STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON GRADING IN AN AGE OF UNCERTAINTY:
FULL SURVEY RESULTS

BACKGROUND ON
SURVEY RESULTS

The ASSU is committed

to ensuring that student voices are solicited and heard when decisions are made at the University. So, the ASSU surveyed the student body to gather perspectives on grading for the coming months. **You can find a letter to the community in The Daily summarizing the key takeaways from the survey.** This document gives a fuller perspective and includes more of the raw data.

There were **3,717** responses (**118,328 words** of textual responses!) distributed among class year as follows:
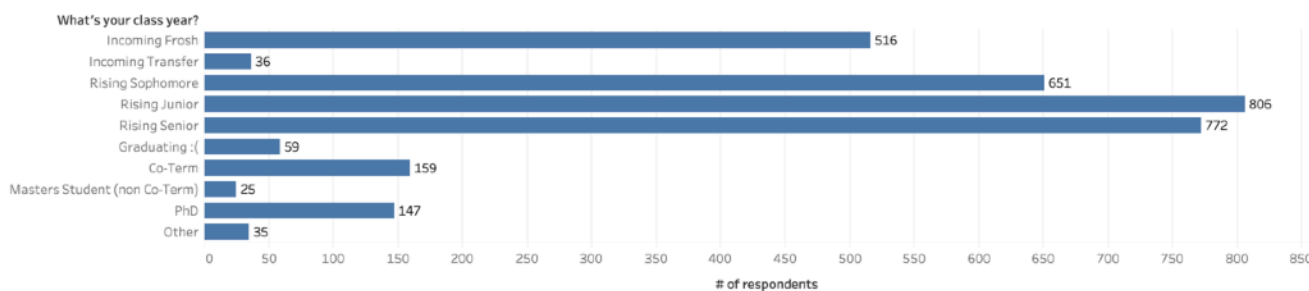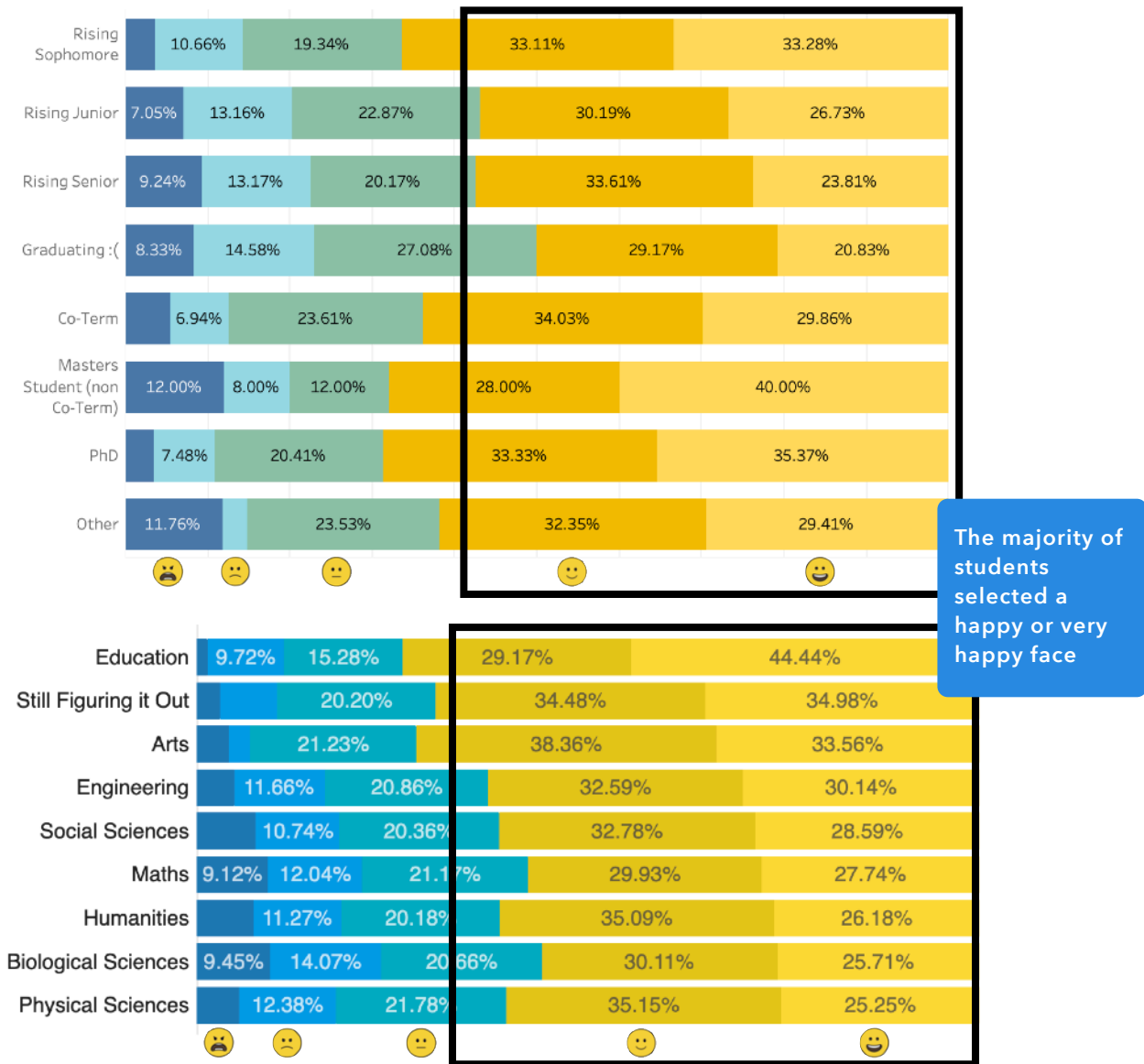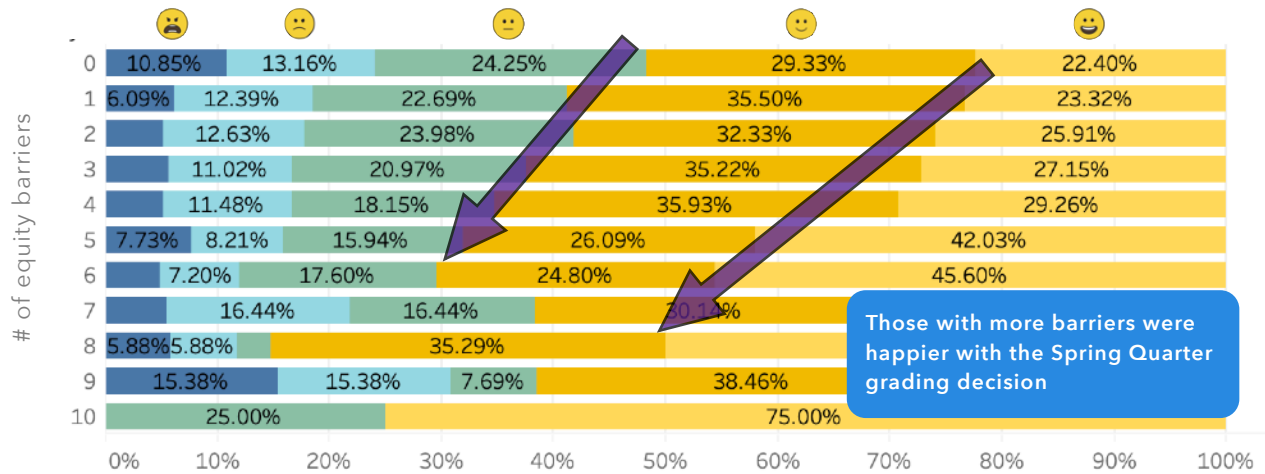

Sincerely yours,

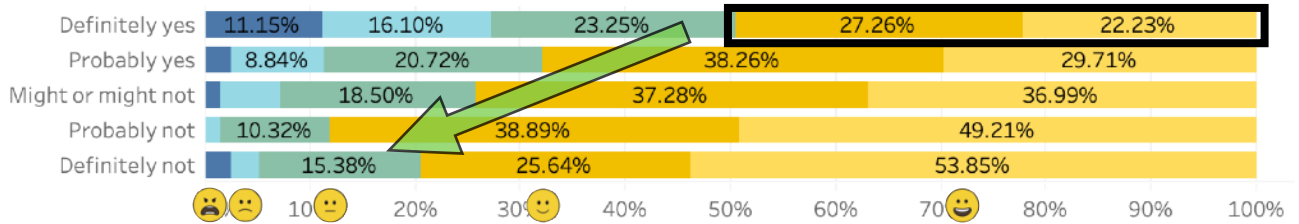Jonathan Lipman, ASSU Undergraduate Senator (he/him)

REFLECTING ON THE
SPRING

Overall, students were happy with the Spring grading scheme, rating it on average about halfway between 🙂 and 😊 on a scale of 😧 🙁 😐 🙂 😄 with a standard deviation of **1.19 emojis**. Breaking it down by class years shows that younger classes were on average happier with Zoom and some disciplines were able to adapt better than others.
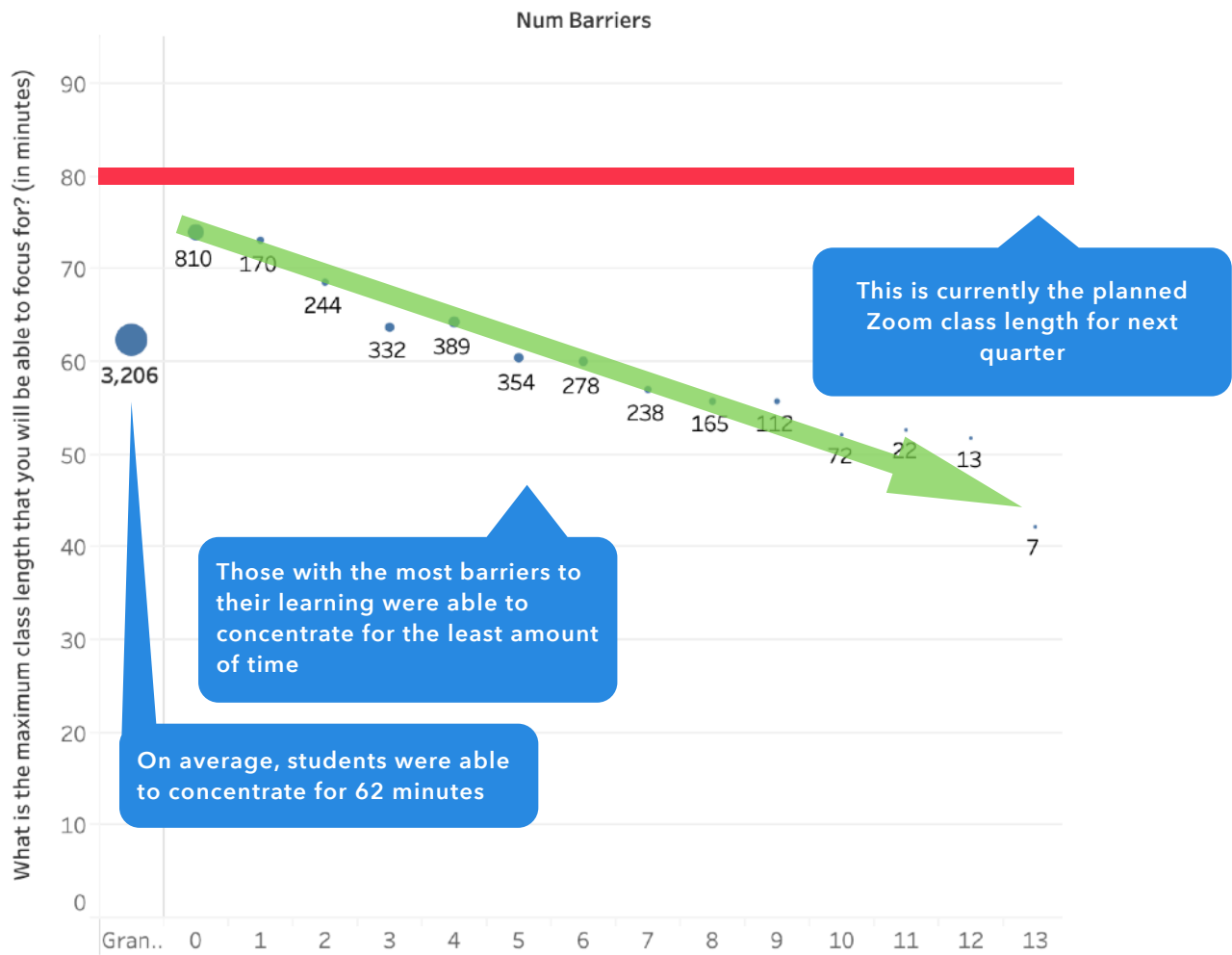
Class Year	😧	🙁	😐	🙂	😄
Rising Sophomore		10.66%	19.34%	33.11%	33.28%
Rising Junior	7.05%	13.16%	22.87%	30.19%	26.73%
Rising Senior	9.24%	13.17%	20.17%	33.61%	23.81%
Graduating :(	8.33%	14.58%	27.08%	29.17%	20.83%
Co-Term		6.94%	23.61%	34.03%	29.86%
Masters Student (non Co-Term)	12.00%	8.00%	12.00%	28.00%	40.00%
PhD		7.48%	20.41%	33.33%	35.37%
Other		11.76%	23.53%	32.35%	29.41%

The majority of students selected a happy or very happy face

Discipline	😧	🙁	😐	🙂	😄
Education		9.72%	15.28%	29.17%	44.44%
Still Figuring it Out			20.20%	34.48%	34.98%
Arts			21.23%	38.36%	33.56%
Engineering		11.66%	20.86%	32.59%	30.14%
Social Sciences		10.74%	20.36%	32.78%	28.59%
Maths	9.12%	12.04%	21.17%	29.93%	27.74%
Humanities		11.27%	20.18%	35.09%	26.18%
Biological Sciences	9.45%	14.07%	20.66%	30.11%	25.71%
Physical Sciences		12.38%	21.78%	35.15%	25.25%

# of equity barriers	😧	🙁	😐	🙂	😃
0	10.85%	13.16%	24.25%	29.33%	22.40%
1	6.09%	12.39%	22.69%	35.50%	23.32%
2		12.63%	23.98%	32.33%	25.91%
3		11.02%	20.97%	35.22%	27.15%
4		11.48%	18.15%	35.93%	29.26%
5	7.73%	8.21%	15.94%	26.09%	42.03%
6		7.20%	17.60%	24.80%	45.60%
7		16.44%	16.44%	30.14%	
8	5.88%	5.88%	35.29%		
9	15.38%	15.38%	7.69%	38.46%	
10		25.00%		75.00%	

Those with more barriers were happier with the Spring Quarter grading decision

	😧	🙁	😐	🙂	😃
Definitely yes	11.15%	16.10%	23.25%	27.26%	22.23%
Probably yes	8.84%	20.72%		38.26%	29.71%
Might or might not		18.50%		37.28%	36.99%
Probably not	10.32%		38.89%		49.21%
Definitely not		15.38%	25.64%		53.85%

50% of students who are definitely planning to pursue GPA dependent opportunities in the future selected happy face or very happy face. The less likely to pursue further opportunities, the more popular the grading scheme

There were a number of key takeaways on students' perspectives about learning and grading during Spring Quarter

I. **67% of respondents said that Zoom was a barrier to their learning.**

II. **Most students felt Zoom classes were too long.** Students on average self reported being able to concentrate over Zoom for **62 minutes**, much shorter than the length of a normal class (and shorter than the proposed 80 minute class length for next year). Indeed, students who faced other barriers to their learning were on average able to concentrate for even less time.

III. **Students faced many other barriers to their learning while at home:**

Barrier	Percentage
Difficultly learning over Zoom	66.76%
Hard to focus while off-campus	65.49%
Loneliness	54.73%
Responsibilities at home	47.40%
Lack of a quiet work area	39.47%
Mental health issues	36.99%
Family relationships	33.66%
Unmotivated without grades	33.45%
Time-zone differences	31.40%
Lack of reliable internet access	29.52%
Financial insecurity	15.47%
Food and/or housing insecurity	8.18%
Impacted by COVID-19	8.04%
Safety concerns	4.28%
None of the other choices	4.04%

IV. **34% of students found it difficult to be motivated in the absence of grades.** In particular, many of these students emphasized that the lack of graded cumulative final exams as harmful to their learning as it removed incentives for them to "go the extra mile" and ensure they had mastered the material. Another common theme was students struggled to find motivation after they reached the passing threshold in a class. It was also clear that those who are planning to pursue future opportunities where GPA is a relevant factor found that the lack of grades was a barrier to their learning at the highest rates:

Are you planning to pursue further degrees and or Fellowships/Jobs ..
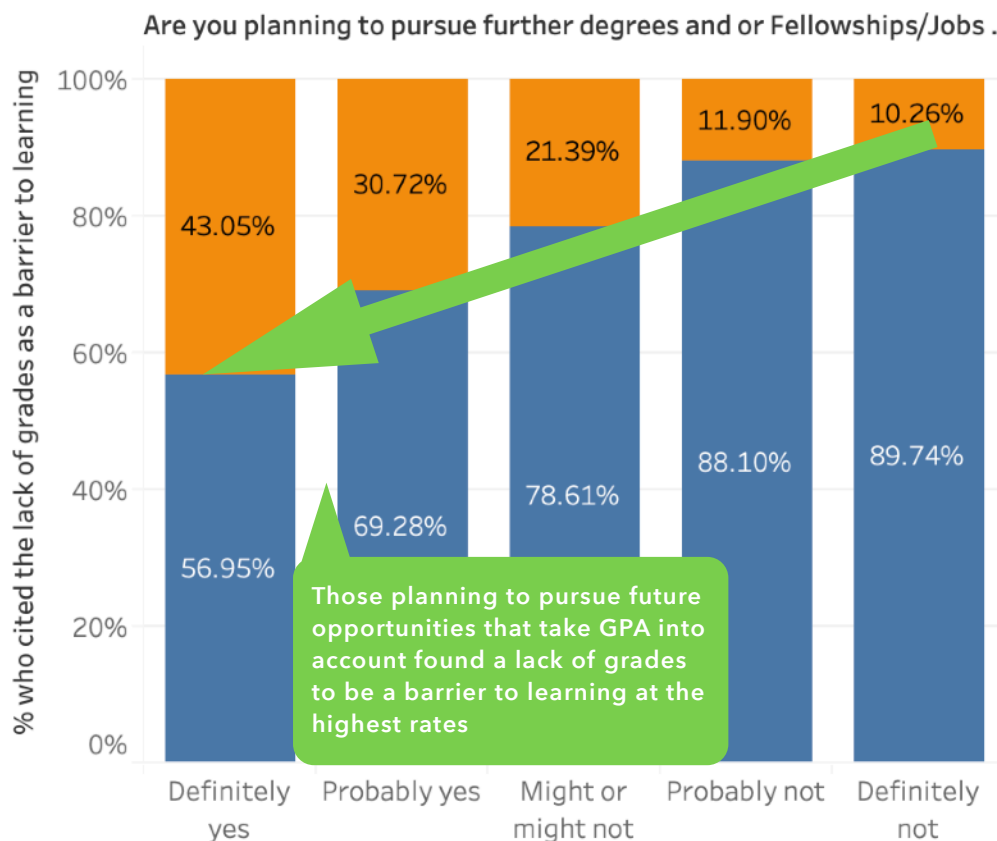
V. **Students were disappointed with the quality and variability of online teaching.** Students responded that many Professors struggled to convert material to an online format (in some cases students were given lecture series filmed at other universities). We recognize the University is working very hard to improve this for next year, plus there were a number of classes (CS103) that were mentioned as having made a particularly successful transition. The inaccessibility of Office Hours was a common point of feedback. Lastly, many students felt grades forced professors to give plentiful feedback. The lack of feedback was something students were disappointed about across the board.

VI. **Some students who were initially opposed to S/NC, found themselves very thankful for it.** Students noted that the S/NC grading system was very beneficial to

their mental health during a time when they were separated from friends and Stanford's support structure. Others reflected they misjudged the difficulty of online learning. Many remarked at how they were surprised by the extra burden of being at home. Students also noted that many of their friends at peer institutions were unhappy with regular grading. Others reflected that they would have struggled to maintain academic output given world events such as the death of George Floyd and the aftermath.
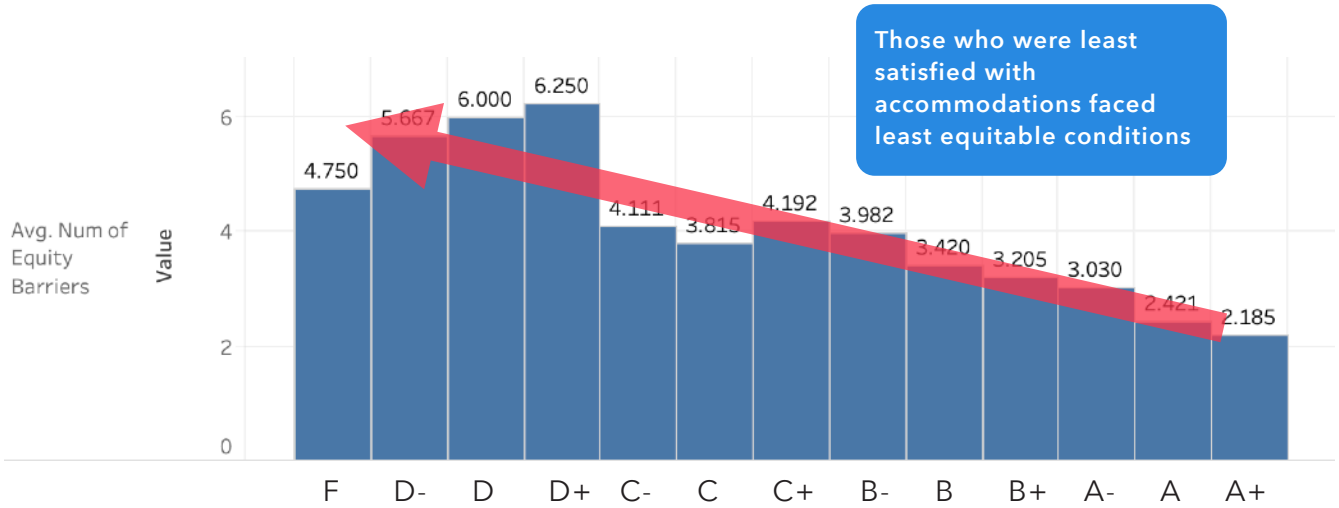
VII.Other students remain unhappy with S/NC. In particular, frustration was high among students who felt their GPA was essential for applying to further opportunities, rising seniors felt as though Spring was their last significant opportunity to showcase their abilities, students who front loaded difficult classes or came from under-resourced high schools and initially struggled to adjust to the rigor of Stanford, and felt that Spring was a particularly important opportunity to showcase an upward trajectory, students who felt they were "not getting their money's worth," and students who were disappointed that their hard work went unrewarded at the end of the quarter.

VIII.S/NC didn't fully reduce learning inequity: Some respondents noted that many students in conducive learning environments took unfair advantage of the S/NC grading to take more difficult and a greater quantity of classes.

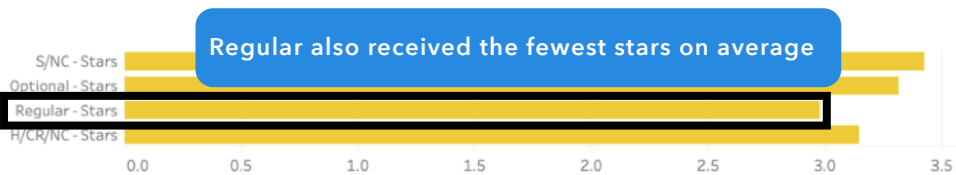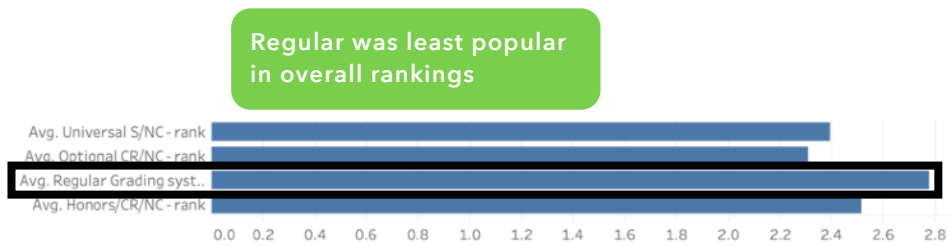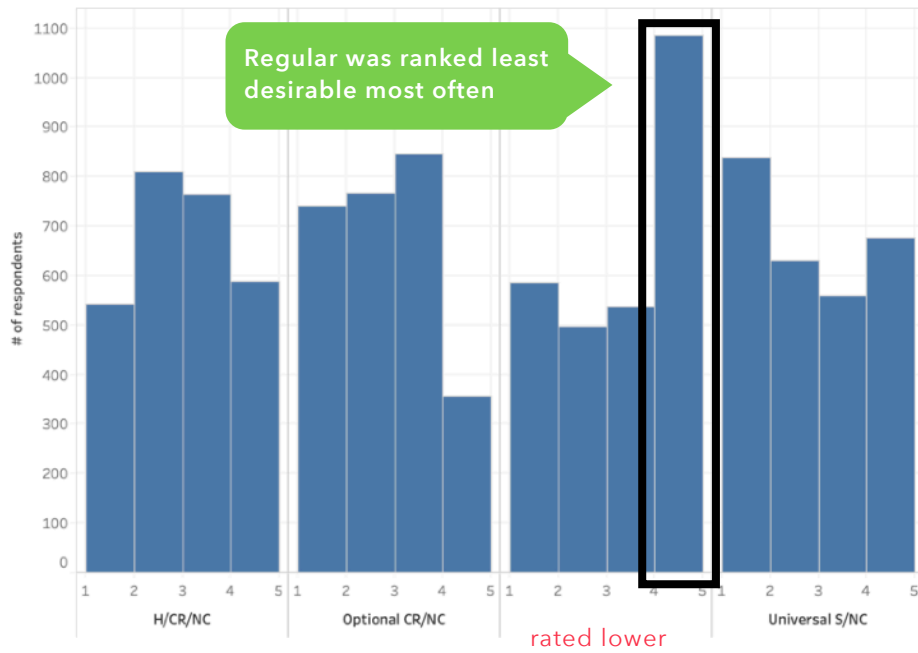**IX. Professors earned high marks on average for accommodating students' circumstances:**
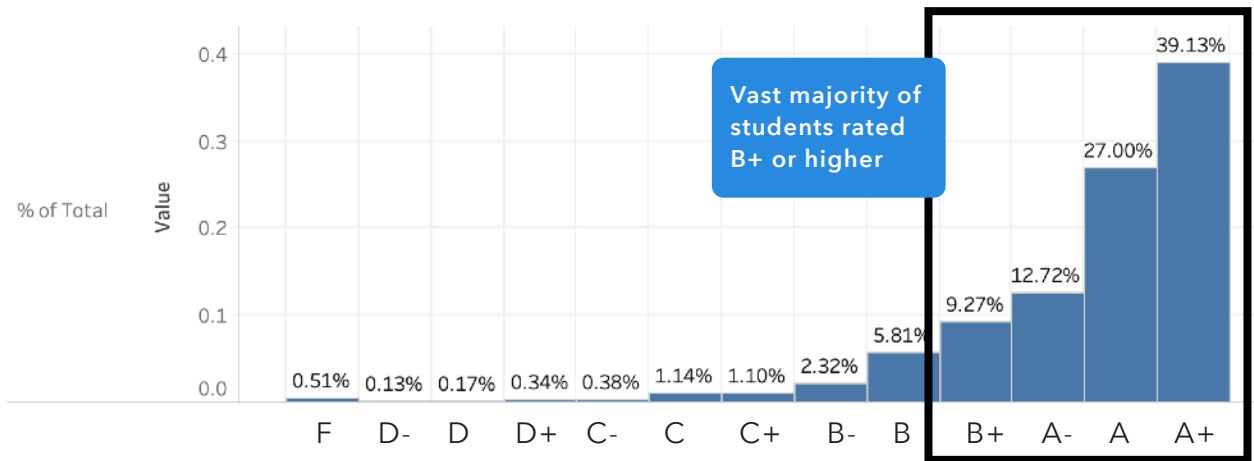
However, if you look at the average number of equity barriers, a pattern emerges that those students who felt professors did the least adequate job accommodating their circumstances were also those with the most barriers:

LOOKING TO THE
FALL

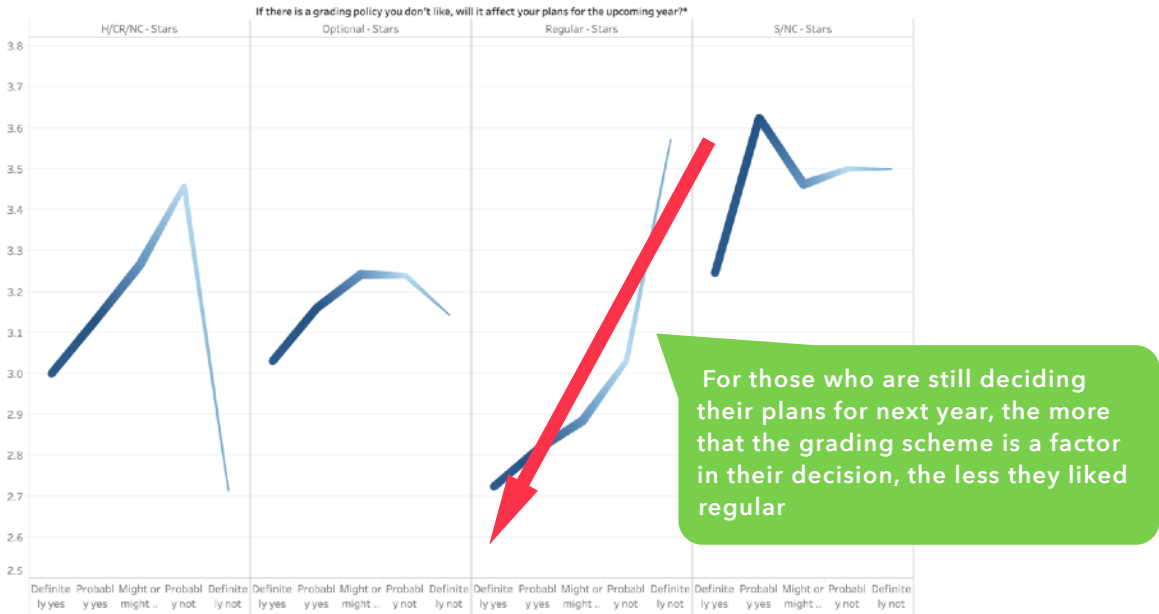**I.   A regular grading scheme is quite unpopular overall**

Regular was ranked least desirable most often

rated lower

Regular was least popular in overall rankings

Regular also received the fewest stars on average

II. There is a negative correlation between the number of equity barriers a student faces and the desirability of regular grading
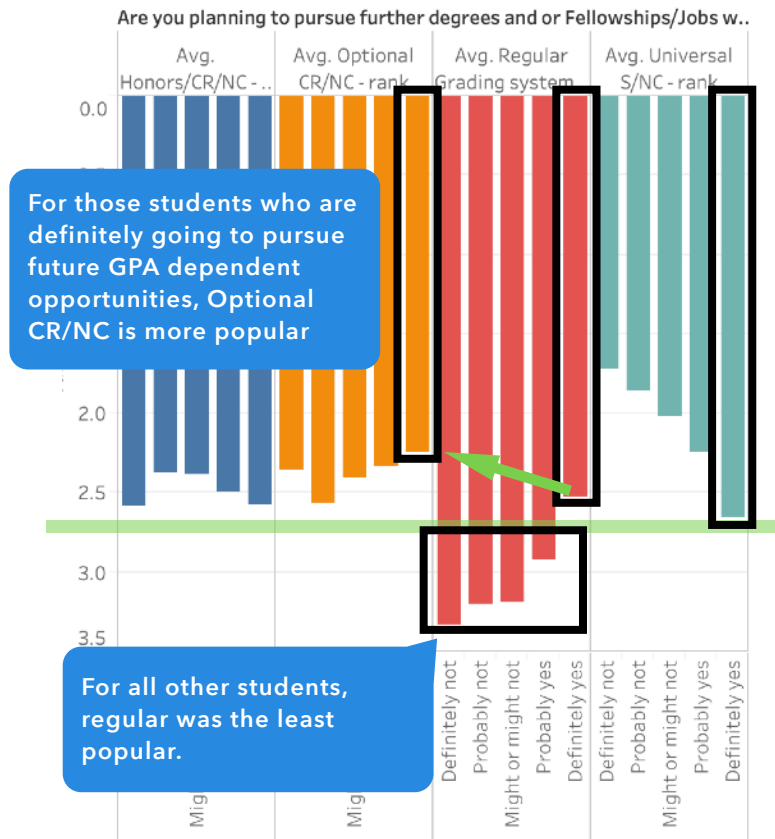

Those with more equity barriers gave less stars to regular grading
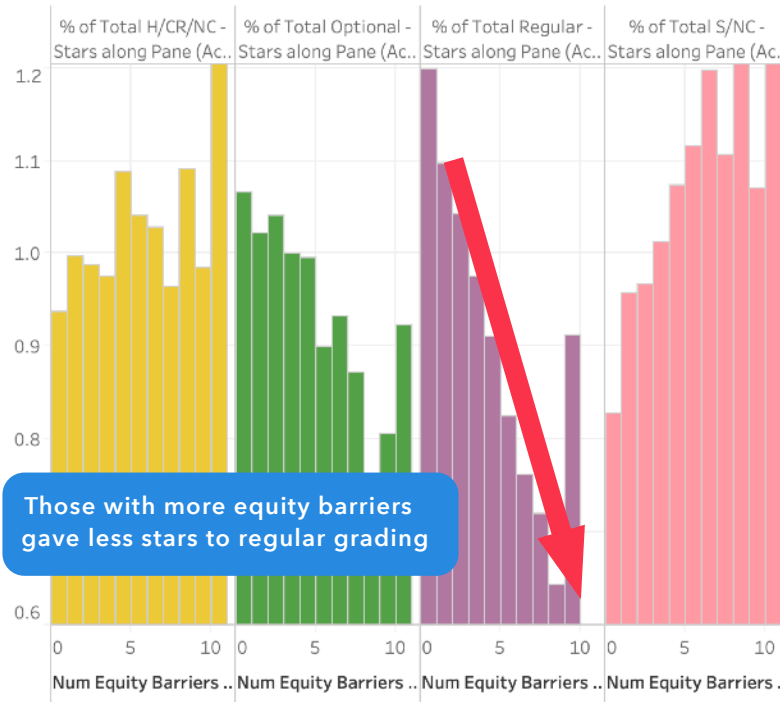
III. Regular grading was particularly unpopular with students who struggled to learn over Zoom

Those students who struggled the most over Zoom desired regular grading the least
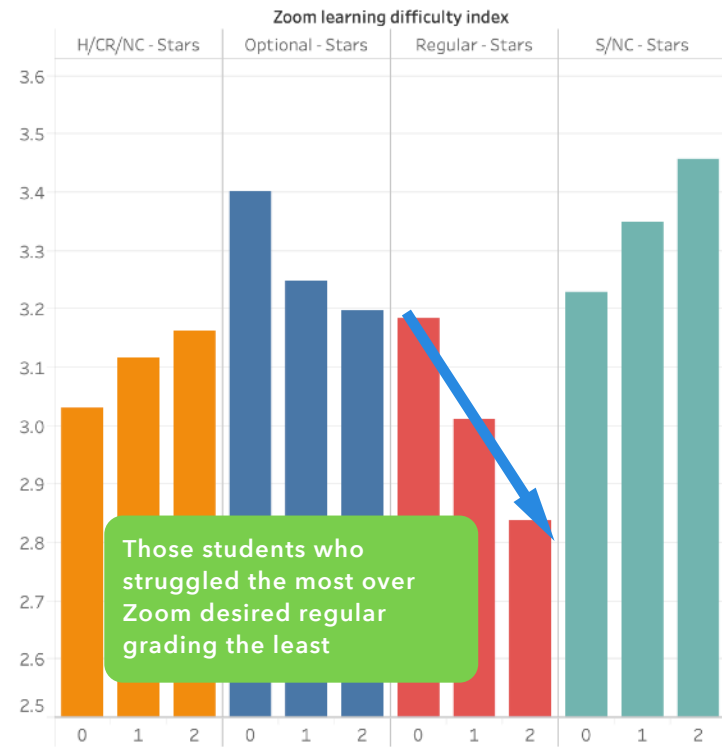
IV. Among students who are still determining their plans for next year, those who reported that the grading basis would effect their plans particularly disliked regular grading, suggesting a negative impact on enrollment if chosen.


For those who are still deciding their plans for next year, the more that the grading scheme is a factor in their decision, the less they liked regular

V. Even students who care significantly about their GPA prefer Optional CR/NC

For those students who are definitely going to pursue future GPA dependent opportunities, Optional CR/NC is more popular

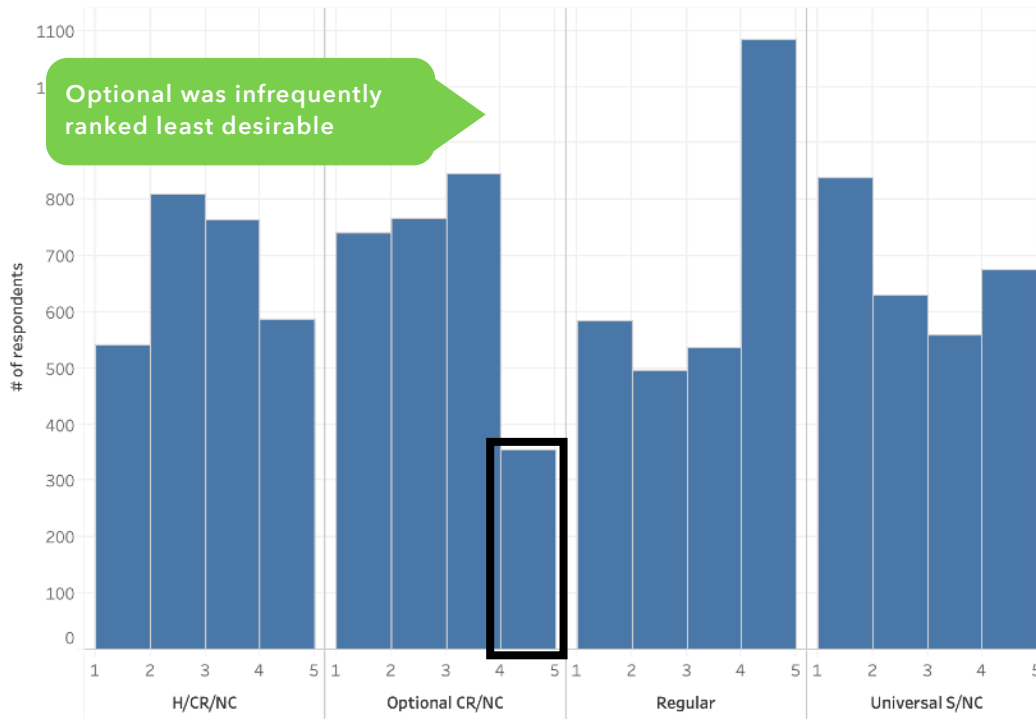For all other students, regular was the least popular.

VI. Honors/S/NC was also unpopular. A list of other grading schemes that were suggested can be found in the Appendix.
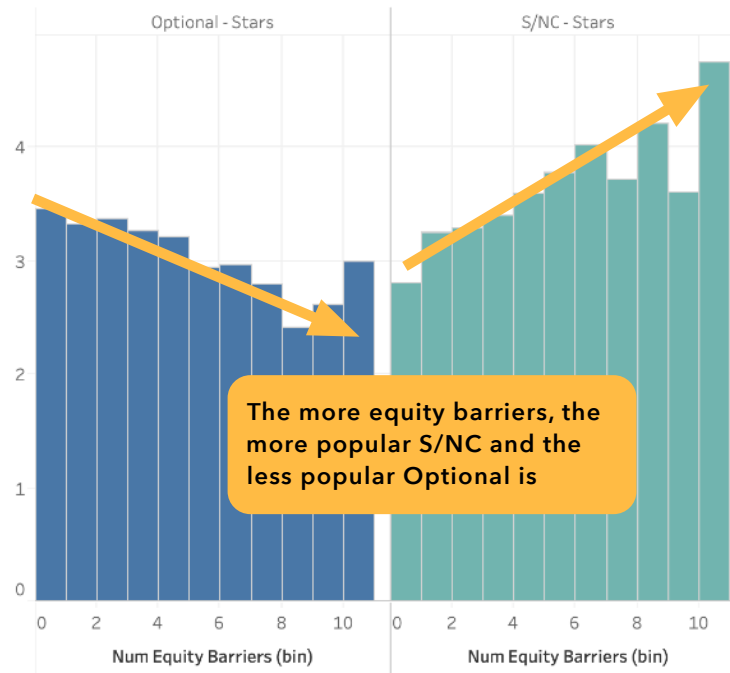
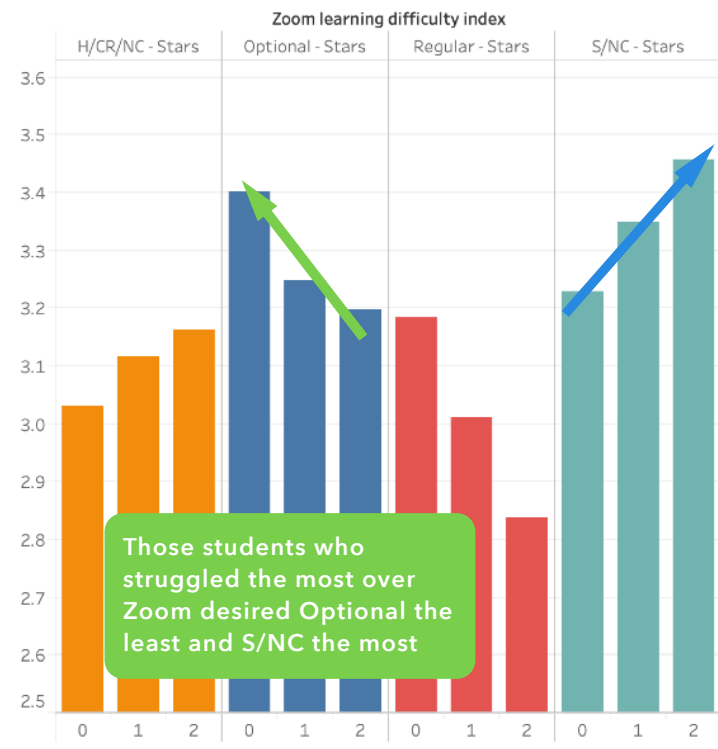**VII. There was no clear preference for Optional CR/NC or Mandatory S/NC.**
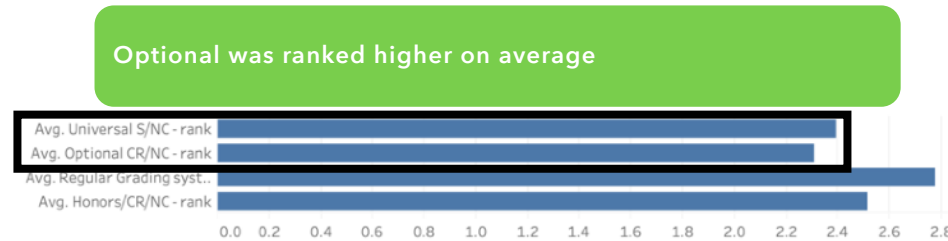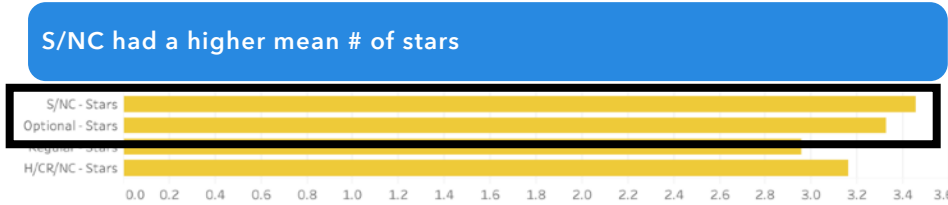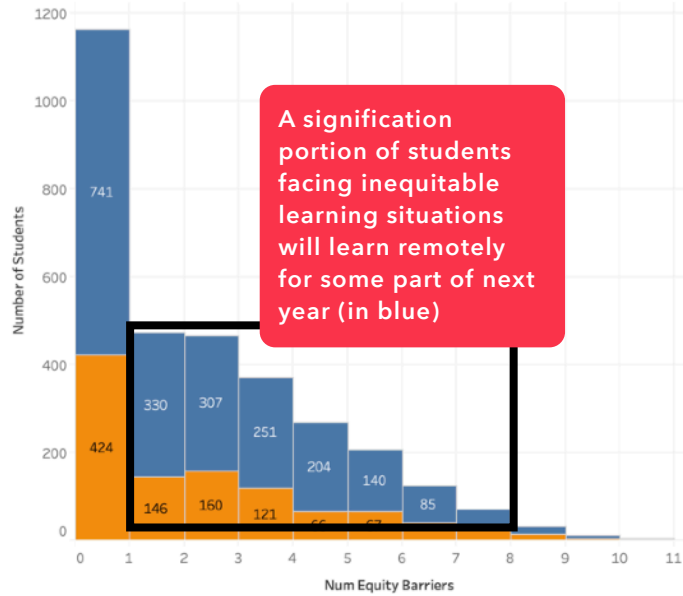

VIII. Optional CR/NC was ranked last by few respondents

IX. Students with equity barriers significantly preferred S/NC

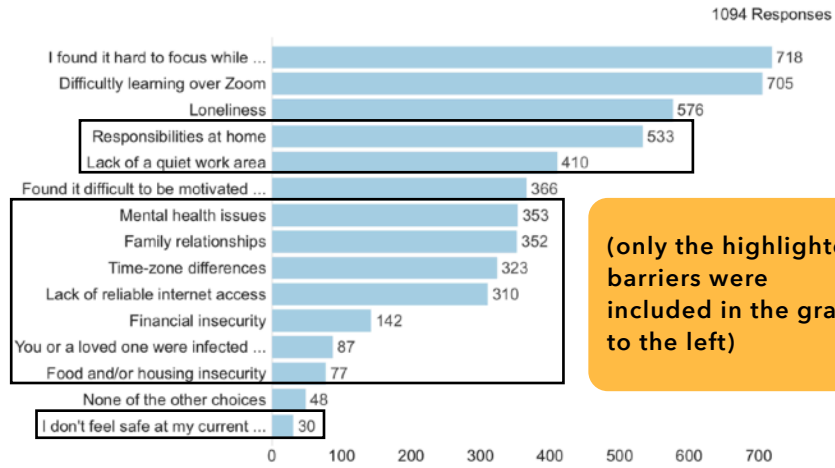

The more equity barriers, the more popular S/NC and the less popular Optional is

X. Students who had trouble learning over Zoom (67%) prefer S/NC

Those students who struggled the most over Zoom desired Optional the least and S/NC the most

XI. Inequity in learning situations will continue in the Fall, only slightly diminished

A signification portion of students facing inequitable learning situations will learn remotely for some part of next year (in blue)

Of those that intend to spend some portion of next year remotely

1094 Responses

(only the highlighted barriers were included in the graph to the left)

XII. Those with the most equity barriers had the hardest time with online learning

Num Equity Barriers

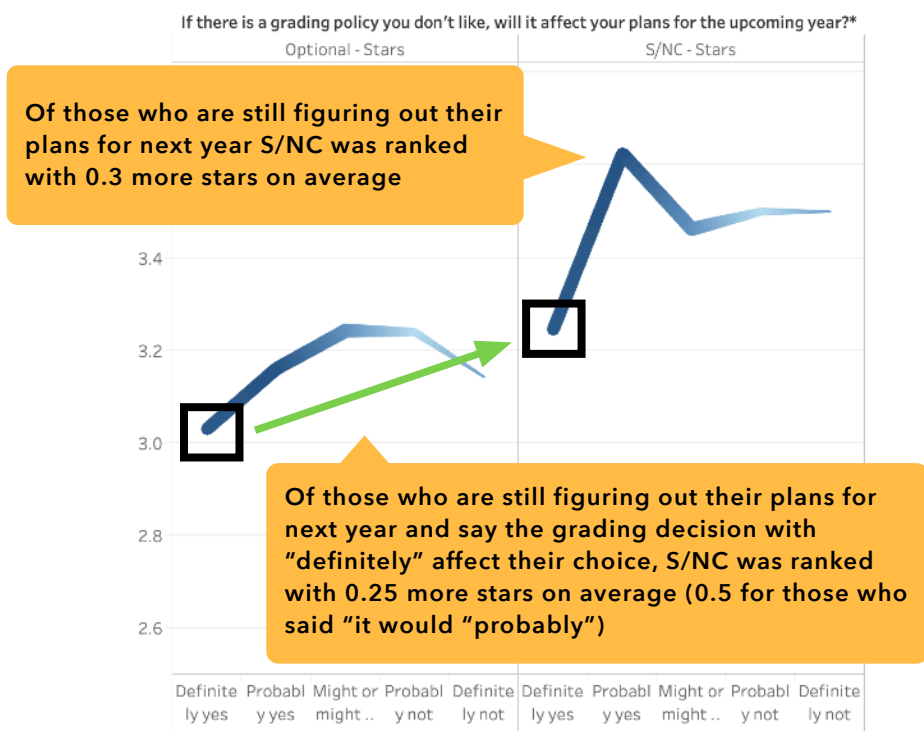Those with the least equitable conditions struggled with learning over Zoom at higher rates
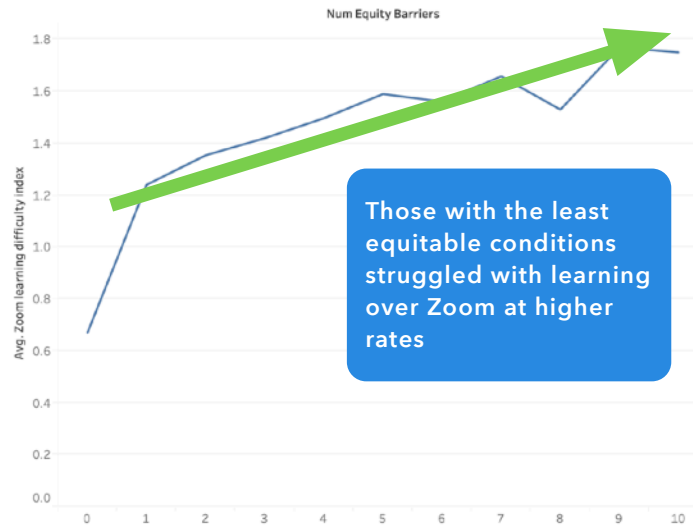
XIII. External research from Brookings suggests that students with lower GPAs suffer from greater GPA drops with a shift to online learning
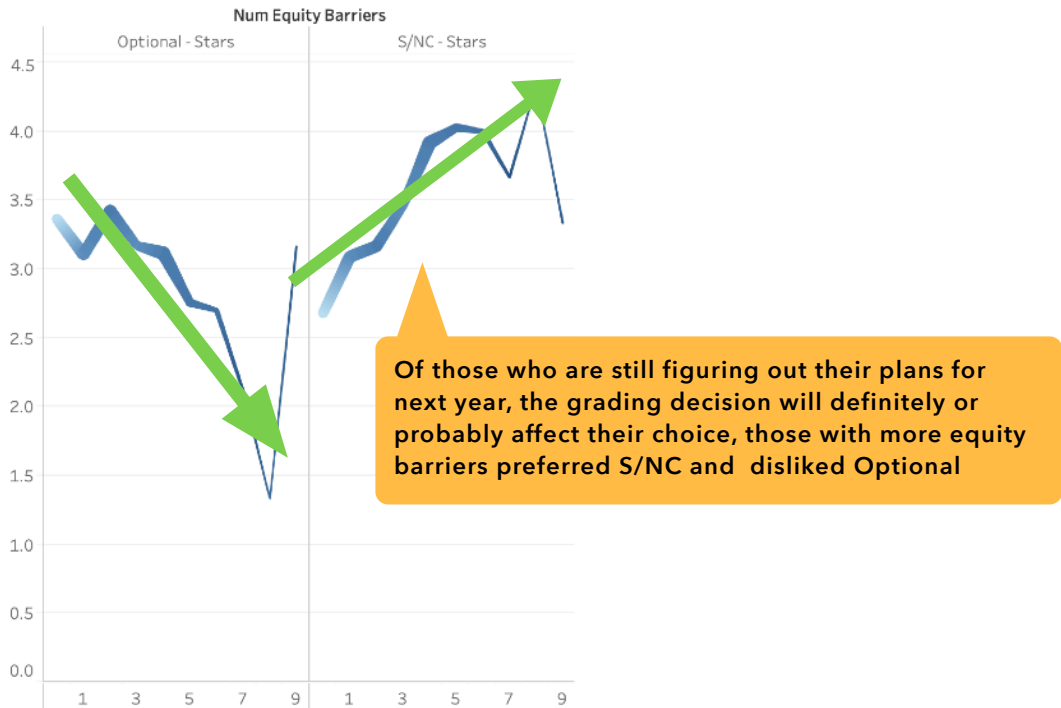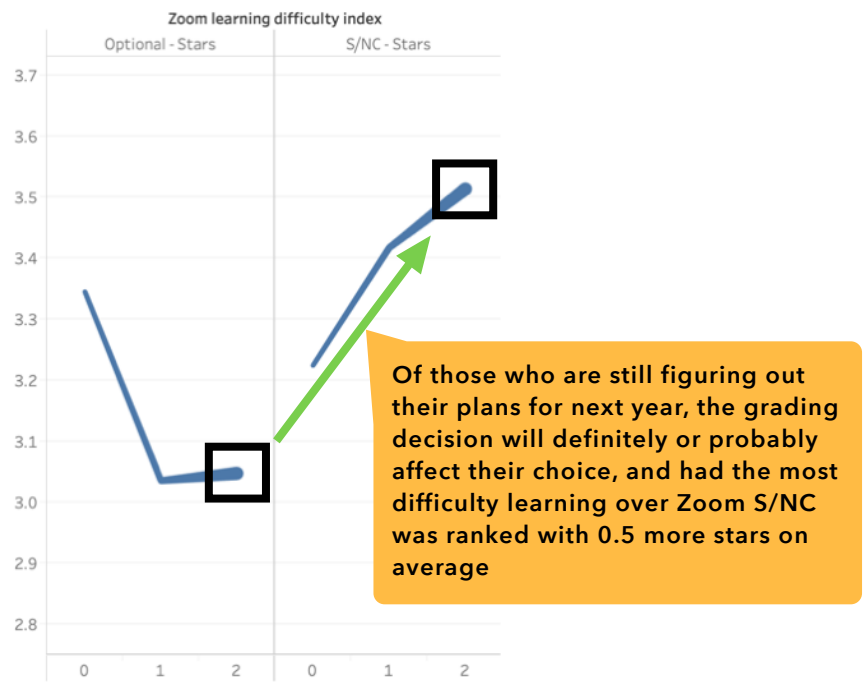

Figure 2. Benefit of in-person course taking by prior GPA

Those with the lowest prior GPA have the largest decrease in GPA during a shift to online classes

BROOKINGS

Figure ng

Current grades	0.44
Next semester grades	
Next semester grades in same subject	0.42
Next semester grades in following courses	0.32

> The data also suggests that lost learning due to Zoom learning causes students to perform less well in follow on classes

0   0.1   0.2   0.3   0.4

BRO(

XIV. Respondent data suggests, choosing S/NC would lead to the highest enrollment

If there is a grading policy you don't like, will it affect your plans for the upcoming year?*

Optional - Stars | S/NC - Stars

> Of those who are still figuring out their plans for next year S/NC was ranked with 0.3 more stars on average

> Of those who are still figuring out their plans for next year and say the grading decision with "definitely" affect their choice, S/NC was ranked with 0.25 more stars on average (0.5 for those who said "it would "probably")

3.4

3.2

3.0

2.8

2.6

Definite ly yes | Probabl y yes | Might or might .. | Probabl y not | Definite ly not | Definite ly yes | Probabl y yes | Might or might .. | Probabl y not | Definite ly not

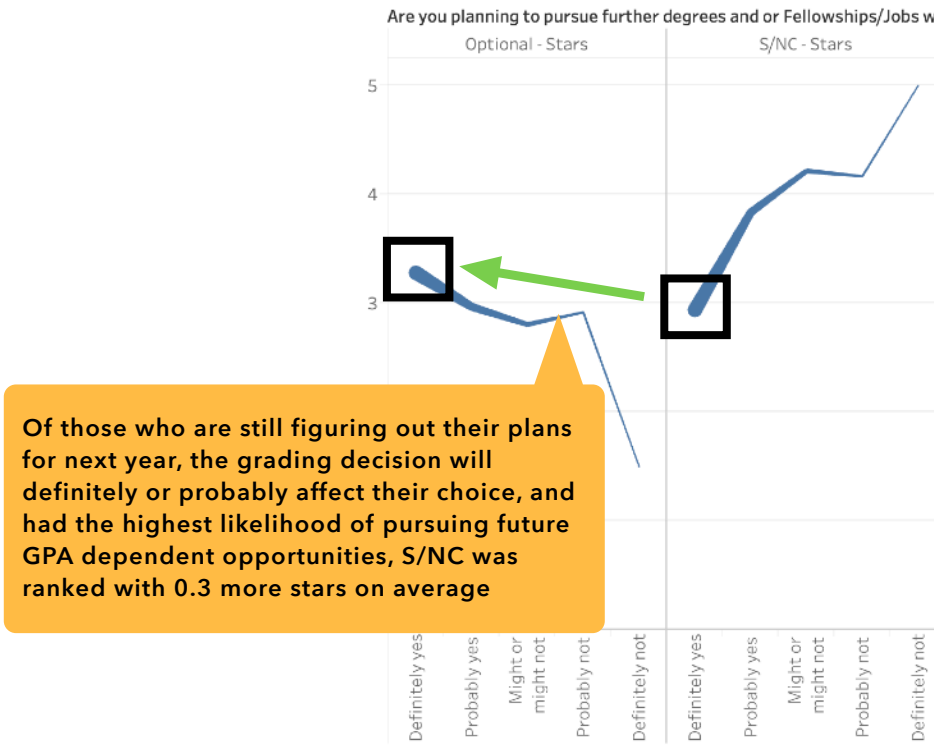## XV. Respondent data suggests, S/NC would lead to higher enrollments of students faced with the greatest inequity

Num Equity Barriers

Of those who are still figuring out their plans for next year, the grading decision will definitely or probably affect their choice, those with more equity barriers preferred S/NC and disliked Optional

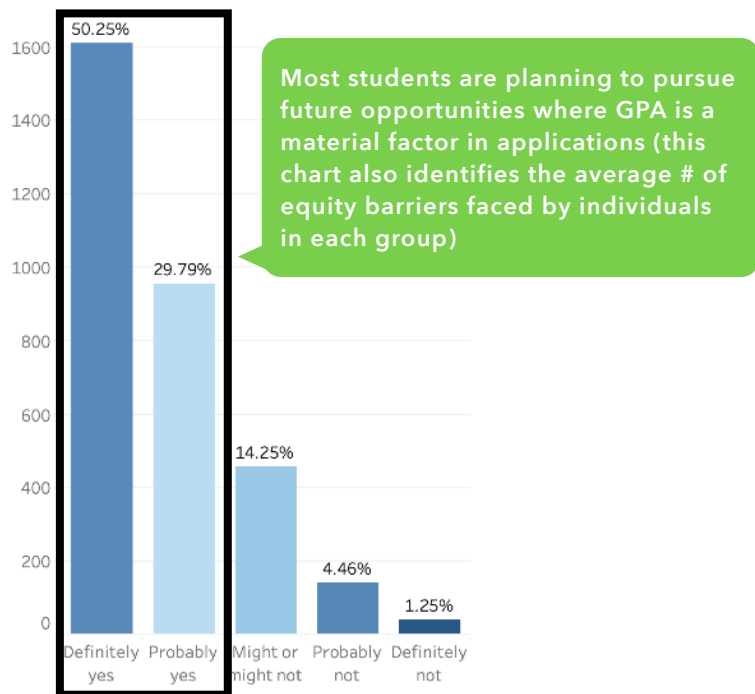## XVI. Respondent data suggests, S/NC would lead to higher enrollments of students who struggled the most with online learning

Zoom learning difficulty index

Of those who are still figuring out their plans for next year, the grading decision will definitely or probably affect their choice, and had the most difficulty learning over Zoom S/NC was ranked with 0.5 more stars on average

**XVII.Respondent data suggests, S/NC would lead to lower enrollments of students who desire to pursue future opportunities that consider GPA as a material factor in their selection**


Are you planning to pursue further degrees and or Fellowships/Jobs w

Of those who are still figuring out their plans for next year, the grading decision will definitely or probably affect their choice, and had the highest likelihood of pursuing future GPA dependent opportunities, S/NC was ranked with 0.3 more stars on average

XVIII.Most students are planning to pursue opportunities where there GPA is important

Most students are planning to pursue future opportunities where GPA is a material factor in applications (this chart also identifies the average # of equity barriers faced by individuals in each group)

XIX. Students who are planning to pursue opportunities where there GPA is important prefer Optional CR/NC
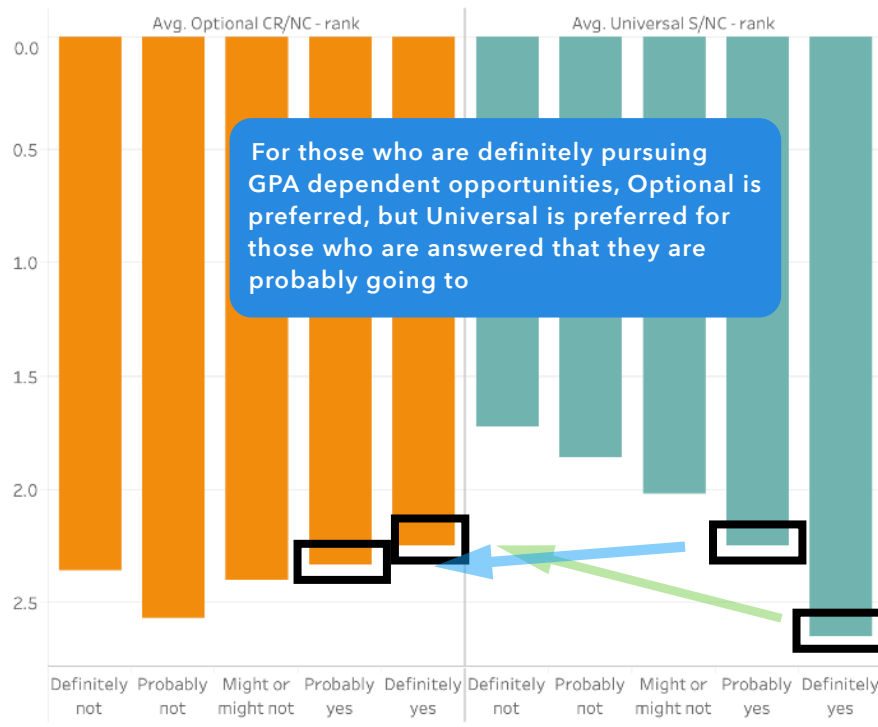

XX. Few are planning to take a leave, but many remain undecided. A small methodological note is that there's likely a response bias at play: those who are planning to take a leave would have less of an incentive to complete the survey.
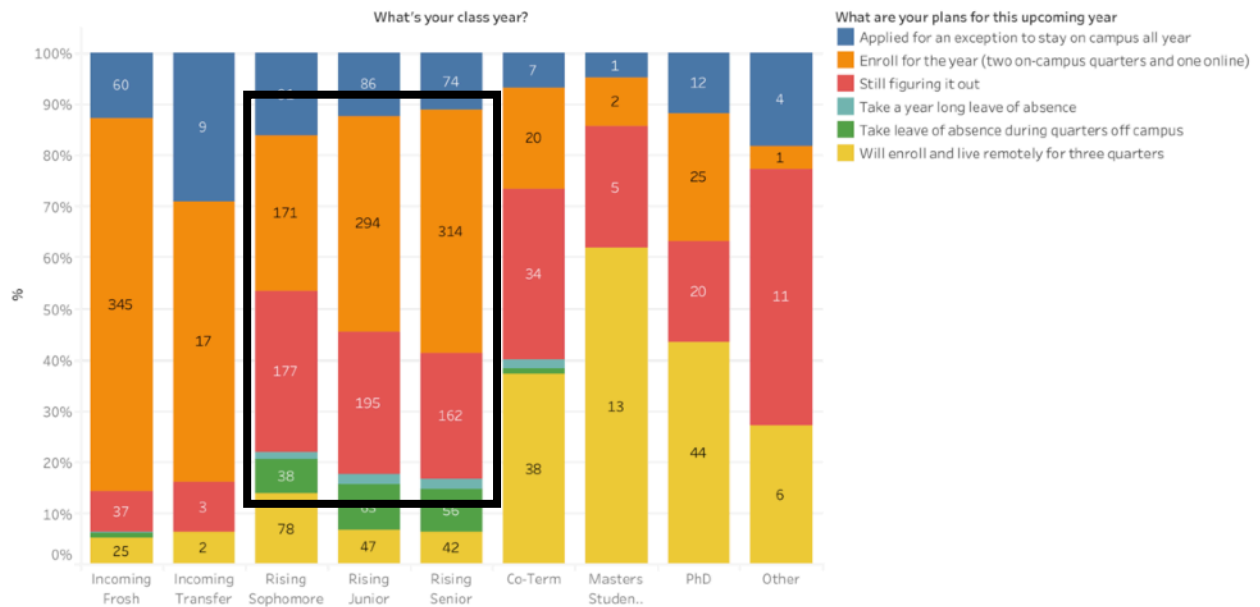
XXI. Grad students are less passionate about grading, but prefer Universal S/NC
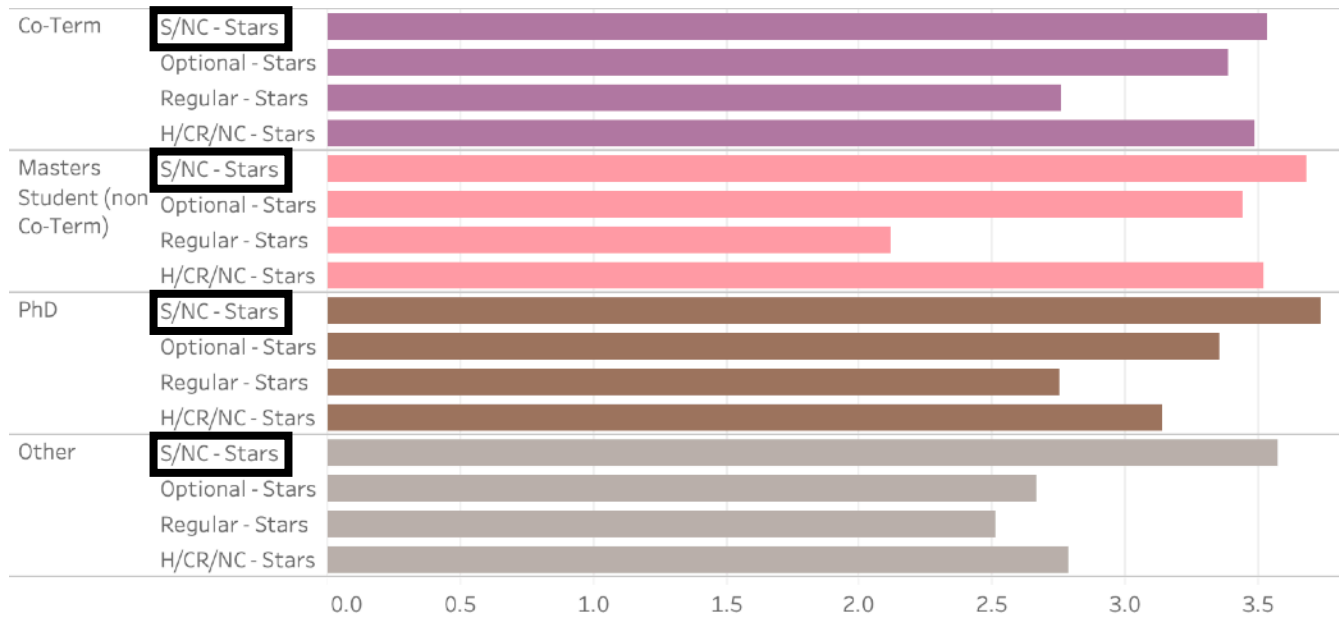
XXII. Frosh and Juniors don't have a clear preference, transfers and seniors prefer Optional, and Sophomores prefer S/NC
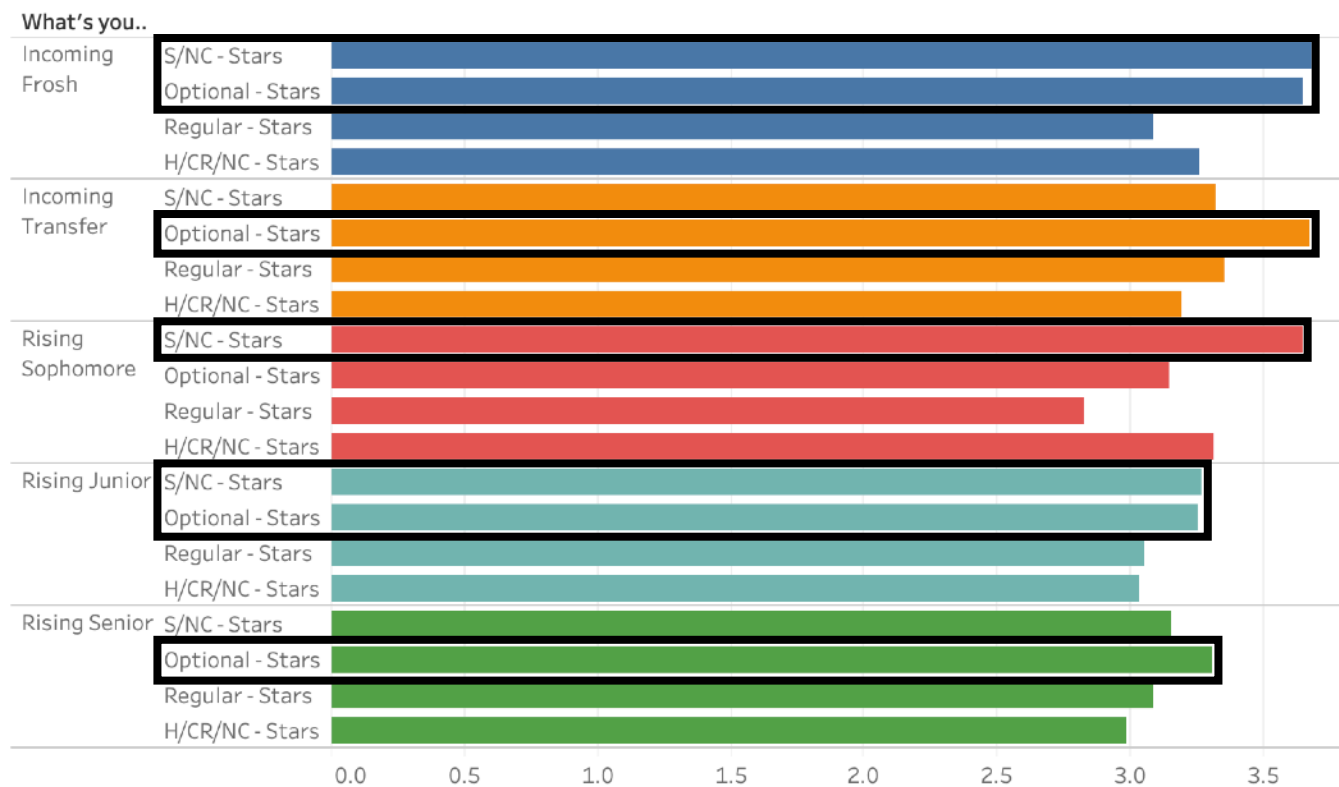
ALTERNATIVES
SUGGESTED

- Append a pre-fix to the name of each grade given to further indicate the unusual circumstanced. For instance Harvard instituted Emergency-Pass and Emergency-Fail which I thought was very wise. Stanford could adopt COVID-S or ONLINE-A to make it immediately clear these grades should not be equated with those awarded during normal quarters. Many students expressed anxiety that, however well thought intentioned Stanford's decision is, transcript readers might not take the time to carefully examine transcripts.

- Schemes that only showcases high achievement (honors, A+/S/NC, A+/A/NC, etc...) – Many students were specifically concerned that Profs would interpret honors in highly variable ways.

- Schemes that are less granular (A, B, C, D, F – with no + or minus, High Pass, Pass, Low Pass, etc...)

- Appending a special transcript notation that indicates whether students were on campus

- A different grading scheme depending whether students are on campus

- Assign incoming Frosh and transfers a different grading scheme due to the challenges of a college transition compounded by the pandemic

- Failing grades do not appear on transcripts. This was the practice until 1994: https://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/03/us/failing-grades-are-restored-at-stanford-u.html

- One respondent suggested, in jest, "MTL stares into our souls and judges if we are worthy

METHODS

The ASSU sent out a survey to all Undergraduate and Graduate Students enrolled during Spring 2020, VPSA and VPUE included a link to the survey in one of their "re-approaching Stanford" newsletters, and Academic Advising included a link to the survey in one of their "approaching Stanford" newsletters.

You can find a link to the survey here to view the questions.

A snapshot from of the data was downloaded on July 23rd and that snapshot is presented in the analysis here. Few responses were submitted afterwards.