Notebook

It's getting harder for Harvard University students to earn honors. Faculty members at Harvard have unanimously approved a series of changes aimed at curbing grade inflation in the undergraduate college. At a regularly scheduled faculty meeting, professors voted to completely overhaul the grading and honors systems by capping the number of students who can receive honors and by taking steps to significantly reduce the number of students who earn A’s and B’s.

The changes, which come on the heels of a wave of criticism of allegedly rampant grade inflation at Harvard, will take effect with the students now finishing their freshman year and affect subsequent classes.

For the first time in the history of the institution, no more than 40 percent of seniors will be eligible to receive the highest distinctions of cum laude, magna cum laude, or summa cum laude, and grade cutoffs will be imposed to make any form of honors more difficult to achieve. For example, a student will be required to be much closer to a B- average in order to achieve cum laude honors, which is higher than was previously required.

The university has also adopted a 4.0 grading scale, eliminating the 1.0-point scale in which the difference between grades was two points.

Some critics of grade inflation at the college have argued that in the 1.0-point system, the gap between an A- (or an A-) and a B+ (or a B+) led professors to award the higher grade so that students wouldn't feel they were unnecessarily penalizing students.

"We are fortunate that the effort and excellence of our students make the continued evaluation of our grading and honors systems necessary," said Susan Pedersen, the dean of undergraduate admissions, who proposed many of the changes.

The faculty have engaged in a thorough examination of grading and honors this year," she said. "I am confident that these policy changes will help us maintain our commitment to the highest educational standards.

Last fall, The Harvard Globe reported that a record 91 percent of graduating seniors had received honors the previous June. The newspaper's coverage of grading at Harvard helped precipitate an internal inquiry into grade inflation. That review, completed this month, found that an upward trend in grades was in fact a serious problem, as many critics had anticipated.

Discussions about grade inflation led to controversy at the university this year. Since becoming Harvard's president last July, Lawrence H. Summers has made curbing grade inflation a priority. Some tense conversations between Mr. Summers and the African-American-studies scholar Cornel West on that and other issues led Mr. West to announce this spring that he was leaving Harvard for Princeton University.

In a statement after the faculty vote, President Summers said, "I welcome the faculty's adoption of higher standards."

Students

Preparing for Life After the Last Pirouette

A program at St. Mary's College of California educates dancers for careers outside the limelight.

BY PETER MONAGHAN

SAN FRANCISCO

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omer new straps onto her pink ballet shoes, Muriel Maffie paces to consider her unique situation. A 26-year-old principal dancer with the San Francisco Ballet, she is not only a star of the ballet world, but she will soon become a rarity in it: a college graduate.

In 1999, she was the first enrollee in LEAP (Liberal Education for Arts Professionals), a program at St. Mary's College of California that allows professional dancers to get bachelor's degrees in three years of part-time study.

The college devised LEAP to accommodate the intense schedules of dancers while it helps them lay the groundwork for subsequent careers. Ms. Maffie's background is typical of the participants: She studied at the Paris Opera Ballet School, where she focused much more on dance than on schooling; signed her first professional contract at 15; and performed for five years at the Monte Carlo Ballet, in Monaco, before coming here 12 years ago.

Grades and textbooks seem worlds away as the French-born dancer rehearses-gracefully raising one leg until it is almost flush against her cheek—at St. Mary's War Memorial Opera House. Standing nearly six feet tall with croppedauburn hair and wiry limbs, she is an expressive force, and it is hard to imagine her trudging off to study math or Melissa.

But Ms. Maffie felt the need to prepare herself for what comes after the stage, and the LEAP program saved her from pursuing a degree one course at a time at local colleges, squeezing classes and study in among her 7- to 12-hour days of rehearsing, performing, and touring.

The program also aims to break through the "shut up and dance" tradition, in which directors have seen their dance programs as a way to train their question in the arts. "In the theater, our minds are working all the time," Ms. Maffie says in her clear, accented English, "so there is very much a need for intellectual investigation, to balance the physical activity."

A DANCER'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Claire Sheehan started LEAP in 1999, after leading the dance program at St. Mary's from 1977 to 1997. In her own performing career, and while teaching in Russia, Britain, Bosnia, and several other

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of the San Francisco Ballet, tried to
sake out a degree by taking classes
here and there, often rising early to
finish assignments after getting
home at midnight from perform-
ances. By comparison, the LEAP
program is a breeze, says the 23-
year-old from Chevy Chase, Md.
"After doing a show, I just want to
go home to bed. But I find that
when I go to class, this other space
opens up in my head, and there's
all this energy there that I hadn't
tapped into."

For Clove Mathis, a founding
member of the Dance Theatre of
Harlem in 1969 who has danced
with leading American and Euro-
pean companies, enrolling in LEAP
was a matter of facing the music.
He has taught dance part-time at
the university level but wants to
keep teaching, he says. "I don't want
to wake up one day and find I don't
have a roof over my head," he says.

LEAP students, who earn a ma-
jor in dance performance and a mi-
nor in liberal arts, take 8 to 10-
week required courses in the hu-
marties (the "Great Works," world
traditions, and lives of key figures
in history), mathematics, anatomy
and physiology of human move-
ment, and dance history. To ease
the scheduling of dancers from as
many as 15 companies, the program
allows students to take "January
terms"—intensive, one-month ses-
sions during a traditional break in
ballet-company touring—or
engage in independent study.

The program's most recent news
is the addition of a website where
students can share experiences
and trade tips and opinions.

BURDENS OF EXCELLENCE

Being back in a classroom can be
a shock for some dancers. During
a break at the Ramada, Thomas
Halligan, his blond shock of hair
far less kempt than a ballet
caller's—he's a 15-year dancer
has been in musical comedy—says
he needs a B.A. "I've been offered
many jobs teaching dance, but when
they find out I don't have a degree,
they're surprised, and I don't get
the job." But he hesitated to go to
college: "At best, I was a disruptive
student as a child."

His fear has abated in classes full
of dancers. "They all think kind of
like I do," he says. "They struggle
with a lot of the things I do."

As Mr. Halligan reads a straight-
forward recollection of breaking his
kneecap as a child, his fellow stu-
dents are riveted. In his opinion,
though, the essay "just sucks." Oddly,
says Ms. Sheridan, lack of confi-
dence is a common issue in LEAP.
"The dancers memorize movement
like this," she says, snapping her
fingers. "They're professionals when
their peers are at the junior prom.
"As a result, they have grown up
carrying a burden of "excellence."

"I've been told since they were 8 that the goal is perfection.
Of course they'll never reach it. That's good and that's bad. They bring
those same standards to their academic work; so if they get an
A— they think they've failed miserably."

Another hurdle is that "dancers' liberation" has been "slow coming,"
Ms. Sheridan says. Many instructors scream at dancers and demoralize
them. "You still see this," she says. "Not at the San Francisco Ballet, but
it's still a tradition in the ballet world: 'You look like a sack of
potatoes,' that sort of thing. ... With
LEAP we want to create a genera-
tion of dancers who say, 'You can't talk to me that way.'"

In Mark Baird's days as ballet
master of Britain's Northern Ballet
Theatre and as a dancer with the
Joffrey, even voicing one's opinion,
much less having any kind of out-
side life, "quite often was really dis-
couraged," he says. Mr. Baird, 45,
is head of human resources for a
large architectural firm here. "Hap-
pierly," he says, "there's been a
change in dance management."

"It was a way to control them—
to not be questioned even if the
dancers had good questions," in-
terjects Peter Brandenhoff, a tall
Dance in his late 20s who is a soloist
with the San Francisco Ballet.

Setting a different tone, St.
Mary's Works, LEAP participants
are given college credit for their
dance experience. "They can dance better than any college dance major," says
Ms. Sheridan. "They've studied
with these legends that I taught my
St. Mary's students about in dance-
history courses."

LEAP students can also gain
credit for courses on subjects they
already know well, like dance pro-
duction, simply by passing the ex-
ams. In theory, any St. Mary's stu-
dent can do so, but that is rare, and
some faculty members balked at let-
ting the dancers do it. Strengthen-
ing LEAP's case was the legacy of
Jean-Baptiste de la Salle (1651-1719),
founder of the LaSallian Christian
Brothers, the order that has direct-
Sⅰed the college since 1866. An advo-
cate of education for poor youth,
"he would go out to the docks on
Sunday nights," says Ms. Sheridan.
"So LEAP is the most LaSallian
thing you can do. It works with a
group of underprivileged students—
keeping the price way down, too."

Unless ballet dancers attain prin-
cipal-dancer or soloist status, their
pay is as modest as a junior profes-
sor's—in the mid-$20,000 to $30,000
per year, but LEAP's tuition is just
$1,400 for the three-year program.

LEAP participants agree that the
expense is worthwhile. But they dif-
fier on another issue: whether hav-
ing a guaranteed future dabs one
hunger for dance excellence now.
"That is a danger," says Mr. Bran-
denhoff. But it won't happen to him,
says Ms. Sheridan, because his resolve is
of long standing. To enter the Royal
Danish Ballet, he had to opt at 16 for
dance over further schooling. Still,
says he, after he came to the
United States 10 years ago, he often
thought about going to college.

Although he can hardly imagi-
nate not dancing, Dalene Bramer, a
23-year-old member of the San
Francisco Ballet's corps de ballet,
sees a benefit in having another life
to go on to. With a college degree,
says Mr. Baird, "I won't feel like I have
to keep dancing because there's
nothing else for me to do."

"Which will make you less afraid
to retire when the time is right," says
Mr. Baird.

"Right, versus pushing through
injuries," she says.

"The future gets scary so I would
guess if you have something at
the end of that, it frees you up to
enjoy it more," says Mr. Baird, with
the wisdom of hindsight.

When his young classmates head
off to rehearsal once more, Mr. 
Baird observes that to look ahead
is not easy in such a specialized world.
"They're still young, and there's
so much more dance ahead of them."
He quietly adds, however: "They
don't know this yet, but you do get
tired of dance by the end of it. You
get to the point where you say, I've
got everything I can get out of it.
I'm fulfilled."

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SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE
of California

LEAP (Liberal Education
for Arts Professionals)
is now accepting
applications for admission.