What Purpose Do Grades Serve?

What is the purpose or function of grades in college? By extension, what is the purpose of college?

Only those hiding out in a cave in some very remote place, without television, radio, newspaper, or Internet for the last decade have not heard about "grade inflation." Indeed discussion of grade inflation at public colleges and universities has been floating about for more than twenty years. However, in the last five years, concerns about grade inflation have begun to surface at elite institutions.

Princeton University, concerned about grade inflation because between 2001-2004 47 percent of undergraduate grades were A's, issued a policy establishing "a common grading standard" and limiting "the proportion of A grades (including A+, A, and A-) to 35 percent in every undergraduate course." (The Chronicle of Higher Education's News Blog September 18, 2007).

As an academic I have been listening to the discussion about grade inflation for as long it has been occurring. However, it was not until I read the comments today's Chronicle News Blog that it dawned on me that the debate had far more to do with different views about the purpose of grading, than it had to do with the toughness or strictness of grading standards.

Those people in academia, and in society at large, who express concern about grade inflation, and applaud efforts like Princeton's to reign in the number of A's, view grades as a sorting mechanism by which those who are most meritorious will be separated from those who are less meritorious. Grades are relational attributes. Grades function to determine who will have the opportunity for access to scarce resources (graduate school slots, top positions in corporations, government appointments). Since the number of top positions in society is limited, the number of A's must be limited, so that it is clear who does and who does not deserve access to those top spots. The good instructor is the one who is best able to differentiate the very best and brightest from the rest of the students.

The other camp in academia, and in society, who are less concerned about grade inflation, and who are opposed to the type of quota system employed by Princeton, view grades as a measure of the acquisition of specified knowledge or mastery of subject matter or skills. Grades to this camps are absolute attributes, determined by levels of performance against an objective scale. Grades function to determine who has mastered the knowledge or skills to entered into a particular occupational field or field of study. The number of persons obtaining mastery is not determined by the number of slots available in the occupational world. The good instructor is the one who is can assist the largest number of students to attain mastery.

But don't take my word for it. Here are portions of some comment posts from The
Chronicle’s News Blog that clearly illustrate my point.

Supporting Princeton’s quota:
"If more than 35% of your students are getting A’s, your standards are too low. In a typical class, perhaps 10-15% of students should get A’s. In an exceptional class, that number may double, but it should never be more than one-third of the class. The primary purpose of grades is to separate students out by performance, and that cannot be done if everyone gets the same grade." [emphasis added] M. Sundermann

"I’d be suspicious of any instructor or class where the 35% level was consistently exceeded. One would like to assume that an “A” at Princeton is different from / better than and “A” at a less prestigious and less costly university. But that assumes professors take the job of evaluation and assessment of undergraduate performance seriously..." Mike L.

Opposing Princeton’s quota:
"What a crock. Princeton students peg the meter on their SAT scores, but evidently the quality of instruction there is so substandard that their faculty can only get 35% of these brilliant young scholars up to the A level. As a parent, I’ll send my kids to a university where they will be inspired to perform at their highest level, and will be graded accordingly, where faculty are not required to punish high achievers because of an artificial percentage." Mike A.

"What do students have to say who were told at the beginning of the course what the “standards” were? It’s my suspicion that the standards are not that precise. Therefore, Princeton has decided on norm-based grading—back to the old curve. So much for mastery learning or competency-based education. [emphasis added] I certainly would not recommend this school to anyone." P. DeWitt

The folks on the side that worry about grade inflation, and push for "higher standards" view discussions of mastery and competence with suspicion. As evidenced by this comment:

"I once talked with an Ed School instructor who was giving virtually all of his students a grad [sic] of A or A-. His justification was “If they master the material, they should get the grade.” Out of politeness I didn’t say the obvious: “If almost everyone can meet the standards, then the standards are a joke.” “Mastery learning” or “Competency-based education” is EdSpeak for low expectations. It is no wonder that grades in Ed Schools are typically a joke.” Sven

Setting aside for the moment the possibility that the education faculty member of Sven’s acquaintance may have indeed had low expectations, it does not seem implausible to me, as it does to Sven, that the overwhelming majority of college students after more than 12 or 13 years of personal experience in the educational system, are capable of mastering an undergraduate course on the educational system. There are some fields of knowledge and instruction that only a small
minority of students could reasonably be expected to attain mastery -- advanced mathematics, neurosurgery, art restoration, cabinet making, are a few that come to mind. But others, such as composition, sociology (my own subject), education, religion, office practices, plumbing, are probably masterable by the majority of those with any interest. [Please no offense is meant to the practitioners any of these fields!]

However, even in those fields where only a minority might achieve mastery, we often find that access limited to an even smaller number. For example, there is substantial evidence to demonstrate that far more people are capable of success in medical school than are allowed into medical school. The sorting and ranking functions of undergraduate education are very important to limiting access to medical education. Of course, limiting access to training, means a limited supply of physicians, which keeps competition under control and the economic benefits of medical practice high.

So what purpose do grades serve? What purpose should grades serve? Should grades be used to sort and rank people with only a specified number of top positions, preparing people to enter a highly unequal society and economic system in which there are a limited number of top positions? Or should grades be used to acknowledge the acquisition of specified levels of knowledge, skill and competency?

At present in U.S. education, how one answers those questions often reflects where one is in the educational system (and the social stratification system). Community and technical college faculty who are preparing people for skilled working class and technical middle class positions tend to emphasize mastery and competence of objectively defined knowledge and skill levels. Faculty at elite private institutions tend to emphasize the sorting and ranking by comparative merit.

POSTED BY SUE AT 7:06 PM
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