

GRADE INFLATION: An Issue for Higher Education?

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ABSTRACT

Grade inflation impacts university credibility, student courses of study, choices of institution, and other areas. There has been an upward shift in grades without a corresponding upward shift in knowledge gained. Some of the most frequently mentioned causes of grade inflation are:

- student evaluations of professors,
- student teacher dynamics,
- merit-based financial aid, and
- student expectations.

Among the reasons for higher student grades on the part of professors are:

- fear of student evaluations,
- avoidance of bad relations with students,
- below average teaching skills,
- lack of experience,
- a lack of clearly stated objectives, and
- job security.

While grades are not a perfect answer to assessing student performance in a course they are still the best answer we have for evaluating students. In order to evaluate students more accurately, universities must identify the problems in grading and grading practices. Once this is accomplished new practices can be designed and policies implemented.

Keywords: Grade Inflation, assessment, evaluation

INTRODUCTION

Today's colleges and universities are plagued by a number of problems. While much attention is focused on access, accountability, affordability, and educational quality, there are other serious problems that do not attract the same degree of attention but are nevertheless significant problems. One of these problems is grade inflation: the upward shifting of grades without corresponding increases in learning or performance. The purpose of this paper is to examine current issues in grade inflation in higher education.

This paper will include a description of the significance of grade inflation, a statement of the problem examined, a critical review of the literature, a description of the issue, and its implication for policy and practice. This information was derived from articles, books, and online sources.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GRADE INFLATION

Higher education appears to be losing public confidence. Problems regarding higher education are discussed more frequently in the news and the information reported is generally not favorable for the institutions concerned. The general public has become increasingly focused on what is happening in higher education. Colleges and universities need to take a more critical look at their practices if they are to regain the confidence from society that they once held. Universities must remember that they are servants of and accountable to society; thus, maintaining the confidence of society is of utmost importance.

One of the areas of current concern to universities is grade inflation. What is grade inflation? Grade inflation, according to Hu (2005), can be defined as a uniform and upward shift in mean grades. That is, student grades are trending ever upward.

To respond to public concern about grading practices, institutions must first identify what the problems are. Once the problems have been recognized, plans can be developed to correct the situation. Institutions will then be able to implement a new course of action to solve the problem and establish more effective means of grading (Hu, 2005).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM EXAMINED

Grade inflation is a significant problem in higher education today. The problem affects university credibility, student courses of study, student choices of institution, and other areas. By better understanding this phenomenon of grade inflation it is hoped that potential solutions can be proposed. Among the topics to be explored in this paper are: causes of grade inflation, consequences of grade inflation, and several proposed solutions.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Grade inflation, as further defined by Hunt and Gardin (2007), is "an increase in grade point average without an associated increase in overall student ability" (p. 19). This is considered a unique problem for colleges and universities. However, few people appear surprised or concerned when an elite university announces that more than half of its undergraduates are graduating with high grades. After all, only the best students go to the best colleges (Dowling, 2003).

It is worth noting that the average grade-point average at private colleges rose from 3.09 in 1991 to 3.30 in 2006 or an approximate increase of 7%. At public colleges and universities the average grade-point average rose from 2.85 in 1991 to 3.01 in 2006 or an approximate increase of 6%. The greatest increases in grades, however, were actually seen at flagship public universities in the southern part of the United States and at selected liberal arts colleges around the country.

Research unfortunately indicates students are not "earning better grades simply because they are better prepared" (Jaschik, 2009, p.2). Grade inflation makes it difficult to distinguish between exceptional students and good students or between good students and mediocre students.

In other words, grade inflation causes a compression of all the grades at the top of the scale, according to the Mansfield's study (as cited in Gray, 2008). It is estimated that 90% of today's college students receive an A or B, according to the Sonner's study (as cited in Gray, 2008). In another study conducted by Nagel (as cited in Gray, 2008), the researcher suggested that there has been a shift toward higher grades without a corresponding upward shift in knowledge gained.

In an article by Dowling (2003), the author asserted that there is no longer the honest measure of academic grading. It has been replaced with a "new dishonesty" (p. 57) and "meaningless grades" (p. 57). The author alleged that the end result of cheating is a form of grade inflation. He stated that grade inflation encourages cheating and is an attempt at "beating the system" (p. 58). He proposed that there are two levels of dishonesty or cheating at play. Dowling compared the first level to the zero-sum game in a weekly poker session. In this scenario if one of the players cheats it directly affects the second player. For example, a student who purchases a paper off the Internet and gets a high grade while another does his or her own work and receives a lower grade. In this instance one student's gain can be viewed as another student's loss.

Dowling's (2003) second level of dishonesty or cheating is more obscure than the first level. The intuition of other students is aroused. There is an understanding that at this level cheating threatens the whole and negatively affects the whole. For example, there is a specific number of As reserved and the same student purchases a second research paper and receives another A. The rest of the class is negatively impacted because there are only a certain number of As now remaining. Unfortunately students are "paralyzed by a diffidence or timorousness about calling public attention to what is going on" (p. 58). Dowling asserted grade inflation is the cause of this form of cheating or "beating the system" (p. 58) and that it is the cheaters who are in fact in control of "the moral climate" (p. 58) today. There are a number of examples of grade inflation (Hunt & Gardin, 2007). Some examples include such things as the attitude on the part of instructors of "Here is your A, now go away" (p. 20), the desire by instructors to win a perceived popularity contest, or the aspiration of junior faculty who desire to improve the academy. Some students may handle the challenge well while others might resist the temptation. The end result might be pressure felt by students to continue down the path previous professors have trod. What is in a grade? How did "A is average" (Pedersen, 1997, p. 64) happen? Researchers and scholars have attempted to determine how we got here. Three causes of grade inflation most commonly cited in the literature are:

- student evaluation of professors,
- student teacher dynamics, and
- merit-based financial aid (Hu, 2005).

In addition to these factors, according to Chonko, Tanner, and David; Birk; Singleton; and Sonner (as cited in Gray, 2008) student expectations and instructor job security was also mentioned by Sonner; Speer, Solomon, and Fincher (as cited in Gray, 2008). Student course evaluations rating professors on the quality of their professors' teaching has been criticize for some time as causing grade inflation as presented by Anderson and Miller; Aristides; Chonko, Tanner, and David; Isely and Singh (as cited in Gray, 2008). Evaluations of professors might influence students' responses on such factors as degree of difficulty of the course, personality of the professor, flexibility of the professor, reputation for grading, willingness to treat the evaluation process seriously, and the evaluation instrument itself (Hu, 2005). Conversely, some reasons for higher student grades on the part of the professors are fear of student evaluation results, avoiding bad relations with students, below average teaching skills, lack of experience, and a lack of clearly stated objectives (Hunt & Gardin, 2007).

Simply stated, there are those who accuse professors of grading more leniently in order to receive more positive evaluations from students. Research has demonstrated that a "grade-lenency theory" (Hu, 2005, p. 56) exists. That is, students buy good grades and faculty buy good evaluations or put another way; students are grading professors as professors are grading students.

It is worth noting that student grades have been steadily increasing since the 1960s. According to researcher Eiszler (2002), there is a correlation between grade inflation and teacher ratings. After all, the students' evaluation of faculty serves a dual purpose. It not only provides feedback of teaching effectiveness but it may also lead to reappointment, promotion and pay increases according to the Jackson, Teal, Raines, Nansel, Force, and Burdsal (as cited in Germaine & Scandura, 2005). The questions remain: do student evaluations of faculty impact faculty grading students? Do faculty grades of students impact students' evaluations of faculty?

Not surprisingly, there are several construct validity concerns relative to student ratings of professors as suggested by Scriven (as cited in Germaine & Scandura, 2005). Students could be rating professors on "consumerism" (p. 58); i.e., the things that might be important to students such as the cost of textbooks, homework assignments, or class participation which are not applicable to teaching ability. Also, professors could be disassociated from the evaluations or worse yet hostile to the evaluation process itself. Professors unfortunately, may chose not to use the feedback provided on the evaluation forms in a positive and professional manner.

There has been a concern about the reliability of the evaluations. Questions have arisen about the accuracy of the student evaluations of professors. Since the evaluations are generally completed at the end of a semester the result is a tendency toward errors rather than when evaluations are completed more frequently during the semester. Despite concerns surrounding student evaluations of professors there appears to be at present no better solution for evaluating faculty teaching effectiveness (Germaine & Scandura, 2005).

Vedder (2010) claimed that "most of the great grade inflation in America has occurred since evaluations began" (§ 2). During the 1960s and 1970s student evaluations became standard practice for evaluating faculty. Also during the same period national grade point averages rose from around the 2.5 to 2.6 range to over 3.0 today.

Are professors, to some extent, the purchasers of good evaluations by giving students high grades? The answer is yes according to an article featured in *Inside Higher Ed*, which stated that:

"Many professors who are off the tenure track or who are pre-tenure report great fear of being punished by students (and then not rehired) if they gain a reputation for tough grading, and studies have found [correlations between being an easy grader and earning good ratings at RateMyProfessors.com](#)" (Jaschik, 2009, p. 5)

Student teacher dynamics, or the "I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone" (Hu, 2005, p. 57) relationship, is presented as another cause for grade inflation. If students are not required to do too much work and receive high grades then teachers do not have to grade too much. There would appear to be a breakdown of learning and both parties would seem to be at fault. Faculty may be more concerned with tenure and promotion, as a result of a publish-or-perish environment. In essence, faculty who spend more time grading, under the current reward system, could actually be costing themselves money.

Merit-based financial aid based is another cause for the current grade inflation problem in higher education (Hu, 2005). Under this approach students, in order to receive financial aid, must maintain a suitable GPA for consideration. Moreover, it is suggested by critics of merit-based financial aid, that grade inflation is inevitable. This phenomenon can be traced to the noticeable grade inflation that first arose over forty years ago when some males were able to stay in college during the Vietnam War. Those males with the highest grades were more likely to avoid the draft. Faculty may have felt a responsibility and therefore protected students by grading more leniently to help their students stay in college (Castillo, Wakefield, & LeMaster, 2010; Gray, 2008).

Does it really make a difference if the average grade is a B- or C+ instead of a B or B+? In 1961, "the average student spent 40 hours a week engaged in their studies—attending class and studying. By 2003, this had declined by nearly one-third to 27 hours weekly" (Vedder, 2010, ¶ 3). Students are doing less because they do not have to do more but are still receiving better grades. With college educations getting more expensive each year and with students spending less time, the cost of college is rising much faster than realized. What does this mean to the public that subsidizes college education? Furthermore, what would happen to grade inflation if states began subsidizing inversely according to grade-point averages?

Interestingly, a study by Wongsurawat (2009) of law schools in the United States, the researcher suggested that grade inflation could possibly negatively impact diversity in colleges and universities. There is some evidence to indicate that there was a drop in enrollment of minorities because of additional emphasis on standardized test scores for admission standards in response to inflated grades. The researcher further stated that there is evidence to indicate that there is an "erosion of the credibility of grades" (p. 531).

DESCRIPTION OF THE ISSUE AND ITS IMPLICATION FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

As a result of grade inflation, in 2004 faculty at Princeton University voted 156 to 84 to approve a new policy for grading. According to the new policy the number of As faculty could award were limited to 35% in undergraduate classes. This was down from 46% and compared to 31% in the 1970s. Faculty maintained that they felt pressure to give students high grades. A member of the faculty at Duke University communicated that he had not awarded a C grade in over two years. One professor stated that if he gave the Cs some students earned, his class enrollments would be negatively impacted and he would be viewed as poor instructor. He went on to say that "As are common as dirt in universities nowadays because it's almost impossible for a professor to grade honestly" (Vogue & Higbee, 2004, p. 64).

According to an article by Marchand in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2010), students and graduates of Loyola Law School Los Angeles were awarded an increase in grade-point average by one-third of a point. The University modified the grading system "to help students remain competitive with graduates of other California law schools, which it believes already grade on a higher curve" (¶ 1-2). Loyola raised the current letter-based grades one step; for example an A- was increased to an A and an A was increased to an A+. "We're not trying to make them look better than other comparable students at other schools. We just want them to be on an even playing field," stated Victor J. Gold, Dean of the Law School at Loyola (p. 13).

"Grade inflation has plagued the system" (p. 34) asserted Castillo, Wakefield and LeMaster (2010). "What's my grade?" (p. 33) is a question also presented by the researchers suggesting that students ask this of faculty to determine if they, a C or even a D student, have done enough.

The authors compare this to the pass/fail system. The question is then, have we entered a societal acceptance where average or underperforming is all right? Have we maintained the integrity of the "grade" (p. 33) system? The question students should be asking is

"Have I learned enough" (p. 33)? Instead, they are asking their professors "Have I done enough" (p.33)?

The authors state that today higher education can be "described as 'dysfunctional' or 'schizophrenic'" (p. 34). They go on so say:

"By all accounts then, what we have today is a troubled higher education system, a system that, when viewed from the perspective of history, seems to have atrophied and broken down little by little over time. It is a system seemingly afflicted by the third law of thermodynamics, the entropy law that affects all matter living and inert: all things must pass from order to disorder over time" (p. 35).

Research suggests (Gray, 2008) that there is a need for training. A course in grading students should be included in all doctoral students' course curriculum. The absence of this training could be the cause for the current grade inflation problems.

Following are five additional suggestions presented by Hunt and Gardin (2007) to avoid grade inflation: base grades on objective factors, provide clear explanations of grading criteria, provide clear indication of expected results and factors by which students will be measured, and provide immediate and ongoing feedback to students throughout the semester.

Grades based on objective factors for grading offer less opportunity for challenge. Professors are encouraged to "evaluate mastery of knowledge and skills" (Hunt & Gardin, 2007, p. 21). Providing subjective grade requirements will certainly result in requests for favors and special treatment. Objective grading criteria tend to reduce the effect of student subjectivity.

Another suggestion presented by the researchers is to "provide clear guidelines that explain grading criteria" (Hunt & Gardin, 2007, p. 21). They recommend using rubrics for all assignments and to ask students to grade themselves using the same rubric to alleviate any perceived discrepancies in grades. The more lucid the guidelines the less room for challenge.

Professors should always "provide clear objectives and the means by which they will be achieved" (Hunt & Gardin, 2007, p. 21) for the course. Professors are advised to review course objectives each semester for clarification, especially since students are asked to rate this area when they evaluate the course. The clearer the objectives the easier it is for the objectives to be met. Universities should "educate faculty regarding the proper basis for awarding grades" (Hunt & Gardin, 2007, p. 21). For example, grades should be earned and not given away. When faculty gives away high grades, students expect them and stop trying to acquire knowledge. Universities are encouraged to clarify institutional grading expectations for faculty on an on-going basis.

"Keep students apprised of progress throughout the semester/term" (Hunt & Gardin, 2007, p.21) is advised. Provide feedback to students by meeting with them and interacting with them on a regular basis. Requiring students to earn grades will encourage the motivation to learn. This will in turn prepare them more effectively for the work world and their respective professions, not to mention the benefits to society as they go out and begin their careers.

While grades may be "inadequate, imprecise, and wildly idiosyncratic indicators of learning" (Angelo in Walwood and Anderson's study as cited in Grading problems in higher education, 2005) they are considered an effective way to rate students. In order to evaluate students more accurately, universities must identify the problems in grading and grading practices. Once this is accomplished new practices can be designed and policies implemented.

SUMMARY

Grade inflation is a serious problem in universities today. It impacts university credibility, student courses of study, choices of institution, and other areas. There has been an upward shift in grades without a corresponding upward shift in knowledge gained.

The most frequently mentioned causes of grade inflation are:

- student evaluations of professors,
- student teacher dynamics,
- merit-based financial aid, and
- student expectations.

Among the reasons for higher student grades on the part of professors are:

- fear of student evaluations,
- avoidance of bad relations with students,
- below average teaching skills,
- lack of experience,
- a lack of clearly stated objectives, and
- job security.

It has been suggested that a "grade-leniency theory" exists. That is, "students buy good grades and faculty buy good evaluations" in return. Students would appear to be doing less because they do not have to do more to continue getting the higher grades. With college education growing more expensive each year and with students spending less time on their studies, it would seem that the cost of a college education is rising much faster than even realized.

Grade inflation could potentially impact diversity in colleges and universities. Princeton University approved a new policy for grading and Loyola Law School Los Angeles awarded an across the board increase in grade-point averages. It appears we may have entered an era where average has become the new A.

Research suggests there is a need for training. Five additional suggestions for avoiding grade inflation include: base grades on objective factors, provide clear explanations of grading criteria, provide clear indications of expected results and factors by which students will be measured, and provide immediate and ongoing feedback to students throughout the semester.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While grades are not a perfect answer to assessing student performance in a course they are still the best answer we have for evaluating students. In order to evaluate students more accurately, universities must identify the problems in grading and grading practices. Once this is accomplished new practices can be designed and policies implemented.

Recommendations for further study might include conducting research by types of institutions (e.g., community colleges, four-year public institutions, four-year private institutions, etc.) to determine if the problem is more prevalent among particular types of institutions. Further ideas include performing a demographic study (e.g., males, females, new professors, experienced professors, etc.) to determine if certain groups are more inclined to inflate grades than other groups and to research by types of disciplines to determine if the problem is more prevalent among certain disciplines. In addition, research could be done at selected colleges and universities to ascertain what they are currently doing about this particular problem with grade inflation.

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