

Speakout: CU gets an 'A' for grade inflation fight

By Anne D. Neal
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Kudos to the University of Colorado for beginning to tackle one of the most troubling problems facing higher education: grade inflation. Let's hope other institutions follow suit.

People are quite familiar with the problem of monetary inflation. As prices rise higher and higher, the value of the dollar shrinks. The problem of grade inflation is similar: As student grade averages rise, the value to a student of earning a higher grade average declines. The consequences of grade inflation are as dire for students as monetary inflation is for the economy.

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni's report, *Degraded Currency: The Problem of Grade Inflation*, has shown that, with only a few exceptions, persistent grade inflation exists in colleges and universities nationwide. Similarly, in their book *When Hope and Fear Collide*, Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton examined grading data from 4,900 undergraduates across a wide range of institutions. They found that the number of "A" grades given increased from only 7 percent in 1969 to 26 percent in 1993.

Conversely, the number of "C" grades fell by 66 percent.

This doesn't mean that American college students are getting smarter - only that professors are giving away grades that students once had to earn.

By its very nature, grade inflation is dishonest. It undermines the essential purpose of a grading system: to distinguish the excellent from the mediocre and the unsatisfactory.

Indeed, grade inflation turns the important moment of student evaluation into a sham - inflated grades do not tell students the truth about their academic performance, but unearned A's and B's do tell them that fraud and corruption are acceptable.

So rampant is grade inflation that grades have become all but meaningless; as Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield has noted, grades have been reduced to "worthless tokens of self-esteem."

Students and employers are both poorly served when professors say students have done excellent work when they have not. When grade averages become unreliable indicators of effort and achievement, businesses must find other, more costly ways of distinguishing among job applicants. Meanwhile, recent graduates - many of them carrying a mountain of debt - are left wondering why there is so little correlation between their grades and their bankable skills.

Grade inflation is not uniform; it occurs much more often in the social sciences and the humanities. Hence, it might encourage grade-conscious students to shift away from the more difficult fields of math and science toward those fields with easier grading.

Because of that, grade inflation might play a substantial role in shrinking the supply of graduates with higher math and science skills. Clearly, this is a national problem.

By pledging to fight grade inflation, CU joins a small but growing number of institutions that understand how honest evaluation lies at the very heart of the academic enterprise.

Duke University Law School holds to a school-average grade point. Professors keep their class grade averages to a set standard or have grades returned by the administration with instructions to make adjustments.

Dartmouth now includes on each student's transcript the size of the class and the median grade for all students.

Princeton, meanwhile, has limited the percentage of A's it will award students in their first and second years of college.

Grade inflation is more than just a bad habit. It's part of an academic culture that too often seeks to avoid accountability (to students, taxpayers and citizens) and that too often overrates and misrepresents college graduates who are not prepared to be effective workers and thoughtful citizens.

In fighting this trend, CU President Hank Brown and the University of Colorado Regents deserve an A.

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