

Measuring Up

The Problem of Grade Inflation
and What Trustees Can Do



AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI
Institute for Effective Governance

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The Problem of Grade Inflation and What Trustees Can Do

For students, it may be a dream come true, but the nationwide trend of grade inflation is ultimately detrimental to our education system.... Curtailing this phenomenon at the University would be a great way to buck the national trend and set an example for other schools to follow.

The Hatchet student newspaper

So began a 2007 editorial in George Washington University's student newspaper. The students there recognized that grade inflation—the assignment of higher and higher grades for lower and lower quality work—is not a dream come true. Grade inflation harms students and schools alike.

Not all students will ask the administration and trustees to take action, of course. **But you should act.**

At nearly every American college and university—and almost certainly at yours—the average grade has climbed dramatically over the years. A larger percentage of students now get A's than ever before, and at some schools, nearly 50% of all grades awarded are A or A-. Meanwhile, there is little quality control. "A" work in one classroom may be "C" work in another. Grades in engineering and science courses tend on average to be lower than those in the humanities and social sciences.

One might be inclined to believe that this rise in grades is attributable to an increase in student effort



and ability. However, the available data show that the exact *opposite* is true. The average college student in the United States spends a mere 10-15 hours per week studying for his or her classes. Moreover, SAT scores of entering students have declined for the last 30 years, and one-third of first-year students are enrolled in some form of remedial reading, writing, or mathematics. What, then, is to account for the plethora of A grades?

Experts point to several causes of grade inflation. Today's students are brought up in a consumer culture, and that mentality extends to higher education: For tens of thousands of dollars a year, many expect to "consume" good grades. Since most of today's university curricula are built around choice, rather than a defined core, students can "shop" for an easy A. Often, students can drop classes many weeks into the semester without penalty. Teachers and departments that don't inflate grades can find their classes dropped or never fully enrolled in the first place.

Students' evaluations also can contribute to the problem. Many colleges today ask students to evaluate their professors on a "number line" system: "On a scale of 1 to 5, how effective was this professor?" Since these evaluations typically influence the setting of instructor salaries, and tenure and promotion decisions for new faculty, professors have a very high incentive to placate students with inflated grades—and researchers at the University of Washington have documented that easy graders succeed in "buying" high reviews. By handing out good grades, professors avoid calls from agitated parents and the extra paperwork that some institutions demand when professors give out low grades. After all, dealing with those issues consumes time that could be spent on faculty research or other scholarly pursuits.

As Andrea Biggs, an English professor at the College of New Jersey, told the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “It’s easier to be a high grader. You can write that A or B, and you don’t have to defend it. You don’t have students complaining or crying in your office. You don’t get many low student evaluations. The amount of time that is eaten up by very rigorous grading and dealing with student complaints is time you could be spending on your own research.” Given these facts, it’s no wonder that grade inflation is the norm, rather than the exception.

Finally, substantial numbers of professors simply don’t believe in rigorous grading anymore, particularly in the arts and humanities. As they see it, grades are hierarchical and subjective, and they diminish students’ self esteem to the detriment of learning. This theory flies in the face of all evidence to the contrary; writing for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley found no significant support for the argument that there is a positive correlation between self-esteem and academic achievement.

Does grade inflation really matter?

You bet it does. Grade inflation reduces the value of your college’s degree. When virtually all students receive an A or B, students who have a superior grasp of the materials are penalized. Motivation to work hard dissipates when students know that they have a high chance of getting an A, especially if they intentionally choose an “easy” class. The whole purpose of A through F letter grades is to communicate information to students about their grasp of the class material. Today’s truncated grading scale allows professors fewer means by which to communicate a student’s progress.



As a matter of fact, inflated grades defraud students. A student who sees an A on his paper thinks he has done exemplary work, even if everyone in the class got the same grade. That inflated grade has undermined the purpose of education—to improve the student’s intellectual abilities. If the instructor doesn’t tell the student how he needs to improve, he, and, by extension, the university, neglect their duty.

Nor does grade inflation only cheat students. Because grades have become so much less meaningful, transcripts now tell employers and graduate schools much less than they once did. A recent poll revealed that only 29 percent of employers find college transcripts useful in helping to determine a job applicants’ potential to succeed. If nearly all students receive A’s, a transcript full of them does not say anything about a particular student’s academic achievements—and this forces employers to use more subjective methods of measurement.

As a trustee, you have the ultimate fiduciary responsibility for your institution. Addressing grade inflation is one way to ensure the academic quality of your institution and to guarantee that students really get something for the tuition they pay. **A strong stand against grade inflation serves your students and strengthens your school.**

What can be done?

Professors are rightly jealous of their authority over curricula and syllabi. It’s up to them—not the board—to work out specifics of any plan that actually changes the way grading is done.

But the board can get things started—and that’s crucial. Here’s how:

Obtain data.

Find out whether grade inflation and grade disparities between disciplines are problems on your campus. What is the average grade point average today? What was it 10 or 25 years ago? Are the grades very different in different schools and departments? There are some institutions where grade inflation may not be a problem, and perhaps your school is one of these. Perhaps not. You need the data to find out.

Start the conversation.

When he was president of the University of Colorado, Hank Brown—working with his board—got some data and began a conversation with faculty and the campus community. As outlined below, this effort resulted in some genuine reform.

Ask faculty to review the data and report back to the board by a date set.

Grade inflation is a problem because it takes away the meaning that grades once conveyed. A deliberate, campus-wide conversation can help restore that meaning, even without changing grading policy. Ask the faculty to engage this important issue and give them a deadline by which to respond.

Providing faculty with school-wide data on grading can help start the conversation. Rosovsky and Hartley suggest that faculty discuss expectations, responsibilities, and standards. Should there be more rigorous general education requirements that make it harder for students to avoid challenging departments? Should the student course evaluation process be eliminated or modified? Would it be preferable for other faculty to evaluate the teaching of their

colleagues? Should tenured professors observe courses taught by junior faculty?

Analyzing what other institutions have done can also provide alternatives to consider. Faculty members at a growing number of schools have challenged grade inflation.

Stanford faculty reduced the ability of students to drop courses and to remove dropped course information from transcripts. These changes prevented students from retaking classes in an effort to maximize grade point averages.

Several professors, most notably Duke University's Valen Johnson, have suggested recalculating GPA, usually by weighting "harder" classes more heavily or by re-norming grades so that they show only how students perform in comparison to other students. This solution redefines what grades mean, by formula. Faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have suggested a similar program, dubbed the "Achievement Index," which measures student achievement relative to the performance of their classmates.

Rosovsky and Hartley suggest replacing letter grades with "honors," "pass," and "fail," in order to reestablish "pass" as the average. They also suggest enforcing grading curves for large classes.

In the face of acknowledged grade inflation, the Princeton University faculty limited the percentage of A's a department could give: no more than 35% of students in any class can receive an A. At Wellesley College, the faculty mandated that most introductory courses have average grades of B+ or lower in order to reduce student incentives to gravitate towards

easier-grading departments. As a result, faculty members now assign many more B-level grades.

Of course, these solutions are not without their limitations. Enforcing a grade point average for a school or a class—particularly in high-level courses for majors in the field—can unjustly punish students who are well prepared and highly motivated. For much the same reason, many Princeton professors objected to grading quotas because of their potential for unfairness and inflexibility.

A would-be solution also seems to have gone awry at Cornell University—where, in 1996, median grades for each course were made available on the university’s website. According to a professor who wrote a paper on the reform, “The hope was that this would encourage students to go into tougher classes because they would be recognized for taking them. We’re not seeing that effect.” In fact, students enrolled in courses with the highest median grades and grades overall went up.

Provide information on the transcript.

After asking the faculty to look into what it can do in its sphere, **there are a number of positive actions the board has the right to take itself.** First, you can propose that the university publish the overall average grade of a class on the transcript or a student’s class rank on transcripts (not online for all to see). In light of a vigorous campus-wide discussion of grade inflation begun in 2006, the University of Colorado Board of Regents added class rank to transcripts for students requesting it. Grade point averages at Colorado have since dropped.



Similarly, Dartmouth College faculty post on student transcripts the size and median grade for most classes, and Columbia University transcripts note the percentage of grades at or above A- in each class.

By making this information available, institutions give students an incentive to work for recognition of excellence, and high-achieving students can signal their success to employers and graduate schools. Potential employers, meanwhile, can easily see how many times a student outperformed, underperformed, or equaled the class median.

But a note of warning is in order. Sometimes a well-intentioned system can confuse the reader, especially an employer looking at many transcripts and résumés. For instance, an Indiana University transcript includes a full distribution of grades for each class the student took, the average of all grades in the class, the average GPA of all students in the class, and the percentage of students in the class majoring in the field, among other data. All these are important, useful pieces of information, but the result is a very complex transcript that may be more confusing than illuminating.

Whatever policy you choose, be sure that you announce it on your transcripts. Many students at schools that have tackled grade inflation worry that they will be penalized by employers and graduate schools that do not know of their alma mater's particular policy. While you hold the line, your students' potential employers may think that the grades they see are the inflated grades too common in today's academy. **A clear note by the Registrar clarifying your policy to the outside world can prevent this.**

Ask that department chairs share information.

The administration at Boston University sends department chairs information about the grades each professor assigns his students and the grades those students earn in other classes. Without mandating a particular outcome, the administration highlights which professors, for whatever reason, are out of line with their colleagues. It also offers data about grade distributions university-wide.

Rosovsky and Hartley strongly endorse providing professors with data showing their grades and those of their peers—a practice also in place at Harvard and Duke. Telling faculty how they grade relative to their colleagues profitably uses existing data to notify faculty they may be contributing to grade inflation—and it does so without mandating specific changes to grading policy.

Consider grade inflation in presidential searches.

Choosing a president is the single most important responsibility of trustees. When you evaluate presidential candidates with academic backgrounds, take into account whether they have upheld grading standards at their previous institution. A candidate who inflated grades himself is unlikely to be a strong leader in the fight against grade inflation on your campus. And if you have a candidate without an academic background, it's worth asking about this issue. Either way, your goal should be to recruit a leader who can start a fruitful discussion and produce needed reform.

The end result!

Whatever your school decides, you and your fellow trustees have an opportunity to set a national standard for academic quality and integrity. Addressing grade inflation is an excellent place to start.

Call ACTA's IEG for help.

ACTA's Institute for Effective Governance supplies information trustees can use in making decisions for their institutions, including best practices from across the country. Drawing on a broad network of higher education experts, IEG also offers a wide range of services including orientations and retreats, board management seminars, institutional assessments and presidential searches and evaluations, at little or no additional charge.

To learn more, go to www.goacta.org or call 202/467-6787.

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AMERICAN COUNCIL OF
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

1726 M Street, NW
Suite 802
Washington, DC 20036
T: 202.467.6787
F: 202.467.6784
E: info@goacta.org
www.goacta.org