

# Degraded Currency:



## THE PROBLEM OF GRADE INFLATION

---

The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit educational organization committed to academic freedom, excellence, and accountability. Founded by Lynne Cheney and former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm in 1995, ACTA has members from over 400 colleges and universities. Its quarterly publication, *Inside Academe*, goes to over 12,000 readers, including 3,500+ college and university trustees.

# Degraded Currency:

## THE PROBLEM OF GRADE INFLATION

American Council of Trustees and Alumni

*“Students tend to select courses with teachers who grade leniently, often learning less along the way. Uneven grading practices allow students to manipulate their grade point averages and honors status by selecting certain courses, and discourage them from taking courses that would benefit them. By rewarding mediocrity, excellence is discouraged.”*

– VALEN E. JOHNSON, PROFESSOR OF STATISTICS  
DUKE UNIVERSITY

By George C. Leef

October 2003

## Degraded Currency: The Problem of Grade Inflation

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 high grade average shrinks. Having an A average when only 10% of the student body has an A average is indicative of strong academic achievement, but having an A average when half of the student body has one is far less so. If grades are heavily clustered at the top, it is not possible to know which students have done outstanding work and which are just average.

Grade inflation has been widely discussed over the last two decades. Many observers have found that it is pronounced, widespread, and properly a matter of concern for those who govern America's colleges and universities. A few, however, have said that grade inflation either has not occurred or is not really a problem.

This study will consider the following questions:

- Is grade inflation real?
- If it is real, why does it occur?
- Are there reasons to be concerned about grade inflation?
- What can colleges and universities do to reduce or eliminate grade inflation?



## Is grade inflation real?

Grade inflation has been studied by researchers at numerous colleges and universities. We begin our analysis by surveying the extant research.

### *Studies at individual colleges and universities*

Grade data has been compiled at many colleges and universities—public and private, research and liberal arts. With only a few exceptions, persistent grade inflation is shown to have occurred.

Professor Jackson Toby studied grade distributions at Rutgers University at wide intervals: 1951, 1971, and 1991. He found that in 1951, 13% of the grades given were A's and 29% were B's. That is, 42% of the grades given were in the top categories. By 1971, 58% of the grades given were A's and B's, and by 1991, that percentage had climbed to 67%.<sup>1</sup>

Professors David Beito and Charles Nuckolls have studied the history of grades at the University of Alabama. Comparing A grades given during four semester periods in 1972 to 1974 and 2000 to 2002, they found that professors were awarding almost 38% more A's in the recent period than in the earlier period. Taking the analysis a step further, they observed that the percentage of A's had risen in every school except the College of Engineering, and had increased the most in the College of Education, which awarded 166% more between 2000-2002, than 30 years earlier.<sup>2</sup>

At Indiana University, spring semester 1997 grades averaged 2.98, with 36% of all grades awarded being As, compared to 1983 grades, when the average was 2.76 and A grades were less than 28% of all grades.<sup>3</sup>

At Harvard, grade inflation has been a matter of national attention. In 2000, nearly half the grades assigned were A or A-minus. A report issued by the university disclosed that, whereas in 1985, 33.2% of grades had been A or A-minus, that percentage had risen to 48.5 by 2000.<sup>4</sup>

A faculty committee studying grading at Princeton found that in 1973, 30.7% of grades given were As. By 1997, that had risen to 42.5%.<sup>5</sup>

The mean GPA for seniors at the University of Arizona rose from 2.97 in 1991 to 3.10 in 1998.<sup>6</sup>

At Carleton College, GPAs rose from an average of 3.05 in 1978 to 3.35 in 2001.<sup>7</sup>

Grades at Dartmouth have risen from an average of 2.2 in 1958 to 3.33 in 2001.<sup>8</sup>

Grades at Duke have risen from an average of 2.79 in 1969 to 3.37 in 2001.<sup>9</sup>

At Georgia Tech, undergraduate GPAs have increased from 2.45 in 1972 to 2.86 in 2002.<sup>10</sup>

Undergraduate GPAs at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill rose from 2.39 in 1967 to 2.98 in 2001.<sup>11</sup>

Although grade inflation is widespread, it is not universal. At a few schools, the data show that grades have remained quite steady over time. At Cal

State-Hayward, the average GPA in 1980 was just the same as in 2000—2.99<sup>12</sup> and at Purdue, the grade average increased only slightly from 1976 to 2001, rising from 2.80 to 2.83.<sup>13</sup> But schools where grades have not been rising are quite rare.

On the basis of these and other studies, it is hard to disagree with Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley when they write, “Measures of average achievement are far from perfect, but the available evidence does support the proposition that grading has become more lenient since the 1960s. Higher average grades unaccompanied by proportionate increases in average levels of achievement defines grade inflation.”<sup>14</sup>

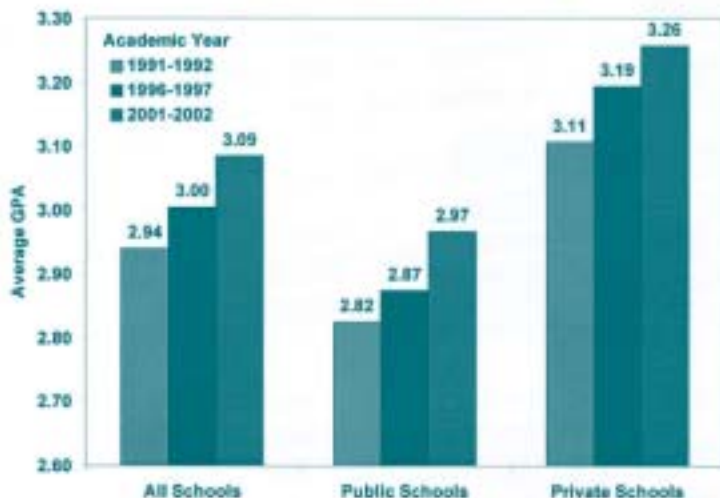
### *Studies across numerous colleges and universities*

In their study of grading, Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton examined data from 4,900 undergraduate students across a wide range of institutions, comparing grades in 1969, 1976, and 1993. They found that the number of As given increased dramatically over that time period, from only 7% in 1969 to 26% in 1993. Conversely, the number of C grades fell by 66%.<sup>15</sup>

In another study, professors George Kuh and Shouping Hu analyzed data from more than 52,000 student surveys from the College Student Experience Questionnaire. They concluded that from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, grades had increased at every type of institution by more than a quarter point.<sup>16</sup>

Duke University professor Stuart Rojstaczer has compiled grade data from a wide cross-section of U.S. colleges and universities that show a steady rise over the last decade.

### Recent GPA Trends Nationwide\*



\*Average undergraduate GPA for Alabama, California-Irvine, Carleton, Duke, Florida, Georgia Tech, Hampden-Sydney, Harvard, Harvey Mudd, Nebraska-Kearney, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina-Greensboro, Northern Michigan, Pomona, Princeton, Purdue, Texas, University of Washington, Utah, Wheaton (Illinois), Winthrop, and Wisconsin-La Crosse. Note that inclusion in the average does not imply that an institution has significant inflation. Institutions comprising this average were chosen strictly because they have either published their data or have sent their data to the author on GPA trends over the last 11 years.

Last update, March 17, 2003

Source: [www.gradeinflation.com](http://www.gradeinflation.com), "Grade Inflation at American Colleges and Universities."

Prof. Rojstaczer concludes that, "The rise has continued unabated at virtually every school for which data are available."<sup>17</sup> His data leave no room for doubt that grade inflation is a nationwide trend, although it is more pronounced at some institutions than others.

Two studies, however, purport to find little or no grade inflation. In 1995, Department of Education researcher Clifford Adelman published a paper entitled *The New College Course Map and Transcript Files: Changes in Course-Taking and Achievement, 1972-1993*. Adelman concluded that, "Contrary to the widespread lamentations, grades actually declined slightly in the last two decades."<sup>18</sup> Adelman's analysis is problematic, however, since it includes grades from students enrolled in community colleges and vocational schools. The academic environment in those schools is different from that in four-year institutions and may account for Adelman's conclusion that



there was no grade inflation trend in the time period he studied. The Adelman study also gives only a snapshot of reported grades at one point in time. It tells the reader nothing about the trends in grading. Furthermore, Adelman's finding of an overall decline in grades is hard to credit in the face of evidence that, at school after school, grade averages have risen significantly.

The second study that has led some to declare grade inflation to be nonexistent is another Education Department paper, *Profile of Undergraduates in US Postsecondary Education Institutions, 1999, 2000*.<sup>19</sup> Based on 50,000 undergraduates at 900 institutions, the study does not calculate grade point averages, but rather breaks them down as students having received “Mostly As,” “As and Bs,” “Mostly Bs,” “Bs and Cs,” “Mostly Cs,” and “Ds or lower.” This method of classification is more general and less accurate than an actual calculation of grade averages. Furthermore, by looking only at grades from 1999 and 2000, the report fails to give more than a snapshot of grade distribution at a point in time. Nevertheless, even taking the data as presented in this study, the idea that low grades have become rare finds strong support. Among students at private four-year doctorate-granting schools, 60% of their transcripts show that they receive “Mostly As,” “As and Bs,” or “Mostly Bs.” That means that grades of C or lower have almost disappeared for a large majority of students. Among students at private four-year non-doctorate-granting schools, the figure is 59%. The figures are somewhat lower at public four-year schools—56% at doctorate granting universities and 42% at non-doctorate granting universities. *Profile of Undergraduates* therefore does not weaken the argument that grades have been inflating, but strengthens it by showing that As and Bs have become the predominant grades at our four-year colleges and universities.

The evidence on grade inflation leads strongly to the conclusion that, at most institutions, grades have been rising steadily.

## Why does grade inflation occur?

Why grade inflation occurs is a question to which there is no one right answer. Several explanations have been advanced, and there is at least some degree of truth in each.

### *Pressure to keep students content*

Probably the most common explanation for grade inflation is that it stems from the “consumer culture” that has spread widely throughout our higher education system. That is to say, students believe that when they enroll in a college or university, they are engaging in just another consumer transaction. They are “buying” (even if mostly with other people’s money) an item they want—a degree—and expect to receive it with as little inconvenience as if they were buying new shoes or a compact disk.

That students would like their college experience to be rather enjoyable and easy is nothing new. However, the great expansion of colleges and universities that has occurred over the last 50 years has left many schools extremely hungry for students. They are more concerned about keeping enrollments up than maintaining academic standards, and thus favor policies that tend to keep students content—grade inflation among them. Professor Murray Sperber writes that many schools and departments “pressure faculty to fill their classes with as many students as possible to generate as many tuition dollars as possible. What better way to please students than by giving them high grades for little work?”<sup>20</sup>

Professor J. E. Stone concurs in that explanation, arguing that grade inflation and weakened academic standards “seem likely to have developed as a result of the continuing insidious pressure placed on teaching and grading practices by the imperative to keep students happy and enrollments up.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Student evaluations**

The pressure for high grades is accentuated by the increasingly prevalent student evaluation. In most colleges and universities, students are asked to write evaluations of the instructor at the end of the course. Naturally, there is a relationship between the evaluations students write and the degree to which they perceive the instructor as lenient and entertaining. In his book *Generation X Goes to College*, Peter Sacks (a pseudonym) writes about his experience in teaching journalism. Initially, he tried to teach a serious course, rigorously critiquing his students’ work, and grading them according to their performance—which was mostly poor. For his efforts, he received blistering student evaluations. The result was a memo from the faculty committee “informing me that its favorable recommendation for tenure would be impossible unless there was significant improvement in my student evaluations.”<sup>22</sup> Sacks therefore undertook what he called the “sandbox experiment,” making his course far less rigorous, adding a lot of entertainment, and grading leniently. His evaluations were dramatically better that term.

A study done at the University of Washington supports the idea that fear of bad student evaluations leads to higher grades. Gerald Gillmore, director of the university’s office of educational assessment, stated that, “Our research has confirmed what critics of student ratings have long suspected, that grading leniency affects ratings. All other things being equal, a professor can get higher ratings by giving higher grades.” The study also found that professors who teach inherently demanding courses in science, math, and engineering “are often penalized with undeservedly low ratings.”<sup>23</sup>

Not all professors are intimidated by negative student evaluations, but many, especially those without tenure, are. Like Professor Sacks, they seek to obtain good evaluations from students by grading leniently and reducing the intellectual rigor of their courses.

### *Avoiding extra work and conflict*

Easy grading not only helps professors to be more popular with students, thus leading to better evaluations, but it also is a way of avoiding conflict. Giving a student a poor grade can bring about unpleasant repercussions for a professor. As Prof. Sperber writes, “If a professor actually flunks a student, or allows a TA [teaching assistant] to do so, that faculty member must have documentation to justify the F, not only that student’s papers and exams throughout the course—all carefully marked, with each grade fully explained—but, for comparison, samples of the work of other students in the course who earned similar and higher grades, also thoroughly marked.”<sup>24</sup>

Harvard instructor William Cole observes that not only does a professor avoid additional work by giving only “good” grades, he also avoids the unpleasantness that comes from facing students and parents who are upset over a low grade. “We are rarely called to account for awarding an A, while anyone who fails a student must be prepared to back up the grade with solid evidence, such as carefully graded exams and papers. Even C’s and D’s are likely to elicit irate calls from students, their advisers, and sometimes their parents.”<sup>25</sup>

In earlier less litigious times, grading was not subject to the intense scrutiny that it now is. Professors could assign the grades they thought students deserved without worrying that they would be called upon to prove that the low grades were justified. Today, however, some students will challenge low grades and time-consuming, quasi-judicial procedures can follow. That possibility is enough to make professors hesitant to give low grades. They know that they can spare themselves much time and trouble by giving only A’s and B’s.

## *Changes in curriculum and academic policies*

Changes in college policies have also helped to bring about grade inflation. Curricular changes are part of that. At many schools, demanding courses (for example, calculus and chemistry) are no longer required. As schools have moved away from the idea of a core curriculum and allow students more and more leeway in choosing their courses, one consequence has been grade inflation. Instead of struggling to earn a C in calculus, for example, students can now choose an easy A in a course like “History of Rock Music,” and many do.

Also, changes in academic policies have pushed grade averages upwards. For instance, permitting students to drop courses in a semester enables them to bail out (with a “W” grade) when they are doing poorly in a course. Likewise, “grade forgiveness” policies allow students to retake courses and have the first grade expunged.

Rosovsky and Hartley explain that:

Certain curricular requirements, for example, foreign language, mathematics, and science, were abandoned by many schools in the 1960s, giving students the opportunity to avoid difficult courses that were less suited to their abilities. Many colleges and universities adopted freer distribution requirements, which gave students increased control over their curriculum and allowed them to avoid more demanding courses and the risk of a poor grade.<sup>26</sup>

While changes in college policies help to explain why grades would tend to inflate for a few years, they don’t help to account for continuing grade inflation long after their adoption. If the curriculum were eased, grade replacement instituted and a liberal drop policy adopted at a college, let us say in 1985, one would expect to see a rise in grades for a few years afterward, but these measures would be so ingrained in the system by the 1990s that they would not explain continuing grade inflation in that decade.



## *The watering-down of courses*

In response to the increased inflow of poorly prepared and academically indifferent students, many professors have chosen to water down the content of their courses. Professor Paul Trout writes, “Once colleges and universities accept cohorts of disengaged high-school graduates, they are obliged to manage the problem in much the same way as high schools did: fewer demanding courses, lighter workloads, easier assignments and tests, and more high grades (to satisfy students, improve course evaluations, and hide the decline of standards from the public).”<sup>27</sup> When professors do that, even if students earn their As, having mastered less content and having performed well on simplified tests, their grades are inflated compared to students who earned As or even lower grades prior to the lowering of academic standards.

## *Hostility to the concept of grading*

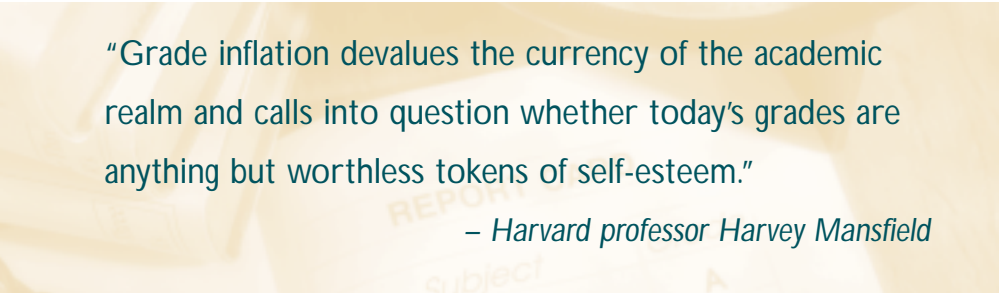
A significant percentage of faculty members are now hostile to the very concept of grading. Some hold to an egalitarian philosophy that makes them unwilling to draw distinctions among student performances. Others adhere to what may be called a “post-modern” philosophy of grading, neatly summed up by Thomas C. Kerr of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee:

[T]he act of grading writing is merely a repressive act, an exquisite expression of a patriarchal violence that suppresses significant difference, discourages different orders (e.g., non-hierarchical, non-dominant/subordinate), silences marginal voices, inhibits creative risk taking, and is, from my ... “relativist” viewpoint, responsible for the fact that 60 to 80 per cent of the college writing students I poll each semester “strongly dislike” or “hate” English classes.<sup>28</sup>

Even if they accept the grading system, many academics simply refuse to assign low grades. To give a low grade, even if the student has done few of the assignments and demonstrates little comprehension of the subject mat-

ter, is seen as unconscionable if it will jeopardize graduation plans or post-graduate ambitions. Some professors believe that low grades are inherently harmful because they reduce the students' self-esteem and willingness to continue their studies.

Particularly in the arts and humanities, many professors have come to embrace the view that a crucial part of their work is to make sure that all students "succeed." If, as seems to be the case, an anti-grading philosophy is prevalent among the faculty, one would expect grade inflation.



"Grade inflation devalues the currency of the academic realm and calls into question whether today's grades are anything but worthless tokens of self-esteem."

– *Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield*

## Is grade inflation a problem?

Should we be concerned about grade inflation? Does it merit our attention and call for some corrective action? Or should we regard it with indifference?

### *The benign view*

One school of thought denies that grade inflation is a problem, arguing that grades *should* be rising. Alfie Kohn, for example, contends that students entering college have had rising SAT scores since 1985 and therefore concludes that grade inflation is warranted. Kohn writes, “Every bit of evidence I could find—including a review of the SAT scores of entering students at Harvard over the past two decades, at the nation’s most selective colleges over three and even four decades, and at all private colleges since 1985—uniformly confirms a virtually linear rise in both verbal and math scores, even after correcting for the renorming of the test in the mid-1990s.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, in Kohn’s view, grade inflation is benign. There are several problems with this argument, however.

Even if it is true that SAT scores have risen somewhat at *the most selective colleges*, they have not risen among college students in general. Economist Bruce Bartlett writes, “According to the College Entrance Examination Board, the average combined score on the Scholastic Assessment Test (formerly known as the Scholastic Aptitude Test) has fallen from 1059 in 1967 to 1020 in 2002. However, this greatly understates the magnitude of the

decline because in 1995 the SAT was ‘renormed.’ In practice, this statistical legerdemain added 100 points to everyone’s score—76 points to the verbal score and 24 points to the math score.”<sup>30</sup> SAT scores for college students generally have not been rising, and we witness grade inflation at selective schools and also at the far larger number of non-selective ones. Grade inflation cannot be explained away by attributing it to rising student SAT scores.

Furthermore, SAT scores are not necessarily a good barometer of college readiness and willingness to work. One often hears comments from professors that their students are very resistant to doing more than the bare minimum of reading and studying, and statistics on student study time bear that out. The National Survey of Student Engagement, released in November 2002, found that only 12% of freshmen at four-year colleges report that they spend 26 hours or more per week preparing for classes, while 63% say that they spend 15 hours or fewer on class preparation, and 19% report that they spend only one to five hours.<sup>31</sup> The amount of study time students have been putting in has been dropping for years. According to “The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 2001,” the amount of time spent studying has dropped steadily since 1987 when the survey was begun.<sup>32</sup>

Not only do students spend a low and decreasing amount of time studying, but there is also reason to believe that the rigor of the assigned work has been falling as well. Comments Professor John Gardner, executive director of Brevard College’s Center on the First Year of College, “I believe today that many of us on the faculty are asking less of students than we were 35 or 40 years ago. We give them less to read, we give them less to write, we test them less frequently.”<sup>33</sup>

One study even finds that today’s college graduates do not outshine high school graduates of 1955 in general cultural knowledge.<sup>34</sup>

The contention that grade inflation is warranted because we have brighter-than-ever students in college, excelling as never before, is the reverse of the

truth. Today's college students are not better prepared for post-secondary studies than were students of a generation or more ago; they do not work as hard; and they are given less challenging material. Grade inflation cannot be defended as a response to rising levels of student achievement.

### ***Grade inflation is harmful.***

Many commentators argue that grade inflation is harmful, giving a number of reasons.

The problem that most observers see with grade inflation is that it undermines the very purpose of having a grading system—to distinguish among students who have excelled and truly mastered the material from those who have merely done well, and from those who have demonstrated only adequate comprehension or less. Grading is a feedback system, telling students how well they have done in comparison with some objective standard, their fellow students, or both. A good feedback system, however, must convey both good results and bad when they are deserved. It ill serves students and those who may employ them in the future to say that they have done excellent work when they have not. Bradford Wilson, executive director of the National Association of Scholars, sums the point up: “A student's grade should accurately inform all who know of it—most important, the student—of his or her degree of mastery of an academic subject. In scholarly work, mastery is rarely if ever achieved. To be objective and informative, then—that is, to be truthful—a grade should tell us where a student's work stands in relation to the varied quality of student work generally.”<sup>35</sup>

A grading system with little capacity to discriminate between students who have done extremely well and those who have learned little or nothing poses a problem for institutions that need to make choices among graduates. If grade averages become unreliable as indicators of effort and achievement, businesses will have to find other and probably more costly ways of distinguishing between job applicants whom they want to consider seriously and those whom they think would not fit in with their organization. The



same problem confronts graduate and professional schools. If almost every applicant looks like a “good student,” admissions officers will have to institute other methods of screening out those who may have a hard time with the academic workload.

A second problem caused by grade inflation is that of unfairness. If all grades are compressed into A's and B's, as is the trend, then there is little difference between the grade received by a student who has worked to achieve a very high degree of comprehension of a subject, and a student who has exerted minimal effort and is content with a vague and incomplete understanding of the subject. Just treatment is denied to high-achieving students when they are not given grades that reflect their superior work.

The unfairness of grade inflation manifests itself in another way, too. If objective measures of student achievement fall by the wayside, it will lead to increased reliance on non-objective ways of evaluating students. Rosovsky and Hartley point out that, “It is certain that a diminution in the use of grades increases the relative weight of informal evaluations, and thus being in the proper network may become more valuable than personal achievement. As a matter of fairness, society should have an interest in counteracting this trend.”<sup>36</sup> That is to say, if it becomes harder for students to show excellence because they earn superior grades, then there will be a tendency for business interviewers and grad school admission committees to rely on “connections” instead. That is detrimental to individuals from families lacking those “connections.”

A third problem is closely related to the second—motivation. The quest for high grades and the fear of bad ones is a strong motivator for many students. When it is known that bad grades are almost never given, the natural tendency among students is to relax. If the hardest of work will get you an A, but the least amount gets you a B, many students will take the B (along with the great increase in leisure time). Consider the attitude of the Harvard student discussed in this article: “When Yann Kumin, a sophomore at Harvard, received a B on a recent 10-page term paper, he felt that he did

not deserve that good a grade. Mr. Kumin, 19, said he had spent little time on the assignment, which he submitted in one of the core courses that is required of all Harvard undergraduates. 'I know I can do minimal work in some classes and get good grades,' said Mr. Kumin, a history major. . . ."<sup>37</sup> Where grade inflation has settled in, effort tends to drop off. Students are content to do minimal work because there is little to be gained from putting out their best effort. The ethos of excellence in education is undermined if professors cannot recognize distinctions between work that shows mastery of the subject matter and work that shows that the student is only willing to do the bare minimum.

A fourth problem occurs due to the fact that grade inflation tends not to be uniform. Grade inflation has been most pronounced in the humanities, history, English and other fields where grading is more subjective. It has been least pronounced in fields where there are right and wrong answers, particularly mathematics, engineering, and the physical sciences. Faculty members in those fields have been much less inclined to go along with the "everyone deserves a good grade" idea. In their report on grade inflation at the University of Alabama, for example, professors Beito and Nuckolls found that only in the College of Engineering had there been no grade inflation over the time period studied.<sup>38</sup> Duke University statistics professor Valen Johnson found the same pattern at Duke, where the difference between the most leniently graded department and the most stringently graded department was almost a full letter grade (3.69 in music versus 2.91 in math).<sup>39</sup>

Once students come to perceive that grading is much easier in some academic disciplines than others, one would expect a shift towards those with the easier grading. Some students who would have enrolled in math and science-oriented courses will avoid them, anticipating both more work and a lower eventual grade. Professor Johnson explains that "Different grading philosophies among disciplines can potentially create shifts in enrollments—specifically, from natural sciences and mathematics to the humanities."<sup>40</sup> At the same time, grade inflation probably hinders the objective of producing students who have a truly broad, general education, since some

key parts of that general education lie within the academic fields where grade inflation is not prevalent.

Finally, grade inflation creates a strong incentive for students to enroll in courses taught by professors who are known to be easy graders. Beito and Nuckolls write, “The system creates perverse incentives for students to ‘shop around’ for professors who have reputations for giving ‘easy As’ and serves to degrade the efforts of those students who might otherwise take ‘harder’ courses.”<sup>41</sup> Indeed, if “everyone” gives As and B’s, the instructor who assigns C’s and D’s or actually fails students will face considerable resistance.

Grade inflation cannot be explained away as a result of more capable students entering college. And it leads to significant problems. We must therefore ask what remedies are possible.



## What can be done?

Grade inflation is a very difficult problem with which to deal. It is deeply rooted in much of our academic culture, and also appears to suit the self-interest of colleges, professors, and students alike. Nevertheless, there are steps that concerned parties can take to lessen or eliminate grade inflation.

### *Adopt a school average gradepoint and enforce it.*

Schools can adopt a policy that puts a ceiling on grades by setting an institutional average and then insisting that professors not exceed that average in their classes. Duke University Law School, for example, has for many years held to a school average gradepoint. While that average itself has inflated somewhat over the last 30 years (it was 2.7 in the early 1970s, but has been raised to 3.1 now), the policy does stop professors from undermining the grading system by giving out all high grades. The way the system works is that professors are told that they must keep their class grade averages to no higher than 3.1. If a professor should fail to observe the rule, the administration will return his grades to him with instructions to make adjustments so that the average is not exceeded.

That approach halts grade inflation so long as the school holds to its established average. Also, by communicating to students that the policy exists and will be enforced, the school can dampen the students' expectations of easy As. Once students know that the number of As is necessarily limited,

they will realize that they must work and outperform classmates in order to earn an A.

***Report more information than just the final grade.***

Several schools, including Columbia, Dartmouth, Indiana, and Eastern Kentucky have adopted a policy of providing more information than just the student's final grade. The idea is to give people who will evaluate students a means of comparing their grades with those of other students, thus enabling them to see whether high grades are indicative of exceptional achievement, or are simply the norm. Dartmouth now includes on each student's transcript the size of the class and the median grade for all students. Anyone who wants to get a clear picture of a student's ability can discern whether high grades demonstrate outstanding ability, or are usual in the classes offered.

That policy does not stop grade inflation, but does help to unmask it.

***Change the grading system.***

If the existing grading system seems to be completely compromised, the best course might be to try something entirely different. Rosovsky and Hartley suggest that "a reduction in the range of grades from A through E to a simpler honors, pass, and fail might perhaps help reestablish 'pass' as the average."<sup>42</sup>

***Discuss grade inflation, emphasizing that it is a problem.***

Even without any change in school policy, Central Michigan University has had success in arresting grade inflation merely by letting faculty members and students know that it is of concern. In the 2000-2001 academic year, C.M.U. studied grade inflation on campus, finding that in some courses the grade average was 3.8 or above. Subsequently, the administration prepared a brochure on grade inflation, with sections aimed at students and faculty



members, and distributed it widely. Catherine Riordan, interim vice provost remarked, “People were genuinely shocked to learn about how serious a problem this was.” The following term, the mean gradepoint average decreased slightly at C.M.U., the first time it had declined in years.<sup>43</sup>

Grade inflation is akin to a bad habit and as this instance shows, people sometimes reign in their bad habits when they realize that others are watching. It may be useful, therefore, simply to have a campus conversation on grade inflation.

Beyond mere dialogue, campus leadership can make a difference. When deans, provosts, and department chairs let faculty know that low grades will not be penalized, it creates countervailing pressures for more honest grading.

### ***Allow professors to give two sets of grades.***

Harvard professor Harvey Mansfield has adopted a policy for his own courses of giving students two sets of grades. The first grade is the official grade that will go on the transcript. It reflects what Mansfield regards as the sad reality that high grades are expected. His second grade, however, informs the student what grade he actually *deserved* in the course. That policy allows the professor to be frank with the student. At least some students might be shocked out of their torpor if they knew that a professor would have graded their work as a D rather than the B that was officially given, for example. For reasons discussed above, most professors wouldn't want to do the additional work that this requires, but schools should at least make it clear that professors who choose to do so will not be reprimanded or have their chances for advancement impeded.



## Conclusion

Grade inflation is a reality. Across our higher education system, from the most prestigious research universities to the least selective of colleges, grades have been steadily rising for decades.

There are a number of reasons why that is true. Many schools have given in to the temptation to keep students happy rather than uphold solid academic standards. Professors feel that they need to “butter up” students with high grades so that they will receive nice evaluations from them in return. They also know that they may face time-consuming, rancorous procedures if they give students low grades, even if entirely deserved, and therefore refrain from doing so. Also, the ascendancy of the loose curriculum philosophy, allowing students to avoid having to take challenging and objectively graded courses, has contributed to grade inflation.

Grade inflation undermines the very purpose of grading—to distinguish among degrees of student achievement. By compressing all grades near the top, grade inflation obscures those distinctions, thereby deceiving future employers, future schools, and even the students themselves. Furthermore, grade inflation reduces student motivation and tends to steer students away from those academic fields where grade inflation has not occurred or is less pronounced.

Grade inflation can be stopped, but doing so will require a dedicated effort. College trustees and alumni can push for responses to the grade inflation epidemic by demanding a uniform grading policy or by insisting that grades be reported comparatively. Trustees can propose a change in the grading system, urge campus administrators to make clear that instructors will not be penalized for giving low grades, and encourage their institutions simply to focus attention on the problem.

In short, grade inflation undermines the integrity of a college education just as monetary inflation undermines a nation's economy. If a college education is to mean anything, institutions must return to honest grades. Inflated grades are degraded currency. Our students deserve better.

## Notes

1. Jackson Toby, "In War Against Grade Inflation, Dartmouth Scores a Hit," *Wall Street Journal*, 8 September 1994, p. A18.
2. Charles Nuckolls, Professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Alabama and Director, Alabama Scholars Association, and David Beito, Associate Professor, Department of History and President, Alabama Scholars Association, *Report on Grade Distortion at the University of Alabama*, August 2002. Available at <<http://www.alabamascholars.org>>.
3. George Kuh and Shouping Hu, "Unraveling the Complexity of the Increase in College Grades From the Mid-1980s to the Mid-1990s," *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 21, no. 3 (fall 1999): p. 297.
4. Associated Press, "As Soar at Harvard, Nearing a Majority," *New York Times*, 22 November 2001, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/11/22/education/22HARV.html>>.
5. Report of the faculty committee on examinations and standings on grade patterns at Princeton, February 5, 1998, cited in Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley, *Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?, Grade Inflation and Letters of Recommendation* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2002), p. 6.
6. Cited at [www.gradeinflation.com](http://www.gradeinflation.com), <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/arizona.html>>.

7. Ibid., <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/carleton.html>>.
8. Ibid., <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/dartmouth.html>>.
9. Ibid., <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/duke.html>>.
10. Ibid., <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/gtech.html>>.
11. Ibid., <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/carolina.html>>.
12. Ibid., <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/hayward.html>>.
13. Ibid., <<http://203.194.198.150/gradeinf/purdue.html>>.
14. Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley, *Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?, Grade Inflation and Letters of Recommendation* (Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 2002), p. 7.
15. Arthur Levine and Jeannette Cureton, *When Hope and Fear Collide: A Portrait of Today's College Student* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 125.
16. Kuh and Hu, op. cit., p. 301.
17. [www.gradeinflation.com](http://www.gradeinflation.com), compiled by Professor Stuart Rojstaczer
18. Clifford Adelman, quoted by Alfie Kohn in "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 November 2002, regarding his report for the National Institute on Postsecondary Education, Libraries, and Lifelong Learning, *The New College Course Map of Transcript Files: Changes in Course-Taking and Achievement, 1972-1993* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1995).
19. National Center for Education Statistics, *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1999-2000* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

20. Murray Sperber, *Beer and Circus* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2000), p. 119.
21. John E. Stone, The Andrew Jackson Institute, "Inflated Grades, Inflated Enrollment, and Inflated Budgets: An Analysis and Call for Review at the State Level," *Education Policy Analysis Archives* 3, no. 11 (June 26, 1995): p. 19. Available at <<http://olam.ed.asu.edu/epaa/v3n11.html>>.
22. Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), p. 52.
23. Anthony Greenwald and Gerald Gillmore, "No pain, no gain? The importance of measuring course workload in student ratings of instruction," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 89 (1997): pp.743-751.
24. Sperber, op. cit., p. 120.
25. William Cole, "The Perils of Grade Inflation," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 January 1993.
26. Rosovsky and Hartley, op. cit., p. 9.
27. Paul A. Trout, "Disengaged Students and the Decline of Academic Standards," *Academic Questions* 10, no. 2 (spring 1997): p. 50.
28. Thomas Kerr, instructor of English, University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, letter to the editor, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 27 January 1993.
29. Alfie Kohn, "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 8 November 2002.
30. Bruce Bartlett, "The Truth about Grade Inflation," <<http://www.townhall.com/columnists/brucebartlett/printbb20030130.shtml>>, January 30, 2003.

31. Jeffrey Young, "Homework? What Homework? Students seem to be spending less time studying than they used to," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 December 2002.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. National Association of Scholars, *Today's College Students and Yesteryear's High School Graduates: A Comparison of General Cultural Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ: National Association of Scholars, December 2002). Available online at <<http://www.nas.org/reports.html>>.
35. Bradford Wilson, Executive Director, National Association of Scholars, *Congressional Quarterly*, 7 June 2002, p. 515.
36. Rosovsky and Hartley, op. cit., p. 13.
37. Jacques Steinberg, "Woe is Harvard, Where All Are Above Average," *New York Times*, 5 December 2001.
38. Nuckolls and Beito, *Report on Grade Distortion at the University of Alabama*.
39. Valen Johnson, "An A Is an A Is an A ... And That's the Problem," *New York Times*, 14 April 2002.
40. Ibid.
41. Nuckolls and Beito, op. cit.
42. Rosovsky and Hartley, op. cit., p. 15.
43. Megan Rooney, "Central Michigan U. Administrators Describe a Small Victory in War on Grade Inflation," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 17 March 2003.

AMERICAN COUNCIL OF TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

DAVID RIESMAN  
*Honorary Chairman*  
(1996-2002)

LYNNE V. CHENEY  
*Chairman Emeritus*

RICHARD D. LAMM  
*Vice Chairman*

JACQUES BARZUN  
SAUL BELLOW  
WILLIAM J. BENNETT  
CHESTER E. FINN, JR.  
GEORGIE ANNE GEYER  
IRVING KRISTOL  
HANS MARK  
MARTIN PERETZ  
LAURENCE H. SILBERMAN  
WILLIAM K. TELL, JR.  
CURTIN WINSOR, JR.

HERMAN B. WELLS  
(1995-1998)

JERRY L. MARTIN  
*Chairman*

ANNE D. NEAL  
*President*

BARRY LATZER  
*Director, Higher Education Policy*

ROXANA D. BURRIS  
*Vice President*

LAURI KEMPSON  
*Administrative Director*



**American Council of Trustees and Alumni**

1726 M Street, NW, Suite 800

Washington, DC 20036

Telephone: 202-467-6787; 1-888-ALUMNI-8

Facsimile: 202-467-6784

Email: [info@goacta.org](mailto:info@goacta.org); Website: [www.goacta.org](http://www.goacta.org)

\$9.95