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GRADE INFLATION AND THE MYTH OF STUDENT CONSUMERISM

Elizabeth Boretz

Abstract. The widespread acceptance of the phrase “grade inflation” poses a potentially damaging overstatement in reference to higher education. Grades are at an all-time high, but a review of the literature demonstrates that the improvement is not incongruous with a rise in faculty development programs and increased varieties of student support services. Students are not consumers who demand high grades from instructors in exchange for favorable teaching evaluations; instead, students aim to succeed through a communal effort to support their learning, and colleges and universities are rising to the challenge.

The phrase “grade inflation” has become increasingly commonplace within the higher education lexicon throughout the past thirty years. The expression denotes “an increase in grade point average without a concomitant increase in achievement” (Potter and Nyman 2001, 9). Its connotation, however, poses an even harsher judgment of the quality of student learning in higher education today. Some researchers have gone so far as to suggest that this trend genuinely reflects “dumbing down the curriculum to focus on self-esteem goals” or that it is “tied to social and moral decline” (Eiszler 2002, 447; McSpirit 2000a, 104). The variety of grading practices across disciplines and institutions further complicates the question of what, exactly, an A or B signifies. Faculty and students alike respond to trends by aiming to conform with norms as they perceive them: “An ‘A’ in an individual course is often looked upon as a birthright by our students and overwhelming proof is needed before any lower grade is forthcoming” (Alper 1993, 57). Indeed, many students and instructors of all ranks appear to subscribe to the myth that grades and success are tightly bonded, particularly in the area of their future career potential. It is an oversimplification of the problem, however, to dismiss the meaning of high grades simply as exaggerated reports of student and faculty achievement.

In this paper, I investigate the history, current discourse, and potential solutions to grade inflation. Throughout the review of literature, one discerns the presence of a gap within most discussions of grade inflation. Grading frequently is viewed and analyzed without any concern for the more important question of how grades relate to student learning. When we say that we aim to fight grade inflation, we really are expressing a desire to ensure that students are engaging in the most meaningful learning experience that educators can provide. If we are to grade in an environment of academic rigor and enhanced learning, we must cultivate a spirit of teamwork and openness to faculty development as a matter of everyday campus culture.

Alleged Causes: Literature Review

The notion that lower-ranking faculty members’ insecurities and their drive to please the students causes grade inflation has been discredited. One extensive quantitative survey shows that there is only a 3.9 percent variance in overall teaching ratings attributable to student grade expectations (Marsh and Roche 2000, 219). According to Marsh and Roche, “Teachers cannot get higher than average SETs [Student Evaluations of Teaching] merely by
It is true that nontenured faculty give higher grades than their tenured, often more accomplished counterparts, but the reasons why this occurs warrant thorough exploration. Remarkably, students’ perceived learning rating had a .53 correlation with favorable or unfavorable teacher evaluations, and students’ perception of engaging assignments most heavily influenced their teacher evaluations, with a .67 correlation (Marsh and Roche 2000). Anticipated grades influenced the evaluations with only a .20 correlation. In this light, prevailing perspectives and discussions regarding grade inflation may be misguided and founded largely on overgeneralizations and myth. Marsh and Roche’s findings demonstrate that students appreciate a stimulating learning experience more than they want an A.

The literature regarding the rise in grades among college students in recent decades appears to have generated its own lore. Several studies point to the origin of unduly elevated grades in the Vietnam era (Alper 1993; Hardy 1997; Lanning and Perkins 1995; Basinger 1997; Kwon and Kendig 1997). According to Alper, A bad grade—that is, the kind we used to issue routinely—was a one-way ticket to Nam. Draft boards did not distinguish an Ivy League GPA from a community college GPA so to protect his students and assuage his conscience, a professor would overtly or subconsciously grade higher. As the war heated up and required more bodies, so too did grades march upward. (1993, 57)

As of the 1980s, grade elevation was ubiquitous and undeniable. Connected to this notion of higher grades as a matter of faculty conscience is the practice of building and reinforcing students’ self-esteem, which originates in primary and secondary education (Eiszler 2002; Potter and Nyman 2001; Landrum 1999; Kwon and Kendig 1997; McSpirit 2000a; Mansfield 2001). Although not a life-and-death concern in times when students do not face the prospect of being drafted into military service, grades in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s reflect faculty awareness of students’ emotional fragility and self-image. For example, since 1992 fewer than 10 percent of undergraduate course grades at Stanford have been below B; 91 percent of grades earned at Harvard are B- or above (Kwon and Kendig 1997). The connection of self-esteem issues with academic performance has led students to misunderstand grading in general; females in particular overestimate their anticipated grades (Landrum 1999).

Students are not entirely to blame for expecting above-average grades even when their performance is mediocre. High grade expectations have emerged during the past twenty years alongside the increased popularity of mastery approaches to learning (McSpirit 2000b; Eiszler 2002; Potter and Nyman 2001; Lanning and Perkins 1995). The practices of allowing retests and revisions of assignments naturally drive student grades upward. In this respect, it is logical to say that grades are not inflated at all. We must not assume that a grade is inappropriate just because it is high (Kohn 2002).

Changes in students and in student-faculty communication also need to be addressed as at least partial explanations for the rise in grade point averages nationwide. Many institutions have extended the deadline for course withdrawal in recent decades. This allows students to avoid D, F, or even C grades by opting out of a course, rather than toughing it out and risking a low grade (Gose 1997; Eiszler 2002). Faculty development programs also have increased in number over the years, providing more opportunities for those who teach to reflect on effective syllabus construction and better ways to foster student learning (Potter and Nyman 2001). Statements of expected outcomes now appear on many syllabi, providing students with a clearer focus on the goals of the course. In addition, it has been suggested that the increase in the number of students receiving federal and other forms of financial aid has led more students to work harder to maintain their eligibility for such support (Potter and Nyman 2001). It also is important to consider the rise in the median age of undergraduates. Students that are older and most likely are more mature bring more experience and a sense of responsibility to the classroom, yielding better academic performance overall (Kwon and Kendig 1997). When we take all of these developments into consideration, it is erroneous to suggest that grades have risen randomly or independently of policies and practices that are likely to motivate or assist students in maintaining high levels of performance.

On the other hand, nearly every piece of literature pertinent to grade inflation lays partial blame for alleged declining standards on the use of student evaluations in personnel decisions. This argument often is presented independently of consideration for other explanations, such as those described earlier. Foster and Foster sum up the views expressed by many who have written on this topic:

Grading properly, as everyone knows, is hard work. But it is labor for which temporary faculty members are neither paid nor encouraged to perform. . . . Temporary and part-time teachers therefore lack both the opportunity and the usual incentives to assume responsibility for the general academic development of their students. (1998, 32)

This explanation of higher grades as attributable to the use of adjunct faculty is flawed, as permanent or full-time faculty are equally unlikely to have had any formal training in how to grade. A more widespread argument attributing unduly elevated grades to the enormous number of adjunct faculty members is that such instructors assume that lenient grading will ensure strong student evaluations of their teaching (Basinger 1997; Nagle 1998; Hardy 1997; McSpirit 2000a; Lanning and Perkins 1995; Landrum 1999; Gibson 2000; Potter and Nyman 2001; Eiszler 2002; Alper 1993). Despite conflicting evidence that grading affects student evaluations, and despite the reality that adjunct faculty generally do receive weaker reviews from students, some instructors’ sense of vulnerability leads them to avoid ill feelings by appealing students with high grades (Eiszler 2002; Landrum 1999; Greenwald and Gillmore 1997; Sonner 2000). Some evidence indicates that student evaluations are higher when their grades also are high (Eiszler 2002), yet no controlled study to determine whether leniency or excellent teaching alone, or perhaps even both, were factors that led to positive student reviews.

Most important, the statistics cited throughout this report appear to be drawn purely from four-year institutions. It also
has been alleged, but not proven, that most research on grade inflation has focused almost exclusively on highly selective institutions (Schoichet 2002). My own experience in reviewing the literature supports this allegation, at least when the institutions’ names are mentioned. In one unique investigation of 16.5 million undergraduates during the 1999–2000 academic year, it was found that only 14.5 percent received “mostly As” (Schoichet 2002). More than one-third of the students in the study had received “mostly C-” and below. What sets this study apart from others is that it includes community colleges. It also is important to note that 48.9 percent of African American students in this piece were found to have “mostly C’s” or lower grades (Schoichet 2002). Critics have spent a disproportionate amount of time pointing fingers at Harvard and Stanford. “The C is alive and well,” (Schoichet 2002, A37); to address the problem of grade inflation, each institution must examine itself as an individual entity with a unique student population. We all must explore campus-specific solutions rather than struggle to interpret questionable national trends.

**Approaches to Solutions: Literature Review**

Indiana University and Dartmouth College are two institutions whose names emerge in discussions of campuses that currently are attempting to redesign their methods of reporting student performance ratings. Both have used similar approaches in that they have incorporated indexing systems into individual academic transcripts; this shows each student’s standing relative to classmates and lists the number of students in each course on the transcript. The institutions have had little, if any, impact on grade reporting methods nationwide. In addition, the practice of using relativism to interpret the meaning of a given grade generates controversy, as it is likely to heighten competition and discourage students from assisting each other. More low grades in one’s class increases the value of his or her performance to the A student (Nagle 1998; Basinger 1997). A simple revision of grade-reporting methods poses a naive avoidance of examining the actual reasons for elevated grades, in a time when student preparation and SAT scores are in decline: “[I]t is much easier to have the registrar ‘do something’ than to dip into the murky water of what is really appropriate in the classroom” (Nagle 1998, 40). The only possible effective methods for addressing grade inflation must revolve around an emphasis on standards and learning, rather than on the grades themselves.

The Relative Performance Index (RPI) used at Dartmouth offers a variation on the University of Indiana’s method of grade reporting, although the philosophy is nearly identical. As one of the RPI’s proponents points out, it “is not a solution to grade inflation” (Nagle 1998, 40). Rather, it is a measure that provides an additional perspective of student performance: “When presented in conjunction with the traditional class grade (A, B, C, etc.), [RPI] provides evaluators such as employment recruiters with a performance assessment relative to both an absolute standard and a relative standard” (Nagle 1998, 40). This statement reflects the assumption that grades, relative to one another, become more meaningful when reported in absolute terms. The concept of actual learning becomes secondary within such a philosophy. The Dartmouth RPI includes the number of students in each class as part of the report and the mean grade for each class, alongside a calculation resulting from a process that is explained on each transcript: divide the student’s grade (A = 4.0) by the class average (for example, 3.75), yielding an RPI of 1.067. An RPI of one signifies the mean. An RPI above one is above the mean. This complicates and clutters the transcript, yet this method has raised some hopes for an end to grade inflation:

By introducing the RPI, other students in the class actually become stakeholders in the grade delivered to any other student in that class. The pressure now shifts from delivering high grades to delivering equitable grades. Consequently, excellent students may seek instructors whose grade distributions are most reflective of performance instead of instructors whose grade distributions are skewed to the high side. (Nagle 1998, 43)

This rationalization is pure theory and is overly simplified. Nagle offers no evidence whatsoever that the RPI actually has had an effect on student grade averages or on learning effectiveness.

The creators of the RPI acknowledge their inability to alter standards and grading methods at Dartmouth. This indexing method actually represents a response to alleged student consumerism more than declining grading standards. Regarding the RPI and perceptions of it at Dartmouth, Nagle reports:

In recent years, the costs of higher education have increased drastically, leading to the students’ expectation of receiving greater value for the education dollar. The value is often judged, in the short term, by student grades. Consequently, pressures exist to deliver grades that satisfy students and parents regardless of whether or not standards of excellence are met. (1998, 40–41)

Faculty are inconsistent in their grading practices, and therefore the objective meaning of an RPI is unattainable.

Indiana University also proposed a three-year moratorium on the use of student evaluations in personnel decisions as a method to curb the problem of too many high grades. The thought process behind this was that removal of concerns over students’ disappointment in the face of potentially lower-than-expected grades perhaps would motivate all instructors to reset their standards, free from the pressures to give As in exchange for strong reviews (McSpirit 2000b). This unique approach acknowledges a crucial element of any effective learning environment: a sense of empowerment enhances the experience. However, students and faculty alike need to feel that they are powerful, and the student role in evaluating faculty should not be dismissed, whether or not we question their motivations for giving strong or weak ratings. A simple removal of student opinion as a factor in faculty promotion decisions disregards the learning process as a collaborative endeavor and central focus of the classroom experience. Student evaluations of their instructors, if prepared with student learning goals and opinions in mind, actually may serve as a tool to develop the sense of community and fairness among faculty and their students.

In their article “Effects of Grading Leniency and Low Workload on Students’
Evaluations of Teaching: Popular Myth, Bias, Validity, or Innocent Bystanders?” (2000), Marsh and Roche aim to debunk prevailing misconceptions. They sort through the many variables that affect student evaluations of teaching. Marsh and Roche also point out weaknesses in many studies regarding the low teaching ratings of adjuncts in that they do not control for factors such as each evaluator’s perceived learning, prior interest in the field, understanding of the assignments, and opportunity for group interaction in the course. In addition to perceived rigor, students’ prior interest in the course topic also is more influential (.28) in their evaluation than their expected grade (2000, 219). This is a factor that may be partially accountable for the lower teaching ratings given to adjunct instructors, as they often take on the general education, introductory, and required courses in which some students resent having to enroll. Marsh and Roche write, “Popular myth implies that teachers can manipulate students into giving them favorable ratings by offering less demanding courses and grading more leniently” (2000, 223). Their research soundly defies this assumption. In fact, students’ self-reported level of “perceived learning” showed a .38 correlation with their overall rating of any given course (207).

Discussion and Recommendations

The assumption that students wish for lenient grading underestimates the breadth of what “student consumerism” signifies. That is, the notion that students want their money’s worth does not indicate that they wish to buy easy As and that this will satisfy them. They wish to earn As from faculty members whom they respect through the opportunity to rise to new and clearly defined challenges. Although none of the literature addresses this quantitatively, it is reasonable to presume that tenured faculty feel more secure in challenging students, which invites the risk (and reality) that enrollment numbers in their courses will drop throughout the term. Those who most concern themselves with their perceived dispensability on a campus are inclined to use their class enrollment as indicative of demand for their classes and therefore may hesitate to push students beyond their self-imposed limits.

My recommendations for how to address grade inflation revolve around a central focus on teaching and learning effectiveness. Grades and revised grade reporting practices do not hold any answers in themselves. First, teaching evaluations need to be demystified for all faculty. An in-service session at the beginning of the nine-month contract period needs to be dedicated to faculty discussion of questions, doubts, and false assumptions surrounding several issues:

1. How such evaluations are used in personnel decisions and whether or not changes need to be made to this process.
2. Acknowledgement that student ratings of adjunct and permanent faculty do differ and that research shows adjuncts cannot always control some of the factors that account for these differences, such as student prior interest in the course content. A summary of Marsh and Roche’s research will be useful for information and discussion purposes.
3. Most important, the content of the teaching evaluations needs to be opened up for discussion and revision: “[Student Evaluations of Teaching] can be improved through a cost-effective combination of SET feedback, appropriate consultation, and application of teaching strategies specific to the particular components of teaching effectiveness that teachers choose to target” (Marsh and Roche 2000, 226). Course- or discipline-specific evaluation forms need to be designed, which will help instructors focus more clearly on the goals of their teaching endeavors.

Each subsequent year, a discussion regarding teaching evaluations and the methods for customizing them should be offered to new faculty as part of their orientation program. Adjunct faculty as well as the tenured and tenure-track faculty must be included in this activity. A committee consisting of faculty from several ranks and discipline areas can be helpful for determining which items on the evaluation form should apply to all faculty members and which areas are open for individual design. A move from heavily quantitative to mostly qualitative feedback from students may result. This likely will be more instrumental in enhancing teaching effectiveness and reducing faculty defensiveness when facing evaluations. To empower faculty toward increased rigor in course content and grading, it is imperative that ideas for the revision of teaching evaluations come from the faculty members themselves.

Second, faculty development programs need to be expanded and offered regularly to adjuncts as well as junior and senior tenure-track faculty. Faculty members already identified as accomplished in the areas of rigorous grading, engaging teaching methods, and strong student evaluations may be sent to national or regional workshops so that they can mentor or train their colleagues. A teaching and learning center to foster such activities is an essential addition to any campus environment.

Third, students need to be educated with regard to grading practices in college. The new student orientation program each year must incorporate an obligatory motivational session led by faculty members, along with a panel of high-achieving student speakers, revolving around the joys of academic rigor and the role of faculty in supporting students in their learning experiences. Student speakers may discuss their experiences with challenging and less difficult classes and their feelings about grades. We are misguided in assuming that college students understand grading practices. New students do not necessarily know how to succeed in college while at the same time embracing learning opportunities that initially may seem risky or intimidating.

All of these recommendations implicitly point to the value of community within the academic environment as an agent for elevated rigor and enhanced student learning. Faculty and students are those who most directly affected by grades. Fears and myths must be dispelled. Marsh and Roche conclude:

The most effective ways for teachers to get high SETs are to provide demanding and challenging materials, to facilitate student efforts to master the materials, and to encourage them to value their learning—in short, to be good teachers. (2000, 226)

In my review of literature, I did neglect to mention the suggestion put forth in “A Modest A++ Proposal for a Solution to the Problem of Grade Inflation”: “Pay
faculty who do not inflate grades more is a guaranteed solution to the problem” (Gibson 2000, 13).

This is a shortcut, however, similar to grade indexing or other methods that focus on the outcomes more than the process of teaching and learning. What this tongue-in-cheek comment touches on, however, has great merit. Faculty members need a tangible motivation for rethinking their relationship with their students and goals of their teaching. Money, of course, is no more meaningful than an A or a B. Its value changes according to context and one’s individual standards. In fact, Perry Zirkel, a professor of education, actually offered sums of cash totaling ten thousand dollars in 1995 to colleagues who would toughen their grading. “No thanks,” said Lehigh colleagues; the program never was implemented (Gose 1997). There is no evidence that financial compensation and grading are connected in any way.

The collective sense of exasperation expressed by many seeking to solve the riddle of what we call grade inflation actually reveals the very solution to the problem:

With four out of five students graduating with GPI’s of B-minus or better . . . employers and graduate schools have had to rely on other measures to sift applicants. Standardized-test scores and institutional “reputation” have become more important than the judgments of teachers and scholars. (Kamber and Biggs 2002, B14)

We must use this circumstance to our advantage. Institutional reputation and student proficiencies truly are more important than the one-time judgments reported as grades, for the students are the ones who have the highest stakes in the outcomes of their college experience. We can improve student learning outcomes and institutional image now and into the future through faculty development toward learner-centeredness. I recommend that we continue to issue grades to students, whether or not they somehow appear to be high. At the same time, we must engage in a perpetual striving to offer a stimulating, motivating learning environment for students. Myths of adjunct insecurities or faculty apathy must be dismissed within and beyond the college campus. The reward of addressing grade inflation lies in an enhanced sense of community with a greater awareness of lifelong, active learning as the true privilege of the academic existence for students and faculty alike.

The wide acceptance of the phrase “grade inflation” has damaged the academic ethos in general. This phrase converts knowledge or learning into a commodity, with the grade being the currency earned in exchange for one’s labors and redeemable by the payee for whatever he or she desires. As educators, we are held accountable to so many external and internal constituencies and are compelled to focus on learning outcomes. It is essential that we understand and convey to students that outcomes and grades are by no means one and the same thing. Grades can be fixed in place on a transcript. Learning is fluid and infinite in the wealth of returns that it brings. After college, pay is instrumental to satisfying our physical needs, but intellectual adaptability is the true determiner of success for any lifelong learner.

Key words: grade inflation, grading

REFERENCES


