GRADE INFLATION:

AN APPRAISAL OF THE RESEARCH

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Concerns about grade inflation, particularly but not exclusively in higher education, have resounded since the early 1970s. The problems remain today and many institutions have become grade-inflation conscious as never before.

The documented increase in grades in the past four decades is a complex, wide spread, though not necessarily uniform phenomenon, affecting to varying degrees all types of institutions and major fields. Within the university and college system, no single department, faculty, or type of institution holds a monopoly on grade inflation. However, grade inflation is prominent in the humanities (Shea, 1994), rife in faculties of education.

Indeed, education is one of the fields where the trend is particularly pronounced (Lanning and Perkins, 1995; Zirkel, 1999). For example, a U.S. national survey or urban, non-residential institutions found that education and the arts typically were high-grading departments, with physical sciences and mathematics low-grading departments (Summerville, Ridley, and Maris, 1990). Two 1980 studies at the University of Texas at Austin and Ohio State University each revealed a dramatically higher average grade in the education college as compared to the other colleges (Oldinquist, 1983). In a different four-year study, researchers (Sommerville, Ridley, and Maris, 1990), found that five departments (led by education) awarded grades that were, on the average, more than 0.10 grade points higher than those earned by the same students at the same time in other departments.

Some schools are relenting to grade inflation rather than fighting it; more are battling the trend. Administrators are viewing rampant grade inflation as an assault on the principles of the academy. To many professors, it seems that the goals of an increasing number of students is to receive higher grades with the least amount of time and effort possible (Chadwick and Ward, 1987) and dialogue on the problem, if not any effective or universal resolution, is taking place. In the wider domain, declining resources and more strident public demands for accountability compels higher education to validate the effectiveness of its educational programs.

Not everyone agrees that grades are inflated or that average grades are higher today than in the past (see e.g., Adelman, 1995). And, even if average grades have increased, the phenomenon of grade inflation is “grossly exaggerated” (Becker, 1996, p.

xiii). Skeptics contend that grades still differentiate among students, while ability and motivation remain key factors in accounting for the variance in grades. Moreover, those assailing high grades may have overlooked salient factors. To wit: high marks may be the result of good teaching and significant student effort; teaching and learning in the past was more rote and receiving a higher grade was more difficult; and professors in the past, hired for content knowledge or research excellence, may not have communicated as effectively with students as do faculty today.

Nevertheless, the objective of this paper is to examine what has generally become accepted wisdom; namely, that grade inflation is endemic in North American colleges and universities. If inflation occurs, it is also necessary to search for its sources, as well as examine the implications and solutions.

To undertake this study, a sample of the literature on grade inflation spanning the three decades from 1970 was used. Many studies are empirical reports that affect neutrality in reporting. Others assume a moral stance. Mansfield (2001), for example, observes that "The grades that faculty members now give . . . deserve to be a scandal" (p. 1).

The problem

Problems of grade inflation overlapped and followed an expansionary period in higher edu outcome of several surveys and the resulting negative publicity, there was greater awareness of the problem and the trend then seemed to be toward slightly lower grades (Bramley, Crow, and Gibson, 1978). A resurgence of concern emerged in the mid-to-late 1980s, concurrent with public concern for enhancing the quality of education (Lanning and Perkins, 1995) and with the movement of more corporate ideals into academe. Today, even in the face of declining research and some evidence to suggest a leveling off of the rate of grade inflation (Mullen, 1995), the problem has reemerged to become the subject of intensive research and reporting.

Grade inflation has been defined in a number of ways from varied perspectives. In general, inflation implies that grades are raised due to an artificial increase independent of academic effort or student characteristics such as ability or motivation. The phenomenon can be seen as the upward drift of grades or "an unwarranted number of students ... receiving honors" (Summerville, Ridley, and Maris, 1990, p. 33). It occurs

when there is a maldistribution of grades characterized by an excess of As and Bs in a class (Shoemaker and DeVos, 1999). It is also defined as an increase in grade point average without an increase in ability (Bejar and Blew, 1981; Hadley and Vitale, 1985) and occurs "when a grade is viewed as being less rigorous than it ought to be" (Mullen, 1995, p.2) and when instructors provide falsely favourable feedback (Zirkel, 1999).

Some writers dispute the term *grade inflation* and prefer *grade compression* (e.g., Cizek, 1996; Hancher, 1994). Cizek (1996) contends that because there is no higher grade than an A, As remain As, but Bs become As, Cs become Bs, and so on. The result is that it takes less to achieve an A, there are almost no failures, the majority of grades are As and Bs, and the C grade, which normally signifies average, has virtually disappeared. For example, Levine (1994) in his study of 4900 undergraduate students' GPAs found that grade of C had dropped by approximately two-thirds, despite evidence that the academic ability of students had not increased. At the same time, student GPAs of A- or higher had "almost quadrupled from 1969 to 1993" (Levine, 1994, p. B3). Ontario researchers found a drop in the number of students getting low grades in most courses, and an increase in the number getting high grades (Frank, 2001). And obviously, as high-achieving students can earn no better than an A, it is students of lower ability who are experiencing the highest rate of grade increase (McSpirit and Jones, 1999).

The causes of grade inflation

Little data support the speculations about the root causes of grade inflation. Lack of unity of opinion reflects conflicting views regarding whether grade inflation (or compression) actually exists; whether reports are exaggerated; whether it is an issue of true concern; and the causes, implications, and solutions.

It seems that multiple factors work simultaneously to produce the increase in grades. The following details the varied, occasionally contradictory, and often overlapping, proposed causes. To order the data, the suggested causes are grouped into categories loosely based on Birnbaum's (1977) explanations for grade inflation: institutional change; student demography; changes in grading policy; faculty behaviour; and curriculum changes.

Institutional change

- *New models of governance*. In many areas of contemporary academia, the discourses are underlaid by different assumptions and agendas than in the past. As corporate models replace traditional modes of university governance, corporate doyens speak to bureaucratic efficiency, service provision, and accountability, modes that are in opposition to academic discussions of intellectual stimulation and the creation of informed citizens.
- *The size of an institution*. While the problem of grade inflation is ubiquitous, Zirkel (1999) reports that "many prestigious undergraduate institutions are leading rather than resisting the trend" (p. 249). Average grades at the most selective colleges are higher than at less selective schools (Adelman, 1999), a problem which Zirkel (1999) attributes to "A self-reinforcing sense of superiority and arrogance at the top-tier institutions" (p. 252).

At Harvard, the proportion of undergraduate grades of A- or higher increased from 22 percent in 1966 to 43 percent in 1991 (Lambert, 1993). Today, at Harvard, half of undergraduate grades are As (Mansfield, 2001). At Princeton, the proportion of students with As and Bs increased from 69.2 percent in 1973 to 1977 to 83.3 percent in 1992 to 1997 (Archibold, 1998). Currently, at Princeton, 80 percent of undergraduates receive nothing but As and Bs (Zirkel, 1999). At Dartmouth College, Pedersen (1997) reports that GPAs have increased from 3.06 to 3.23 in a 26 year period. At Duke University, the mean GPA rose from 2.7 in 1969 to 3.3 in 1996 (Gose, 1997a). Stanford University has reinstated the F grade, eliminated in 1970, after it was determined that 93 percent of recorded grades were As and Bs (Pedersen, 1997).

At the same time, grade inflation is a concern within smaller or less selective colleges and subject in a twenty year period, though some subjects were inflated more than others and widely different grading standards apply within a univeristy (Anglin and Meng, 2000; Frank, 2001). The trend toward grade inflation at the upper end of the marking scheme was in English, French, music, and biology. At the other end of the spectrum, most of the inflation was accounted for by fewer fails being assigned in many of the

sciences, including chemistry, math, and economics, although they too experienced some increase in the proportion of As (Frank, 2001).

- *Funding*. A focus on admissions, retention, graduation rates, and student achievement can make institutions overly image conscious. Schools, driven by enrolments, view students as valued customers who believe that good grades are essential to future success. Schools fear that raising academic standards would place them at a disadvantage with schools that do not do so, thus reinforcing the competition among marginal and mainstream colleges and universities to attract and retain students.
- *Student evaluations*. Only about 30 percent of institutions used student evaluations in 1973 (Wilson, 1998). Today, student ratings have gained widespread acceptance as a measure of teaching effectiveness in North American colleges and universities. Almost all post-secondary institutions have some sort of plan for student evaluations of teaching effectiveness, which generally refers to the degree to which a teacher facilitates students to achieve educational goals (McKeachie, 1986). Even when other data are available, student evaluations are assumed to be a better measure of teaching effectiveness because only students observe the professor throughout a course (Howard, Conway, and Maxwell, 1985). Results of student evaluations are used both as diagnostic feedback to instructors and as evidence in decisions on faculty retention, tenure, and promotion (Murray, 1988).

Some writers (e.g., Lichty, Vose, and Peterson, 1978; Zangenehzadeh, 1988) assume that student evaluations of faculty are among the main factors generating grade inflation. Correa (2001) concluded that excessive reliance on student evaluations is indeed likely to reduce academic standards and student achievement and to promote grade inflation. Trout (1997a) contends that "course evaluations contribute significantly to grade inflation in a dumbed-down curriculum" (p. 51). In a US national survey of deans of colleges of education and of colleges of arts and sciences, over 70 percent of the respondents agreed that the use of student evaluation as a consideration for promotion and tenure was a major reason for grade inflation (Nelson and Lynch, 1984).

It seems that the beginnings of grade inflation paralleled student clamour for more say in their education. It was also in the mid-1970s that the terms of the compact

between faculty and their institutions shuffled as the ideals of corporate America moved into academe. Evaluation of faculty by students emerged as one response. Evaluations allowed students more involvement in their education. Once in place, corporate tacticians could impose draconian standards for tenure and promotion, in part by elevating student evaluations to a primary role. Hence, Murray (1988) reports that while students believe that their evaluations are largely ignored, many faculty members believe that the use of student ratings in personnel decisions causes teachers to inflate grades and weaken instructional content in an attempt to buy positive evaluations from students.

A body of early research on student ratings concluded generally that ratings provide reliable and valid information on instructor effectiveness (e.g., Costen, Greenough, and Menges, 1971). Other studies questioned the effectiveness of student evaluations noting that they "have only modest agreement with some criteria of effective teaching" (Marsh, 1984, p. 749). In addition, the question of biasing influences on student objectivity was inconclusive (see Stumpf and Freedman, 1979). Variables which may impair the validity of student ratings are multiple and include gender, grading leniency, course difficulty, instructor popularity, student interest, course workload, class size, reasons for taking the course, and students' GPAs (see Blunt, 1991). Today, with the increased emphasis on the use of student evaluations for critical personnel decisions, less sanguine results are emerging. Research finds that instructors' evaluations of students, among other variables, are a source of contamination of student ratings of instructor performance (Blunt, 1991; Chacko, 1983; Stumpf and Freedman, 1979).

It is now well established that students' evaluative ratings of instruction correlate positively with expected course grades (Greenwald and Gillmore, 1997); studies in various disciplines have shown a significant correlation between student ratings of instructors and the grades expected by students (e.g., Cashin, 1988; Goldberg and Callahan, 1991; Hudson, 1989). A study of the University of Washington, for example, found that professors who were easy graders received better student evaluations than did professors who were tougher (Archibold, 1998; Wilson, 1998). Similarly, Brodie's 1998 correlational study of 1,939 student evaluations from 75 first-year university classes representing 15 disciplines found that even though grading leniency decreases

learning, easy courses received high student evaluations. As well, in different laboratory experiments researchers (Perkins, Guerin, and Schleh, 1990; Snyder and Clair, 1976) found that students who were randomly assigned higher grades rated the professor higher than students who were assigned lower grades.

Certainly, undergraduates can be sincere in their comments, offering praise and acknowledgement. However, Lundrum (1999) found that students do not discriminate well between evaluating the course, the instructor, and their own performance. Sometimes, their comments reflect personal items, not teaching, or are used to punish a professor (see Wilson, 1998) particularly in light of the new wave of students who are quick to criticize high grading standards (Trout, 1998).

Brodie (1998) states that "by themselves high student evaluations do *not* indicate that a professor is an effective teacher" (p. 17, original punctuation). Nevertheless, despite intense disagreements over whether student evaluations actually address teaching effectiveness, they are widely used by administrators to judge faculty so that student evaluations of teaching impact seriously on the institutional reward system. When rigorous learning and assessment is equated with professional shortcomings, rigorous graders can become casualties of a system where the stress has become keeping the customer satisfied. If faculty are pressured to conform to student expectations, or face retribution, grade inflation may emerge.

- *Instructor workload*. Many universities and colleges have initiated exacting standards for promotion and tenure, which imitate top tier research universities but have teaching demands that mirror those of community colleges. In institutions where large class sizes are encouraged, work load may be a factor. When classes are excessively large, or a faculty member has multiple teaching, service, and scholarly commitments, the time spent on the evaluation of students' performance may be compromised (Rieck, 1993).

Student demography

- *Students are better today*. Some debate surrounds whether higher grades are the result of better-prepared college entrants or grade inflation. Many researchers dispute whether students are better prepared. On the contrary. And because a significant

increase in grade averages apparently fails to represent an actual increase in learning, we must assume that higher grades are a result of grade inflation (Basinger, 1997).

We will not rehearse here the data on grade inflation at the secondary school level (see e.g., Casas and Meaghan, 1995; Harvey, 1995; Stanley, Sale, and Kim, 2001) but point out only that the problems are endemic at this level which then confounds college and university entrance criteria. Critics argue that public schools have lowered standards, expect less, and work to allay student anxieties and create interest rather than achievement. Moreover, a sense of entitlement to good grades begins early with the enhanced expectations of parents and students as a result of grade inflation at the high school level. It is difficult for students to work hard, or for the professor to get them to work hard, when students know that their chances of getting an A or A- are 50-50.

Critics of the "better-prepared" stance hold that current students possess on average no greater capacity than did students in the past, but actually demonstrate less mastery of basic education skills - less ability to read, write, think and calculate — than did their counterparts generations ago (Leo, 1993; Wingspread Group cited in Stone, 1995). Indeed, according to Levine (1994), indicators actually point to a decline in college students' academic ability since 1969.

Nor does it appear that students expend more academic effort or are more highly motivated today than in the past. Academic effort is the amount of time and quality of effort students devote to such academic tasks such as studying, writing, reading, using the library, and interacting with faculty (Kuh and Hu, 1999, p. 299). In a major study of more than 52,000 students from 112 institutions in two time periods, the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, Kuh and Hu (1999) found that grades appear to still reliably distinguish among students in terms of academic effort. However, the absolute amount of efforts students devote on average to academics may have suffered somewhat. That is, the amount of time students devote to their studies in high school and college is down and they are widely believed to be not as well prepared for college as previous cohorts (Astin, 1998; Gose, 1998).

- *Student expectations*. Many of today's students believe "that grades are more important for success in life than acquired knowledge, the ability to learn throughout a

lifetime; and hard work on campus" (Wingspread Group, 1993, p. 20). On this theme, Kohn (1999) observes that "The proper occasion for outrage is not that too many students are gettings A's, but that too many students have been led to believe that getting A's is the point of going to school" (p. 40).

Student cultures establish a normative academic effort in response to grading reward structures. In the past, as A represented excellent work; today, it represents work that is little more than acceptable. But success without achievement fosters high expectations among students. In a study of 278 students in five different courses, Lundrum (1999) found that a large proportion of students doing superior and average work expected an A and almost half of the students in the sample reported doing average work yet expected to receive a B.

Many students understand there are other ways to achieve high grades that don't involve hard work. They view decisions as open to negotiation and endless appeal and maneuver and bargain for better grades.

An unknown, but non-trivial fraction of students, use various methods that range from whining to intimidation to persuade teachers that they deserve high grades. In fact, most professors have, at one time or another, been faced with such highly competitive assertive students who expect an A grade and are not reticent about voicing their demands. Or the students who demand an explanation for a B which is considered today an unsatisfactory grade. Arguments have been made to suggest that more than a few teachers succumb to the pressure, not wishing to argue or hassle with students or to have their teaching evaluations suffer (Sacks, 1996; Trout, 1997a). In fact, Buck (2001) asserts that "Far too many instruments purporting to measure faculty performance are instead measures of the degree to which faculty accede to students' whining about what they consider to be excessive demands and difficult material" (p. 3).

- *Student entitlement mindset*. The business model that preaches that the customer is always right has permeated academe, and resulted in a marked consumer orientation on the past of students and their families (Levine and Cureton, 1998). Lead by this, students work to get what they paid for (Trout, 1997b).
- *Female students*. Since the 1970s, there has been a notable increase in female students. A US national study shows that females, on average, earn significantly higher

college marks than their male counterparts (Adelman, 1995) which may explain some higher grades.

- *Adult learners*. An increase in the number of older, more serious minded college students may serve to explain an increase in high grades at some institutions. A positive correlation exists between age and grades (Kwon, Kendig, and Bae, 1997); student age is a positive predictor of student GPA (Olsen, 1997). Too, many of these mature students are over-achievers and will drop a course rather than accept a grade of B (Hultgren, 1994).

Changes in grading policy

- *Departmental differences*. Some studies find that the migration of student majors from low to high grading departments is a principal factor behind grade inflation (Bearden, Wolf, and Grosch, 1992; Sabot and Wakemen-Linn, 1991; Summerville, Ridley, and Maris, 1990).

Some students shrewdly manage their academic careers on the basis of "gradesmanship" and opt not to take courses where more difficult assignments are an impediment to earning good grades; rather they prefer majors and courses where the average grade is higher (Sabot and Wakeman-Linn, 1991).

Then, in order to counteract the flight of students to higher GPA departments, traditionally low grading departments might be inflating grades in order to recruit and retain majors (Sabot and Wakeman-Linn, 1991).

Nevertheless, some academics argue that the departments that award higher grades do so because they accept exceptionally high-achieving students. But there is no evidence that education and the humanities generally attract superior students (Zirkel, 1999). In fact, one study (Summerville, Ridley, and Maris, 1990) found that the differences in grading were, to a large extent, independent of students' majors.

- *Grading practices*. Altough the collegiate setting is essentially a norm-referenced world, a tension has developed between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced evaluation, between traditional forms of assessment and newer, more 'authentic' forms.

Some instructors have abandoned comparative competitive normal curve distributions and moved to other methods and practices such as mastery learning and contracting where students participate in setting the standard. Such changes in grading

procedures to self and peer evaluations, and to authentic and performance assessment, are a direct consequence of a shift from teacher-centred to student-centred modes of instruction. However, these benign, even benevolent approaches to assigning grades dismantle the hierarchy of learning that is implied by a normal distribution of grades, and encourage grade inflation.

- *Faculty grading criteria*. There exists lack of faculty knowledge about evaluation methods. Schuh (1983) argued that some grade inflation is justified given the frequent lack of reliability of teacher-made tests.
- *Grades encourage learning*. In a study that compared grade inflation rates among students of different abilities at an open admission public university, McSpirit and Jones (1999) found that lower ability students were experiencing the highest rate of grade increase and suggested that faculty might be using grades to encourage learning rates among marginal students. As well, in fields such as education, grades are sometimes viewed as a product of reciprocal relationships between academic performance and student effort, in that grades are not only a reward (that is, greater effort producing higher grades) but also an incentive (that is, students who earn higher grades devote even more effort to their studies) (Erekson, 1992).

Faculty behaviour

- *Faculty pressure*. According to Mitchell (1998) a particularly insidious problem is grade variation within and among individual courses. Other faculty members create and maintain pressure toward inflation. Faculty with higher standards tend to relax their expectations to avoid the perception of being unfair and, as a consequence, unpopular.
- *Faculty perceptions*. Cole (1994) attributes the problem of grade inflation to faculty laziness, claiming that it is easier to record a good grade than a bad one. Or, to cite Zirkel (1999), "When the rationalizations are stripped away from the rationales, the basic problem is that high grades are simply easier" (p. 255). Faculty do not have to justify high grades; they do have to defend low marks.
- *Faculty mindset*. Younger faculty members bring to the academy their own experiences of inflated grades in high school and university. After being conditioned to

grade inflation in their own lives, they may see the assignment of high grades as a normal occurrence.

- *Blurring of the faculty-student relationship*. As many areas, particularly education, have shifted from a strictly objective positivist view of learning to a more constructivist approach, the nature of the student-faculty relationship has changed as the traditional hierarchy of faculty-student relationship is replaced by an apprenticeship model. When this happens, professors may experience difficulty in reconciling the activity of teaching as involving collaborative learning between teachers and students and the distancing that traditional approaches to student evaluation create. When there is a growing sense of equality between faculty and students or when a faculty member encourages or allows a more familiar milieu, objectivity may be diminished, professors may show a benign reluctance to fail students or to mix teaching and evaluative roles, and grade inflation may result.

Curriculum changes

- *Edu-tainment*. Others argue that inflated grades emerge as professors spoon-feed students and entertain more than previously. Although students in the past had to put forth effort to determine what was significant in a required reading or lecture, many today are simply told what they need to know. Thus, while students receive better grades, they have not been helped to master the material in any lasting way and may indeed have been hindered from doing so (Crumbley, 1995; Darby, 1995).
- *Student affect*. Grade inflation emerged hand in hand with the emphasis in American education on the primacy of self-esteem. According to this therapeutic notion, the "Purpose of education is to make students feel capable and empowered. So to grade them, or to grade them strictly, is cruel and dehumanizing. Grading creates stress. It encourages competition rather than harmony. It is judgmental" (Mansfield, 2001, p. 1). Beaver (1997) points out that the formula for building self-esteem is fairly straightforward: "Students should be praised and nurtured while criticism should be held to a minimum so that students' egos will not be harmed (p. 4).

Under the banner of respect for the individual, objective standards of achievement or knowledge become secondary. A poor grade is not only an incursion of the authenticity of an individual, but a devastating form of criticism. Yet, making

achievement easier in order that students may feel good about themselves in college opens the door to propelling them to failure later.

- *Graduate programs*. Some observers have attributed grade inflation at the undergraduate level to the generally higher grading norms at the graduate level, where in many disciplines B has historically been the average grade (Levine, 1994).

Discussion

While some academics dismiss any problems related to grade inflation, the previous discussion indicates a more cogent and candid interpretation: that inflation is perceived as a true and endemic problem by many involved in higher education. Of course, high grades are not inherently undesirable. Most teachers implicitly and explicitly encourage students to achieve high marks and every school has many ways of honoring students. But it appears that current grading practices do not evaluate students' academic performance appropriately. It takes less work and effort to receive a high grade than it did in the past; the grades students receive are not awarded consistently in a manner commensurate with effort mediated by ability and other relevant factors; and performance has become only one measure among many. If it is a problem of puffery, with much of the current grading designed only to please and placate, then student grades are no longer the helpful measure that they once were.

The previous discussion shows also that there exist many plausible explanations for an increase in grades. The bewildering array of explanations is rendered even more confusing because there are several levels or foci for each explanation. Student evaluations of professors, for example, may be influenced by the grades instructors assign and high grades may influence tenure and promotion decisions.

Implications

Traditionally, two basic purposes have accrued to the assignment of grades. The first is to inform students about their achievement both individually and in relation to their classmates. The second purpose is to inform the public, potential employees, regulatory bodies, and graduate schools of students' performance (Shoemaker and DeVos, 1999).

Today, simply graduating from university is less distinctive than in earlier decades. And, with rampant grade inflation, the informational value of a degree's grades has deteriorated and grades no longer serve as the important measure they once were for employers and others. This conclusion leads inevitably to the notion that grade inflation is not exclusive to the academy; the problems spill over to affect many areas.

In the academic domain as a whole, it is a breach of academic responsibility to acquiesce to the degradation of standards by inflating grades and pandering to demands for a weak, watered down curriculum. Colleges and universities that condone inflated grades are abrogating their responsibility to provide trustworthy information about student performance on and off campus (Wingspread Group, 1993).

Grade inflation is damaging for students. Not only is students' work today no longer being assessed appropriately but grade inflation disturbs students' own view of their competent and achievement (Cizek, 1996) by promoting a "counterfeit excellence" (Staples, 1998, p. D16). Student academic effort is devalued. Not only do students allocate effort to academic tasks in response to perceived incentives in the form of grades, which, in turn, affect future employment or further study, but rewarding students in spite of relentlessly poor performance subverts the value of achievement in favour of nonacademic factors. At the same time, grade compression tends to erase differences as the better students receive the same grades as everybody else (Hancher, 1994); all grades are at the top, making it difficult to discriminate the best from the very good, the very good from the good, and the good from the mediocre.

Inflated grades indicate watered down course content. Today's students, it is argued, are not required to master as much material as they once were. Nor is the material as challenging. Thus, even assuming students are receiving the grades they have earned - assuming they have mastered what they have been asked to master - students today are not as prepared as they were in the past (Crumbley, 1995). Too, if grades are going up, and student effort is going down, then today's students are unfairly advantaged in relation to earlier cohorts.

When abilities and talents are examined, there is a high end and a low end to the continuum. Rightly or wrongly, the higher education system is the agency for sorting and selecting. Grades sort students and assign them a particular spot on the continuum.

Who is admitted to graduate school and who is hired for a particular position in the larger economy are decisions that must be met fairly and dispassionately. Institutions have accepted the social function of certifying competence and select those to fill certain roles based on their grades. But today's grades are no longer a trustworthy cornerstone, and may not act as a meaningful guide to parents, employers, and graduate schools.

Graduate programs may accept students on the basis of tainted evidence and are then negatively affected when entering students lack the requisite knowledge and skills. Incompetents are being turned loose on the marketplace.

Response and solutions

Despite denials, evasions, and adroit rationalizations, grade inflation is a visible problem. Simply, students are receiving higher grades because instructors are assigning them. Yet the assigned grades may not accurately measure academic performance, including a student's ability to think critically, solve problems, and master content.

In general, responses to grade inflation are founded on two propositions. First, the intellectual performance of students in North American colleges and universities has shown a substantial decline over the past 20 years. Second, the standards employed in academe to evaluate intellectual performance have shown a substantial erosion over the same 20 year span.

Many within and without academic areas hold that inflation must be curbed, whether through moral suasion or administrative fiat. The first step is to confront the issue, not always an easy task among faculty members. After Perry Zirkel, an education professor, attempted to correct the problem, he reported that, "Even if you try to correct this problem in a relatively innocuous, positive, way, you're met with either total apathy or downright resistance" (cited in Gose, 1997b, p. A41).

An increasingly popular response to the problems grade inflation is to modify the manner in which grades are reported on transcripts. In an attempt to help all those concerned both better assess student performance, some schools now note after a grade the number of students in the class and the median grade. Others indicate at the

bottom of the transcript the number of classes in which the individual student exceeded or failed to meet the median course grade. Other schools have begun to indicate when courses have been repeated and/or require that initial grades for repeated course by factored into a student's GPA. Others look at the distribution of grades which is more important than the average grade in a course. Yet, critics note that "Educational standards cannot be instantaneously bolstered up with a mere restructuring of the final numbers any more than a decaying house can be repaired with a fresh coat of paint" (Agnew, 1995, p. 93). Such transcript manipulation does not address the central issue – it does not explain the academic standards in a particular course or an individual student's learning.

Basinger (1997) points out that "inflated grades are but a symptom of an underlying problem: misguided educational standards — inappropriate content, modes of presentation and/or modes of assessment" (p. 4). Hence, the prominent response to grade inflation is a call for the reinstatement of higher academic standards. Intellectual fires can be lit by a rigorous curriculum presented by teachers who believe that their area of expertise is more important than students' subjective sense of how happy they are. The primary goal is to ensure appropriate content, mode of presentation, and grades where intellect is valued and rewards are tied to performance.

Ideally, dealing with grade inflation is a faculty responsibility. Remedies must be collaborative and systematic with the standards and assumptions used by faculty in different fields clarified and discussed. Faculty must reach concensus about the meaning of the grading system in place.

Hence, some suggested solutions focus on faculty's grade assignments. In this model, faculty members are held accountable for the grades they assign. To focus attention and stimulate discussion, the grade distributions of faculty members can be made public and grade distribution become an important part of faculty's annual performance review.

Administrators should be aware of a link between student accolades and the higher number of As on a grade sheet. Units that typically assign larger proportions of As and Bs, such as music and education, should demonstrate why their grade distributions are positively skewed (Kuh and Hu, 1999).

In many senses, student evaluations of teaching stand as one symbol of the erosion of faculty authority. If student evaluations are used to measure teaching effectiveness, recognizing that sometimes students produce paradoxical evaluations is important (Brodie, 1998). Careers should not be injured because a faculty member holds strict standards. Rather than use current student evaluations, an appropriate response is to evaluate professors using a well balanced combination of indicators of student satisfaction based on the effort required in the courses they take and what they learn in them (Correa, 2001).

Summary

Historically, grades have assumed a significant position in mirroring the achievement of students and thereby the effectiveness of the educational process within academic institutions. Since the late 1960s, however, rampant grade inflation has been documented at all levels of schooling and in schools across North America. While prominent at the most prestigious institutions, it also presents problems at the less elite schools, which have generally failed to resist the trend toward grade inflation.

After some reported leveling off in the 1980s, grade inflation has become again a subject of debate and controversy in the past few years, particularly when inflation is tied to student evaluations and the goal of attracting more students to certain departments. Alarm about grade inflation both spills over and finds its basis in two other related areas - today's students appear to achieve less and possess less mastery of skills than they did in the past and increasing concerns about grade inflation and student evaluations of faculty.

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