

GRADE INFLATION: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

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This study attempts to determine if grade inflation is present in U.S. colleges and universities, what are its causes and consequences, and what are some recommendations to curb it. This research entails a review of relevant literature about grade inflation in U.S. higher education from the 1960s to the present time. It presents the trend of GPAs at National University (a private, accredited, non-profit institution of higher education), from 1996 to 2002 both for graduate and undergraduate courses. The findings of this study indicate that grade inflation is present at U. S. colleges and universities and at an increasing rate. However, surprisingly, the trend of grade inflation at National University is the exact opposite-it is declining. It concludes with recommendations on ways to curb grade inflation in the academe.

Purpose and Methodology

This study attempts to answer three questions: (1) is grade inflation present in U.S. colleges and universities? If so, (2) what are the causes and consequences?, and (3) what are some recommendations to combat grade inflation? This study includes a review of literature relative to grade inflation from the 1960s to the present time. It presents the trend on the average GPAs at National University, a non-traditional, non-profit, and a private institution of higher learning, as a result of its effort to fight grade inflation for seven academic fiscal years from 1996 to 2002 covering both graduate and undergraduate courses. It includes recommendations on ways to curb grade inflation in the academe.

IS THERE GRADE INFLATION IN THE U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION?

Grade inflation is defined as an upward shift in the grade point average (GPA) of students over an extended period of time without a corresponding increase in student achievement (Goldman, 1985). Many researchers agree that grade inflation started in the 1960s and continued to the present time. Gose (1997) study indicated an upward trend in GPAs among five universities (Table 1). The mean GPAs at Duke University was 2.7 in 1969 and went up to 3.3 in 1996; at Leigh University, it was 2.6 in 1972 and became 2.9 in 1996; at Pacific Lutheran University it was 2.99 in 1974 and rose to 3.2 in 1996; at UC Berkeley it was 2.95 in 1986 and went up to 3.10 in 1996; at the University of Washington, it was 2.31 in 1964 and was up to 3.12 in 1996.

Levine and Cureton (1998) surveyed 4,900 undergraduates at all institutional types and the results showed that grades of A- or higher soared from 7 percent in 1969 to 26 percent in 1993, while grades of C or lower plunged from 25 percent in 1969 to 9 percent in 1993 (Table 2). Seligman (2002) reported that at Harvard University, around half of all course grades are A or A-, and in 2001, 91 percent of the seniors graduated with honors. An article by scholars at Princeton University cited research findings that only 10 percent to 20 percent of all college students received grades lower than B- which means that 80 percent to 90 percent of all college students received grades of either A or B (Sonner, 2000). Stepp (2003) reported a high percentage of students graduating with honors at three leading Ivy League universities: Harvard at 91 percent, Yale at 51 percent, and Princeton at 44 percent.

Rojstaczer (2003), who created a website, www.gradeinflation.com for gathering data about GPA trend nationwide, reported increasing grade inflation in American colleges and universities (Table 3). The data on GPAs came from 34 schools for the fiscal years, 1991-1992, 1996-1997, and 2001-2002. His findings indicated a consistently rising GPAs across the board: in all schools 2.94 in 1992, 3.00 in 1997, and 3.09 in 2002; in public schools: 2.82 in 1992, 2.87 in 1997, and 2.97 in 2002; in private schools: 3.11 in 1992, 3.19 in 1997, and 3.26 in 2002. The highest GPAs were indicated in private schools.

CAUSES OF GRADE INFLATION

Studies have indicated that grade inflation in U.S. educational institutions of higher learning started during the 1960s with the Vietnam War. Other causes include the notion of raising students' self-esteem, the wide use of adjunct instructors, the impact of some tax legislations, the effect of student evaluations, the treatment of students as consumers, watered-down course and spoon-feeding, and changes in university practices.

The Vietnam War

Many studies cited the Vietnam War as the beginning of grade inflation. In the 1960s, faculty members were reluctant to give low grades to male students because students who dropped out of school were candidates for enlisting in the wartime military service. Consequently, faculty members were encouraged to award students higher grades to avoid students from being drafted in the service (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002).

Self-Esteem

Kline (2001) wrote that according to a Harvard University professor of government, Harvey Mansfield, "Grade inflation has resulted from the emphasis in American education on the notion of self-esteem. According to that therapeutic notion, the purpose of education is to make students feel capable and empowered. So to grade them, or grade them strictly, is cruel and dehumanizing." Students who are used to getting high grades have the belief that anything lower than A is failure. Thus, faculty members who want to make students feel good, trying to avoid law suits from angry parents, and dealing with suicidal students obsessed with getting A grades, were forced by circumstances to award As to almost every student in class. In the effort to elevate students' self-esteem, faculty had the tendency to award higher grades to shield students from failure instead of making students realize that failure is a stepping stone to success.

Hiring adjuncts

Sonner (2000) posited that increased reliance by universities on adjunct faculty is of the main reasons for grade inflation. Adjuncts are employed on a part-time basis; consequently, most of them face the pressure of earning high student evaluation as their passport for being retained in the adjunct pool. Making students satisfied are equated with giving them high grades-thus, in return students reciprocate by giving the adjunct faculty higher student evaluations. Sooner (2000) compared the average class grade given by adjunct instructors and those by full-time faculty over a 2 year-period at a small university that relies heavily on adjuncts for its teaching staff. In the sample used, 37 percent of the classes were taught by full-time faculty, while 63 percent were taught by adjuncts. A total of 7,610 grades were used in the study. Around 80 percent of the students were given grades of A or B and less than 20 percent were given grades below A and B. The average grade for all students was 2.7 approximately a B- or C+. The average class grade in classes taught by adjuncts was 2.8 while the average grade by full-time faculty was 2.6. Although the difference was small, Sooner (2000) considered it large enough to be statistically significant. The results of the study indicated that differences exist between grades given by adjuncts and grades given by full-time faculty, even after controlling for the effects of other factors such as class size, subject discipline, and course level. Sonner (2000) concluded that, in general, adjuncts give higher grades than full-time faculty.

Effect of Tax Legislation

Cronin (1997) made a report on the possible impact of tax legislations on grade inflation. Cronin explained that there is a potential for grade inflation resulting from tax legislation such as the Hope Scholarship tax credits. This tax incentive provides a non-refundable credit against federal income tax up to \$1,500 per year. To claim the credit, the student must be enrolled at least half-time in the first two academic years of a degree certificate program. To take the credit in the second year, the student must attain a grade of at least B- (2.75 on a 4-point

scale) in the course work completed before that year. In general, the rule will only affect middle and high-income, second year students attending relatively less expensive schools. The fear of grade inflation effect is that students will take easy course on the first year to get the required grade to be eligible for the tax credit on the second year. Hence, the potential for grade inflation is on the first year.

Student Evaluations

Wallace and Wallace (1998) posited that the use of student evaluations as a basis for promotion, retention, tenure is one of the main causes of grade inflation and that student evaluations result in reduced student knowledge and inflated grades. Students are earning higher grades but are learning less. In another article, Seligman (2002) likewise cited that student evaluation is the leading cause of grade inflation. He argued that insecure assistant professors, who do not have tenure yet, but are assigned heavy teaching loads are under pressure to award higher grades in the hope of getting higher student evaluations.

Students as Consumers

Snare (1997) posited that the "student as consumer" model undermines the quality of education due to over emphasis on students' satisfaction which encourages grade inflation. In the business world, the rule is that "the customer is always right." With the student as consumer approach, universities must always satisfy students-make them happy, resulting in the awarding of higher and inflated grades and consequently, lowering the quality of teaching/learning. Snare (1997) explained that learning must be viewed as an "apprenticeship relationship" in which the quality of student performance is determined and set by the master-the teacher. Educational institutions are not selling products-they are offering services whereby students are supposed to earn the right to proclaim that they have met the standards and that they possess particular skills to engage in productive endeavors in the world of work. According to Snare (2000) the emphasis must be on learning-which eventually will serve the true consumers-the taxpayers, parents, and employers.

Watered-down course and Spoon feeding

Basinger (1997) argued that today's students are not required to master materials as they once were. The materials are not challenging. While students attain better grades they have not master the materials in such a way that will have lasting value. The standards for student performance are not set high enough to challenge students to pursue excellence in academic endeavors. Edwards (2000) blamed the changes being effected by universities to accommodate students desire to improve their grades. The practice of allowing students to retake or drop the lowest score, as well as curving scores for below average classes are vehicles for inflating grades.

CONSEQUENCES OF GRADE INFLATION

According to Sewell (1994) employers can no longer assume that the degree ensures a certain level of education. Employers view grades as less crucial when hiring and rely in greater degree on other factors such as personal references. When students are able to get higher grades easily, they do not exert their best efforts; they do not excel in the course, and they are not challenged to their best potential. Since there is no distinction between the good and the best, there is no motivation on the part of the students to truly excel. Consequently, students are not adequately prepared to face the realities and demands of the workplace.

Seligman (2002) argued that grade inflation appears to be especially pervasive at elite institutions, the so-called Ivy League universities (Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Pennsylvania, Princeton, and Yale) where students have high expectations since they are being charged high tuition fees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Restoration of academic excellence as a core value of academic life

Wilson (1999) suggests a strong administrative support for responsible standards and grading policy. Faculty must insist on high academic standards—raise the bar that challenges students to exert their best efforts to achieve a higher level of learning. Avoid curving grades for doing so encourages modification of grades that contributes to inflated grades. Awarding extra credits could result in grade inflation and must not be practiced. All faculty members must maintain clear, rigorous and consistent expectations for student achievement. Achievable learning outcomes must be specified in the faculty course outlines together with clear and objective grading criteria.

Institutional Dialogue

Rosovsky and Hartley (2002) recommend communications among schools and departments to review their grading policies with the objective of raising rigor and quality in teaching/learning. The communication about raising quality and standards must be a participative process that include the top officials of the institution, the deans, the department chairs, faculty members both full-time and part-time, and the staff, especially those who actually face the students on a daily basis—the admission counselors. There must be an open-line of communication from top management to the faculty and staff—and in the same vein there must be participation from the staff going up to management. It is also recommended to have discussions among universities about their grading practices. This will allow for a more meaningful and reliable comparison and interpretations of grades among educational institutions.

Tighten-up the Curriculum

Wilson (1999) suggests a rigorous review of the curriculum both general education and those of the majors, with the objective of eliminating options that allow students to elect academically inferior courses or programs that survive only because of low standards.

Provide Additional Information

Rosovsky & Hartley (2002) recommend the inclusion in the students' transcripts of record not only the grade of the student for the class, but also the average grade for all students enrolled in the class. This will give prospective employers of the real standing of the student relative to the class performance. It is hoped that this will discourage students from shopping for faculty that are easy graders.

Eliminate or Revise Student Evaluations

Edwards (2000) posits replacing the student evaluations with a system of peer evaluation and assessment. Wilson 1999 proposes a radical modification of the existing student evaluations that should focus exclusively to academic content and the teacher's academic seriousness.

Alternative grading system

Rosovsky & Hartley (2002) recommend consideration of alternative grading systems. In the Great Britain, there is no grading system in place, instead examinations are to be taken at the end of the degree that determines whether the student attains the degree or not. Edwards (2000) talks about requiring students to prepare portfolios in lieu of traditional grading system. Some educational institutions are not using the grading system; instead they provide written narratives—qualitative assessments about the student's performance and achievement.

TREND OF AVERAGE GPAS AT NATIONAL UNIVERSITY (NU)

It will be noted that the trend in the average GPA in the NU graduate courses (Table 4) has been declining from 1997 to 2002. From the highest GPA of 3.73 in 1997, the GPA was down to 3.46 in 2002, representing 7.2 percent decline over 6 years period. For the undergraduate courses (Table 5), the trend was likewise going down from 3.34 in 1996 to 3.02 in 2002, a decline of 9.6 percent. It will be noted that while the grade inflation nationwide as reported by Rojstaczer (2003) is increasing, especially in private educational institutions, the trend of GPAs at National University is decreasing.

WHAT NATIONAL UNIVERSITY DID TO CURB GRADE INFLATION

Focusing on academic rigor and quality

From the President/Chancellor to the staff-the theme that resonate everywhere from the northern to southern California among 26 academic centers is rigor and quality. There were monthly faculty-time faculty meetings with the respective deans, monthly departmental meetings with department chairs, and two to three faculty assemblies held in San Diego with focus on rigor and quality. Lead faculty members are tasked with calling adjuncts who are teaching during the month to remind them of maintaining high standards of achievement for the students in their respective classes and implementing rigor and quality in the assessment of students' performances.

The number of As awarded at National University was analyzed for the academic fiscal years 1998 to 2002. Increased rigor was evident in the change in the dispersion of grades awarded to students. The percentage of As awarded declined on all levels: 8 percent decrease for associate degrees, 10 percent decrease for bachelors' degrees, and 4 percent decrease for masters' degrees and credential students. The largest decrease in As awarded was indicated in the last two years when National University increased its emphasis on monitoring GPAs (NU, Institutional data, 2002).

As part of increasing rigor and quality, National University built a central library costing \$29.3 million at the Spectrum Business park area and created Library Information Centers at each of the NU major academic centers. National University has around 17,000 full-time equivalent students-24 percent are undergraduate students and 76 percent are graduate students. The construction of the new library provides the facility for research by students especially graduate students who are required to do written reports for all their classes. National' library system houses more than 200,000 print volumes, 31,000 online e-books, 1,500 serials in print form, and 600 online journals with full-text access.

Increase in the number of full-time faculty and keeping the classes small are measures to enhance academic quality. National has a target of desired class size of 20 students, but in academic year 2001-2002, the actual average class size was 16.9. Studies have indicated that adjuncts have the tendency to grade higher than full-time faculty members. By increasing the number of full-time faculty, it is expected that rigor and quality will increase resulting in the awarding of grades that are not inflated and thus reflect a more realistic evaluation of the achievement of the students. Currently, National has 170 full-time faculty 94% with Doctoral degrees.

Establishing target GPAs

At National University when the decision to curb grade inflation started, the faculty who give all As were sent letters by the Vice-president for Academic Affairs explaining the importance of improved academic rigor and grading standards. The expectation is that with increased academic rigor and quality, the mean GPAs would shift downward as a natural consequence on increased rigor in the classes. That worked for some faculty, but still the average GPAs did not go down. Consequently, two years ago (academic year 200-2001), after the efforts to fight grade inflation via letters to faculty did not materialize, the Provost and Vice-president for Academic Affairs established target GPAs of 2.75 for undergraduate courses, and 3.25 for graduate courses. In addition, NU created a Web-based report that provides the mean GPA for each and every class taught. As the faculty input the

grades online for the class, the average GPA for the class is automatically computed and recorded. In this manner, each and every faculty member becomes aware of whether the class GPA exceeds the targeted GPAs or not. It has also provided National University with the ability to identify classes and instructors with consistently high GPAs and to take appropriate actions to remedy problematic situations.

Comprehensive Review of Curriculum

Task forces and committees were created to perform a comprehensive review of the curriculum. Course offerings were streamlined from San Diego to the 26 campuses in 11 metropolitan areas from northern to southern California. Courses contained in the National University catalogues were scrutinized and examined for any duplication, and to ascertain that the courses in every program are relevant to the needs of the students and that the courses, as well as pre-requisites are the appropriate requirements for each program offering.

Conclusions

Over the span of four decades since the 1960s, many studies have indicated that grade inflation is present at USA colleges and universities and at an alarmingly increasing rate. There are a number of causes and consequences and recommendations. However, a return to higher standards, maintaining the core value of academic excellence, and implementing rigor and quality in teaching/learning stand out to be effective ways to curb grade inflation.

TABLES

Table 1
Mean GPAs for Five Universities

Universities	Year	Mean GPA
Duke University	1969-1996	2.7-3.3
Leigh University	1972-1996	2.6-2.9
Pacific Lutheran University	1974-1996	2.9-3.2
UC, Berkeley	1986-1996	2.95-3.10
University of Washington	1964-1996	2.31-3.12

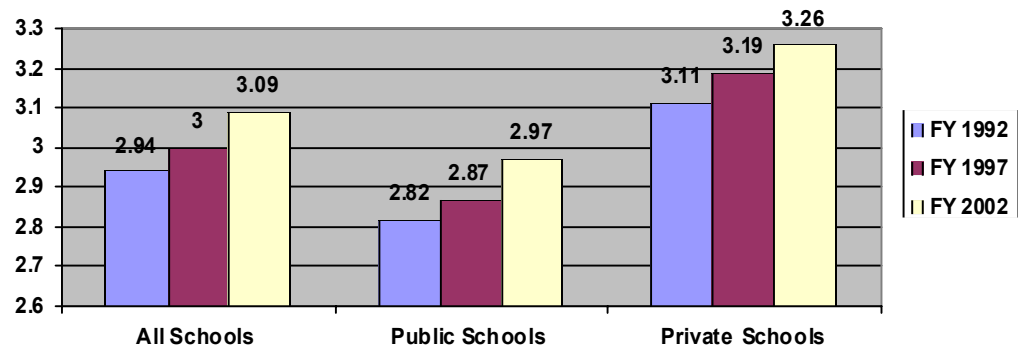
Source: Gose (1997)

Table 2
Percentages of A- or Lower and C or Lower
1969, 1976, and 1993

Cumulative GPAs	1969	1976	1993
A- or Higher	7%	19%	26%
C or Lower	25%	13%	9%

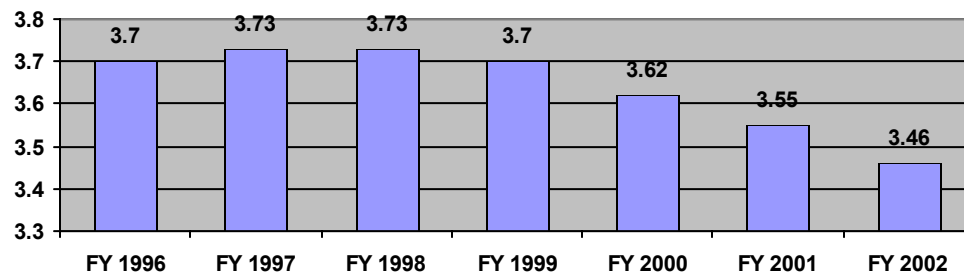
Source: Levine & Cureton (1998)

Table 3
Grade
Inflation in
American Colleges and Universities



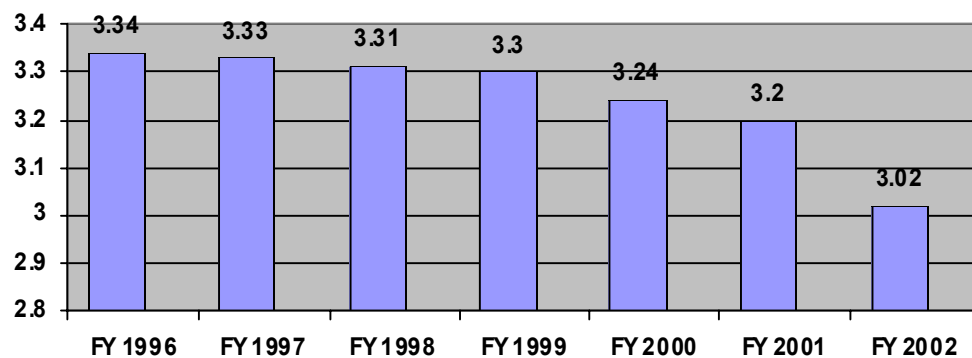
Source: Rojstaczer (2003)

Table 4
Average
GPA in
NU
Graduate
Courses



Source:
NU Institutional Data (2002)

Table 5
Average GPA in NU Undergraduate Courses



Source: NU Institutional Data (2002)

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