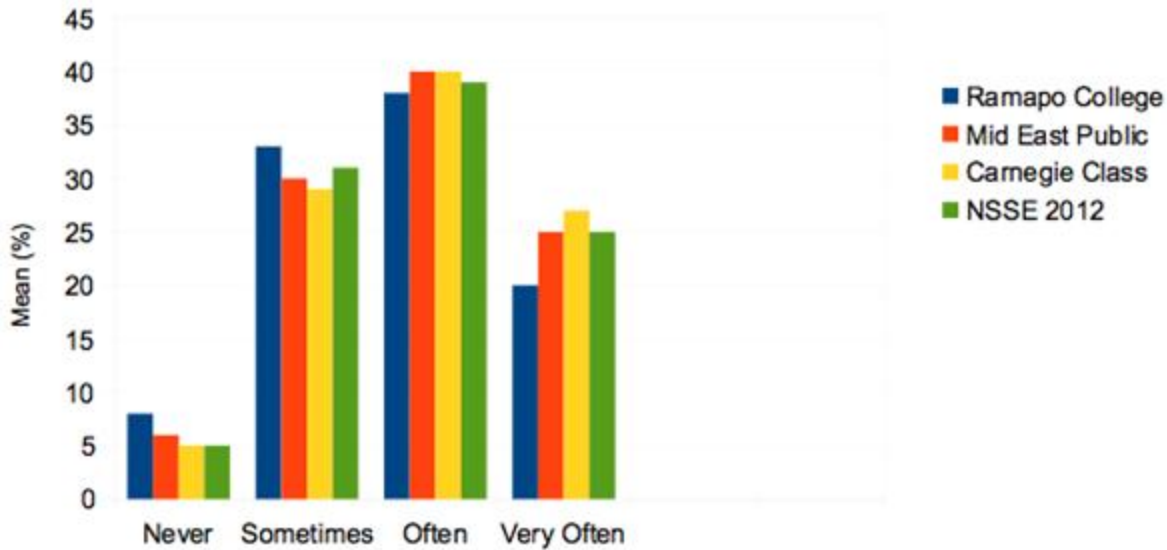
Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations?

1=Never, 2=Sometimes, 3=Often, 4=Very often

	Ramapo College		Mid East Public		Carnegie Class		NSSE 2012	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Never	15	8	506	6	618	5	7797	5
Sometimes	62	33	2890	30	3981	29	47103	31
Often	72	38	3950	40	5621	40	61196	39
Very often	36	20	2613	25	3875	27	39394	25
Total	185	100	9961	100	14095	100	155490	100

Fig. 6: NSSE 2012 Engagement Item Frequency Distributions - Ramapo College compared with Mid East Public, Carnegie Class and NSSE 2012

Worked harder than you thought you could to meet an instructor's standards or expectations (seniors)



*Column percentages are weighted by gender and enroll. Status (and inst. size for comparisons). Counts are not weighted; one cannot replicate column percentages from counts.

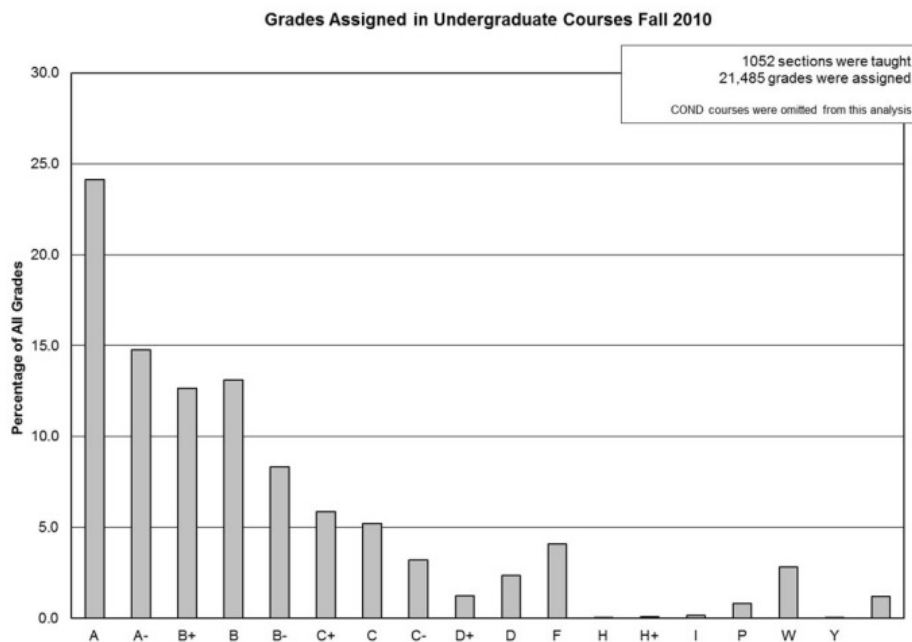
NSSE Summary: Data (Table 3 and Figure 4) from the same NSSE survey show that 61% of RC Freshman, 61% from Mid East Public, 63% from the Carnegie Class and 62% from NSSE said that they very often/often had to work harder than expected to meet instructor's standards or expectations. For Seniors, the data (Table 4 and Figure 6) showed that 58% from RC, 65% from Mid East Public, 67% from the Carnegie Class and 64% from NSSE said that they very often/often had to work harder than expected to meet instructor's standards or expectations. This means that even though over 58% of both Freshman and Seniors said they had to work much harder in their courses than they expected, over 80% of all students in the survey still managed to get superior grades, a B or better, in most of their classes. The percentage of RC Seniors who said that they had to work harder is lower than for the other three. This data shows that even though students were surprised by the quantity of the course work, they did not find this extra work challenging. Does this mean that they simply had to study longer hours, but not necessarily harder, to get good grades?

Also, the Multi-Year benchmark Survey for RC (Tables 7 and 8) during the period from 2003 to 2012 showed that 54% (range 52.4 –54.9%) of Freshmen and 56.2 (range 53.8 –58.9%) of Seniors said that the level of academic work was challenging.

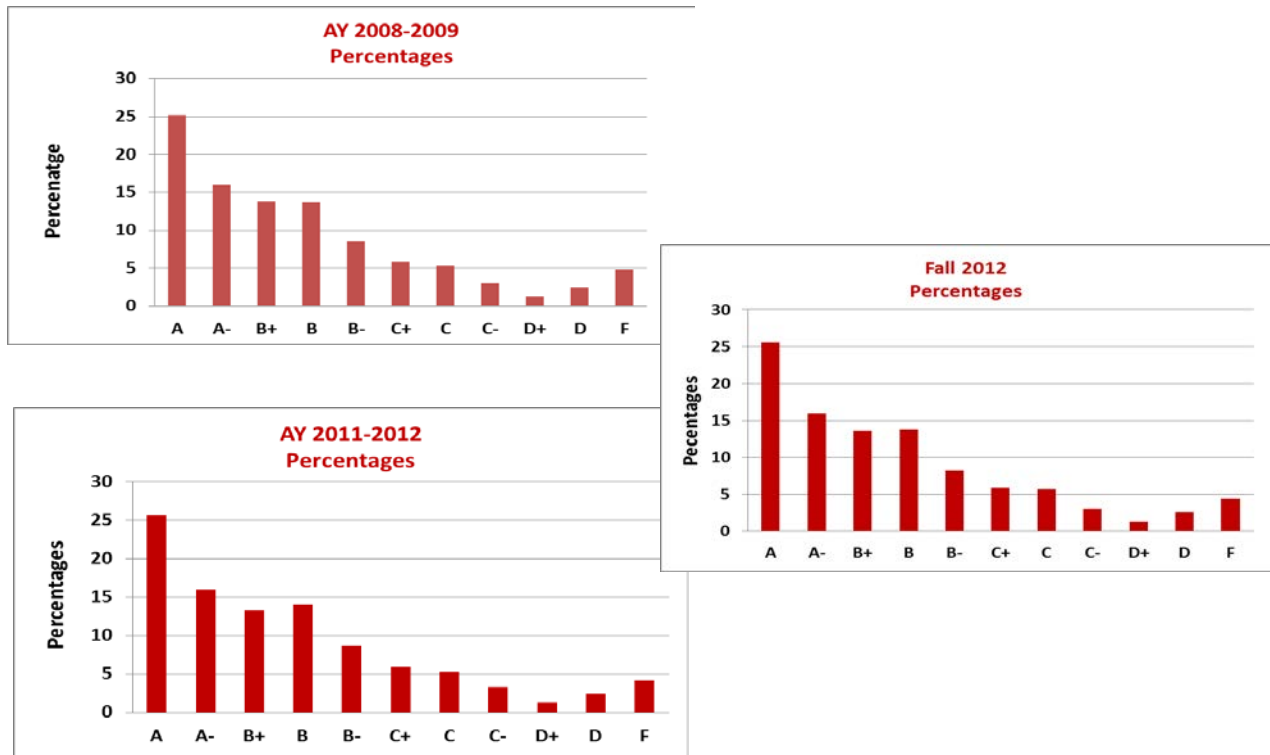
Current State of Grading at Ramapo College

Through the good offices of the Provost, we obtained the grades recently awarded at Ramapo College, semester by semester. The data comprised counts: how many each of the A, the A–, the B+, and so on, were awarded for each course. Courses were identified by discipline, number, and section as in the Catalog and the Schedule of Classes (e.g., PSYC 242-01). For some semesters the instructors' names also appeared, but these we immediately deleted. We acknowledge that for some courses a motivated mind could nonetheless identify the instructor, but we have not done so, and the summaries we report do not allow such a thing. A larger issue here is whether grades—i.e., the counts of the A, the A–, the B+, and so on—should ever be public, and if so how aggregated—perhaps over disciplines (e.g., Psychology) and over schools (e.g., SSHS). Perhaps the data should be published unaggregated—i.e., course by course, in which case the instructor is likely to be identifiable. We take no position on this issue but call for discussion, and in our Recommendations below we list pros and cons. The website Koofers.com purports to publish these data by instructor with the instructors identified.

As an example of our analyses, consider the grades awarded in the fall of 2010. According to the Provost's data, 1078 courses were taught that semester, with sizes ranging from 1 to 70. We dropped the 27 Conditioning courses, all but one of which were graded Pass-Fail, leaving 1051 courses. Across these courses, 21485 grades were awarded (yielding a mean class size of $21485/1051$, or 20.4). Of these grades, 39% were the A or the A–; 34% were the B+, B, or B–; 14% were the C+, C, or C–; and 8% the D+, D, or F. The modal (most common) grade that semester was the A, awarded about a quarter of the time, 24%. (Other grades listed in the records were the H+, H, P, W, I, Y, and an unlabeled one we believe to be the Z. They totaled 5 %.)



This pattern held for all the semesters we examined, fall 2008 through fall 2012, as the graphs show.



The modal grade was always the A, accounting for about a quarter of all marks; the second most common was the A–; and the total for the A and the A–was close to 40%. The pattern lies far from the old norm of centering grades on “the gentleman’s C.” In the 1980s one member of this task force, together with our Ramaponian colleague Prof. Mary Starke, published a survey of grades in a stratified random sample of 65 colleges and universities across America⁷ (Starke & Bear, 1988). At the time Ramapo’s modal grade was the B. Is it conceivable that today’s Ramapo students are so much better prepared for college, so much more strongly motivated to do their assignments, and so much more successful at what they accomplish that their grades should be so much higher?

Current State of Administrative Role in Rigor and Grading at Ramapo College

This task force did not attempt to assess the role of administration in these issues. We recommend that the Administration perform an internal assessment of its current and future role in maintaining and improving Rigor. However, according to Eric Daffron, Vice Provost of Curriculum and Assessment, the administration is extremely active in educating students regarding Ramapo’s Academic Integrity Policy and enforcing it. His office provides a presentation to all incoming freshman during “Welcome Week” and to all EOF students. Furthermore, the full Academic Integrity policy is provided in the syllabus for all First Year Seminar sections; an abridged version is also required in all course syllabi. In conjunction with the Judicial Affairs office, the Provost’s office instituted a Formal Academic Integrity Board to provide an additional layer of inquiry into Academic Integrity violations. This Board is composed of faculty, staff and students. According to Vice Provost Daffron, the number of violations has increased recently (data is forthcoming from the Provost’s office). Although, interpretation is tempered in that is unclear if students are actually committing more violations or

⁷Starke, M., & Bear, G. (1988). Grading in higher education: A survey of American systems and practices. *Journal of Research and Development in Education*, 21, 62-68.

rather faculty are more comfortable reporting violations in lieu of strong administration support. This will continue to be an area for discussion and refinement (see Recommendations).

Conclusion

In general, both students and faculty *perceive* that Ramapo is currently offering a rigorous educational experience. In regards to grade inflation, Ramapo is similar to national trends in that our modal grade is an A. However, it appears that discussions among the faculty, both formal and informal, are needed to determine if college-wide benchmarks in both rigor and grading are either possible or desirable (see Recommendations below). That is, we as an institution need to reflect and assess if the status quo is sufficient or do we desire to improve? If we assume that both student and faculty perceptions discussed in this report truly reflect the nature of rigor at Ramapo College, then our task is simply one of vigilance and maintenance to ensure the integrity of our academic excellence.

Recommendation for Defining Rigor at Ramapo College

Reflecting on our three-level working definition of Academic Rigor (see Introduction) and the results of the faculty survey, we now offer the three-level system as framework for constructing a college-wide definition of Academic Rigor. Thus, our core recommendation is to implement bottom-up discussions and initiatives, whereby each discipline determines its standards/benchmarks for rigor and grading practices. Once each discipline has reached an agreement on a core set of values, it will share these values with its parent school (unit). Then each school will define a broad set of rigor and grading practices that reflect the distinct personality and diversity of each unit. Finally, each unit will present their values to the Faculty Assembly for discussion and debate to find common elements that will ultimately define Ramapo College Faculty's united view on Academic Rigor and Grading Policy. This grass-roots organic process will ensure protection of discipline- and unit-specific values as well as providing a college-wide set of values and practices common to all faculty members.

A similar, bottom-up process is recommended also for the Student Level. One major concern with both the Graduating Student Survey and NSSE is the assumption that students have a clear understanding of Academic Rigor. For example, asking students "how hard they worked" is extremely vague and subjective. We as an institution need to first provide the students with what to expect in terms of attendance, time spent outside classroom studying, and time spent working on assignments. Furthermore, students should be presented with a clear and consistent grading policy in terms of the \pm grading system. This should be disseminated to students during the Admissions process, during Orientation activities, during First-Year-Seminar and throughout the curriculum. Conversely, the students should be involved in the rigor process by not only adhering to the institution's policies, but also through active engagement with faculty and administration. This will serve to inform the institution on the quality of rigor it is delivering and what students expect from the faculty and administration.

Although we are recommending a bottom-up process for faculty and student participation in shaping our academic culture, there needs to be a level of top-down input from the administration. As described in our working definition the administration needs to support faculty and students in meeting or exceeding standards of rigor through: Provision and maintenance of safe and modern facilities, Provision and maintenance of technology, Provision and maintenance of resources and funding for student and faculty development, and Provision and maintenance of a rigorously enforced Academic Integrity policy.

With all three levels contributing effectively, this system should provide a foundation to support and cultivate a rich culture of Academic Rigor and Excellence at Ramapo College.

Appendix: Specific Recommendations to Improve Grading and Rigor

A. Professors

1. Grades *must* reflect rigor, as *demonstrated* (observed, measured) by the student in their coursework, class participation, and any out-of-class experiential activity. Imperfect as grades may be, they are the best and last measure of rigor, since they reflect the disciplinary training and expertise of the faculty who issue them. The target grade for a student *demonstrating* an average amount of rigor should be a 2.0 (C). Only student who exceed this average should earn the highly coveted A or B grade. Students who cannot even meet the C level must be graded honestly, so they can seek remediation or consider other life plans and/or career paths (short of dropping out of college, they may consider a change of major).

Grades should not be artificially imposed from above. A college may have a high GPA in its student body because it is selective and attracts students capable of practicing (or at least exhibiting) high standards of rigor. However, greater discussion among faculty within units and convening groups may yield a greater consensus of what constitute A, B, and C grades, as well as what do not. Moreover, faculty would likely bristle at the idea of the administration imposing the bell curve from on high (for example, requiring all classes have an average grade of “C,” or a certain percentage of students expected to fail).

2. Because Ramapo’s courses carry 4 credits whereas most other colleges teach 3-credit courses and most textbooks are written for a 3-credit course, professors at Ramapo must assure that their courses are worth that 4th credit. Because 4 is 1/3 more than 3, our courses should require 1/3 more work. When Ramapo switched to 4-credit courses, the number of courses required for graduation was reduced by about 10, equivalent to an entire year. Lest our students graduate with only 3 years of course work, we must each augment our courses.

3. According to Vice Provost Daffron, violations of Academic Integrity are being increasingly reported by the faculty. Regardless if this indicates a higher frequency or increased reporting of such events, professors should make their tests and their assignments resistant to cheating and plagiarism. Furthermore, timely official reporting of these events will enhance the administration’s efforts to adjudicate violations. This sends a strong message to students that Ramapo College strictly enforces Academic Integrity and this in turn supports a culture of high academic rigor.

4. Although our survey does not strongly support an impact of student evaluations on grading rigor in general, more than 48% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that “adjunct and non-tenured faculty cause more grade inflation and less rigor because they want to have better student evaluations”. Only about 25% disagreed or strongly disagreed. It is widely accepted that students tend to evaluate an instructor based on the grade received in the class and furthermore, the adjunct and non-tenured faculty are well aware of the importance of these evaluations in the reappointment process. We propose that the student evaluations be revised and reformulated in such a way that students reflect more on the quality of teaching and their learning from a course rather than being assertive of the grading methodology. Also, we recommend that in the reappointment process, more emphasis must be put on peer and administrative evaluations. These evaluations may be enhanced to also include an assessment of the grading rigor, but our assertion is that they provide a more accurate picture of the quality of teaching and grading rigor than student evaluations do.

B. Students

1. Feeble effort at academic assignments limits learning. Students should set high standards for themselves and work hard to meet those standards; doing all the assigned reading, for example, and double-checking their homework. This needs to be encouraged and nurtured from Welcome Week through Graduation by the Faculty, Administration and Students.

2. Students should refrain from cheating and plagiarism (see A. 3.)

C. Administration

1. When supplying data from sample surveys, include (a) the method by which the data were collected and (b) a measure of the uncertainty in the estimates derived from the data, such as the margin of error for 95% confidence or the standard error of the mean. In the absence of such things, the data give the impression that they are the full truth and trustworthy as a basis for generalizations about our student body and sufficient grounds for policies and practices.

We suspect that most data collected by administrators at most colleges come from self-selected samples or from randomly selected samples with high rates with missing data, and extrapolation from such data to the sampled population is unwarranted. Moreover, in the absence of measures of uncertainty, one cannot reason correctly about differences between samples, including changes over time; one can easily over-interpret a difference, ascribing it to a causal process when it is really due to nothing more than sampling error.

Moreover, as social and psychological research shows, most people's opinions on most topics are superficial statements generated on the fly, easily influenced by circumstances such as the wording of the question, the order of the questions, the options available for the answer, and the respondent's current mood. Questionnaires carefully constructed and validated are available to measure certain variables, and administrators reporting data should state whether such instruments were employed.

2. Support Academic Rigor by supporting faculty in student-faculty disputes regarding course grades and difficulty. This sends a strong message to students that Ramapo College is a community that cultivates excellence in academic achievement and growth. It also reinforces the student's role in that achievement. Lastly, it shows clear administrative support of Academic Freedom.

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