

**EXAMPLES OF EXTERNAL EFFORTS TO CURB GRADE INFLATION**  
**Gathered by Ron Severson for the Undergraduate Council, February 2006**

Grade inflation is a national trend and some universities have taken steps to reverse that trend. The excerpts reprinted below offer some perspectives on the present situation (**A**), and some examples of steps taken at other universities (**B**). These may be useful as background for formulating recommendations for the UO. The web location of the complete text is given at the end of each excerpt.

**A. Perspectives on the Problem of Grade Inflation**

EVALUATION AND THE ACADEMY: ARE WE DOING THE RIGHT THING?

By Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley  
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EXCERPT:

What are the characteristics of a good grading system?

- It should be rigorous, accurate, and permit meaningful distinctions among students in applying a uniform standard of performance.
- It should be fair to students and candid to those who are entitled to information about students.
- It should be supportive of learning and helpful to students in achieving their educational goals.

Short of a fundamental systemic overhaul or return to an earlier day, neither of which are realistic possibilities, we review various suggestions that are contained in the literature.

Institutional Dialogue

The academic profession is the only one that provides virtually no formal training or guidance to new entrants concerning one of their primary responsibilities: teaching and evaluation.<sup>48</sup> Expectations, responsibilities, and standards are rarely discussed or committed to paper.<sup>49</sup> It would be helpful if this type of dialogue occurred in departments or in faculties as a committee of the whole.<sup>50</sup> Greater comparability of standards and fairness could result.

It would also be a good idea to make students a part of the institutional dialogue. Their ideas about how the system might be made more supportive of their educational ambitions would be especially appropriate and valuable.

## More Information

Faculty members ought to know how their grading standards compare to those of their colleagues. Some universities (Harvard and Duke are examples) provide such data. In Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences each professor annually receives an index number for each course taught that compares individual grading practices with departmental averages. This practice has not eliminated grade inflation, but it may have slowed its progress and made the system more equitable.

## Additional Information

Some schools have adopted the practice of providing additional information about course grades on student transcripts. These schools include Columbia,<sup>51</sup> Dartmouth, Indiana,<sup>52</sup> and Eastern Kentucky.<sup>53</sup> Typically information about the number of students in the class and the average grade is added to the letter grade on the transcript.<sup>54</sup> Grade inflation is not addressed directly, but the information does help those who wish to put the transcript in perspective.

## Alternative Grading Systems

Various alternative or modified grading systems are in use that intend to mitigate aspects of grade inflation. For example, 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. Providing comments along with letter grades is another method of contextualization. Still another strategy is to administer general examinations to seniors, perhaps using outside examiners, which is the practice at Swarthmore.<sup>55</sup> However, both written comments and general examinations are labor intensive and do not seem practical for mass higher education.

## A Standard Grade Distribution

In large classes it seems appropriate for departments and/or instructors to establish a standard distribution (a curve) so that distinctions are both fair and maintained over time. The distribution need not be totally inflexible—exceptions can occur—but this would be a useful yardstick.

We are conscious of the fact that all suggestions for change are partial and not wholly persuasive. This is not a surprise because no single or easy solution exists. The main plea is to be clear about professional standards and obligations and to bring practices into line with these

standards. The selection of a standard will necessarily be an individual matter—individual for each college or university, department, and faculty. The present system is flawed. The ethics of professional conduct demand that we—as faculty members—seek the best solutions for our institutions.

[http://ece.gmu.edu/~wsutton/inflation/Evaluation\\_and\\_the\\_Academy.pdf](http://ece.gmu.edu/~wsutton/inflation/Evaluation_and_the_Academy.pdf)

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## GRADE INFLATION ...WHY IT'S A NIGHTMARE\*

By Jonathan Dresner

### EXCERPT:

#### Solutions Already Being Tried

There are a few active attempts to solve the problems of grade inflation and educational effectiveness. Some of them are at the level of the individual school; more come from 'suggestions' of accrediting agencies; post-graduation testing is already standard in graduate school admissions and certain professional arenas.

Colleges and universities have tried a variety of techniques to deflate grades. Some have adjusted their grading systems: Princeton instituted a limit to A-level grades. Harvard adjusted its GPA calculation to narrow the A-/B+ gap and that has reportedly been effective in reducing the A-level overload slightly. Most institutions don't go much further than passing around department-level data on grade averages, though a few institutions have followed up with enough pressure and discussion to bring the outliers closer to norm. Some have tried acculturation through discussion, but without hard data there is mostly a chorus of 'it doesn't work that way in our department' and the discussion ends. Tenure, for all its charms, is a serious barrier to making progress at the institutional level: it both insulates its possessors from pressure to change and provides strong motivation for grade leniency to the untenured. Academic freedom, precious though it is, is used to insulate faculty against discussions of content, workload, grading or pedagogy.

The accreditation agencies have their own ideas. They use their accreditation review to promote the scholarship of learning and integration of current 'best practices.' Many of the themes of these best practices are encapsulated in the push for the development of 'Master Syllabi' for both multi-section courses and for departmental curricula, that would clearly lay out learning goals, particularly those learning goals which could be demonstrated, assessed, evaluated in some kind of graded fashion. Interestingly, they do not seem terribly

interested in grade inflation. Perhaps they've given that up as a losing battle, but instead they focus on 'learning assessment' using metrics separate from those used to evaluate students for grades.

Pre/post-testing, portfolios developed over time, post-graduation interviews and graduate tracking are emphasized. There is little discussion of how 'best practice' applies to different disciplines, or different levels; we're supposed to figure that out ourselves, but without deviating significantly from the 'standards of best practice' that they articulate.

Syllabi seem to be very important to these agencies. Collecting syllabi was an important part of the accreditation review, and they pushed to make syllabi more public and accessible through internet publication. Syllabi have grown, as others have noted, to articulate clear goals and standards for students, contain an outline of the course that goes well beyond a 'reading and assignments schedule' and introduce students to the discipline, where the course fits in the discipline, and to general academic practice through discussion of how to handle reading and writing assignments, labs, discussions, etc. This, in addition to a growing collection of boilerplate text: disability accommodation; advising; civility; academic honesty; offensive material disclaimers. Any ambiguity or reservation about the idea of 'syllabus as contract' seems to be over and done. How this is supposed to be superior to addressing these issues in a course catalog or in class is, honestly, beyond me, but my syllabi have been selected as 'model syllabi' several semesters running, so I must be doing something right.

One consistent strain running through our accreditation, and others I have heard of, is pressure to strengthen centralized institutions of governance. I got to meet with the accreditation team on their last visit, because of my position on the CAS Curriculum Review Committee. They were quite concerned about the way in which general education standards were set and enforced, particularly about the independence of the individual college governance bodies from the University-wide Congress and its committees. Several of their recommendations included weakening or eliminating separate college governance of curriculum. They were also clearly concerned about the Curriculum Review Committee's lack of mandate to review the workload and pedagogical aspects of new or revised courses. While they did not directly address the questions of tenure and academic freedom, it was pretty clear that a more centralized, less 'free for all' approach was preferable. 'Post-tenure review' with an eye toward continued teaching effectiveness is already being put in place or seriously discussed throughout the American academy, and some have argued that tenure is, or will soon be, both obsolete and toothless.

A few institutions have largely abandoned grades as a measure of the success or ability of college graduates, or found ways to supplement those grades with standardized norms. Ironically, the most widespread form of national post-graduate testing is graduate admissions tests. Lip service is paid to grades, recommendations are carefully read for faint praise, and personal statements give admissions officers some way to tell applicants apart. But the existence and ubiquity of the use of these standardized tests is perhaps the most damning form of self-criticism possible: the very academy which grants grades cannot rely on them as a measure of quality or achievement. Professional accreditation in several fields is test based (nursing, teaching and accounting come to mind immediately), recognition that completion of the relevant bachelor's degree may not, in fact, indicate technical mastery of crucial material. The tests, of course, influence the curricula: some departments have gone so far as to include a 'preparation for the test' course as a component of the major.

What's Next?

My suggestions, which most readers will cheerfully ignore in favor of their own, focus largely on the nexus between grade inflation, student evaluation of teachers, and tenure review. In the short term, some form of open grade norming -- perhaps as simple as putting the class or department median on transcripts along with the student's grade -- would reduce the opacity of grades. In the long run, outlier departments must be called to account, and discussion of grades, standards and norms must be ongoing, data-driven and interdisciplinary. Reform of social promotion and grade inflation at the primary and secondary level would help immensely.

The training of Ph.D. students also needs to be shifted in more practical and professional directions, starting with an emphasis on teaching as a skill in graduate school. Not just tossing TAs in sections, but mentoring, review, professionalization; also, graduate coursework should include not just dissertation-related topics but general education in areas which students will most probably have to teach. I, for example, got through graduate school without taking a single course of Chinese or Korean history, though as a modern Japanese historian in a small department I spend a great deal of time teaching China, along with World History (at a previous post I taught East Asian Civ and Western Civ), and only about 1/3 of my teaching time in Japan. General education and teacher training would not be useful only for academia-bound students: the ability to structure a presentation, to impart useful information clearly, to see both the broad sweep and sharp details of an issue, would benefit people in many professional fields.

After hiring, a thorough reform of the institutional culture is necessary, and though that seems daunting, it can be done effectively at a departmental level before being done at an institutional level. One essential component is an environment in which teaching techniques and issues can be discussed without fear that sharing concerns or difficulties will be used against you in retention and tenure. Faculty need some form of confidential mentoring, or some form of mutual discussion which allows everyone to display strengths and be critiqued (instead of creating an artificial division between 'master' and 'student' teachers). Tenure/retention review should include both quantitative and qualitative material, and problems, if noted, must be followed up with mentoring and support. Such review should not stop with tenure, and I am one of those who feels that it would be possible to design post-tenure review that would allow the most egregiously bad faculty to be removed from the classroom without threatening academic freedom. But these reviews and discussions must be sensitive to disciplinary differences and to variation in the student population in order to be meaningful: the techniques which work with upper-division English courses will probably run into problems in world history surveys, and lab techniques don't translate well into philosophy; and sometimes lecture really is the best way to impart information and understanding, though it's terribly old-fashioned.

If these or similar methods are not adopted, if grade inflation continues and no strong articulation of standards is forthcoming, the worst-case scenario is easy to project. National standards for college curricula, enforced by NCLB-style testing in non-professional subjects, have already been discussed by national legislators. Accrediting agencies and federal funding would force schools to address their curriculum to these tests, which would entail the functional loss of academic freedom with regard to syllabi and classroom activity. Faculty who failed to follow institutional guidelines (which would be very closely modeled on national guidelines and adjusted to the tests) would be penalized, probably with dismissal, and tenure would be obsolete. Students would be forced to take more general education courses, but would have fewer choices regarding how to fulfill their requirements. At this point, college really would become an extension of high school.

We are faced with change: things will not simply continue as they are for very long. We must decide what sort of change we prefer. I would prefer that we be accountable to ourselves, individually and as an intellectual and teaching community, and that others respect that system because it produces high quality results. If we cannot demonstrate those results, and that accountability, it will be imposed on us in a form which we may not recognize or appreciate.

<http://hmn.us/articles/6591.html>

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## **B. Steps Taken Elsewhere to Curb Grade Inflation**

### **Princeton University**

#### GRADING POLICIES IN UNDERGRADUATE COURSES AND INDEPENDENT WORK

Beginning with fall term 2004-05, grades awarded at Princeton University reflect new institutional grading expectations for undergraduate courses and independent work. These expectations result from the determination of the Princeton faculty to address locally the persistent national problem of grade inflation. This statement explains the new expectations so that the academic records of Princeton students can be properly understood both in their own context and in relation to the records of students in other institutions where grading practices are different from those we have adopted.

Princeton's new expectations posit a common grading standard for every academic department and program, under which A's (A+, A, A-) shall account for less than 35 percent of the grades given in undergraduate courses and less than 55 percent of the grades given in junior and senior independent work. These percentages are consistent with historical grading patterns at Princeton for the two decades between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. For departments that have maintained these patterns over the last decade, the new policy will affirm established practice. For other departments, the new policy will mark a significant break with recent practice. Overall, implementing the new expectations across the University will, at least at present, set Princeton's grade distribution well apart from those of its closest peers.

As the Princeton transcript explains in greater detail, the University faculty has agreed that grades in the A range signify work that is exceptional (A+), outstanding (A), or excellent (A-). Grades in the B range signify work that is very good (B+), good (B), or more than adequate (B-). Grades in the C range signify work that is acceptable in varying degrees.

The new policy sets expectations for academic departments and programs rather than individual faculty members. It does not mean that only 35 percent of students in each course will receive a grade in the A range, nor does it mean that a student who does A range work will receive anything other than an A range grade. What it does mean is that if faculty make rigorous evaluative judgments about the quality of student work, we expect that over time, on average, across the University, about 35 percent of undergraduate students will be doing course work of the highest quality, and 55 percent will be doing independent work of the highest quality.

Princeton enrolls a select group of unusually accomplished – indeed, increasingly accomplished – students, whose credentials and achievements place them in the front rank of undergraduates in all American colleges and universities. The new grading policy reflects the commitment of the Princeton faculty to hold these students to the highest standards and to make very careful distinctions in evaluating their work. Princeton grades should be understood, therefore, as rigorous markers of academic performance in an extremely challenging program of undergraduate study.

[http://web.princeton.edu/sites/career/data/Grading\\_Policies.pdf](http://web.princeton.edu/sites/career/data/Grading_Policies.pdf)

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## Indiana University

### THE EXPANDED GRADE CONTEXT RECORD

by Mark McConahay and Roland Coté

#### EXCERPT:

The issue of grade inflation has been debated widely and openly on college and university campuses and in the media for the past twenty-five years. This discussion in the mid-1970s at [Indiana University in Bloomington](#) resulted in the Faculty Council mandating that the registrar produce reports that show the distribution of grades. Since 1978, the registrar has provided a copy of grade distribution reports to each academic school and department. In 1994, the Faculty Council again discussed grade inflation, but this time focused on how best to present grades so that they will be more understandable and meaningful to students, advisers, and external recipients of transcripts. The Faculty Council charged its Educational Policies Committee (EPC) to develop a grade-indexing scheme that would put individual student grades into a context that would be meaningful to students as well as to all others who viewed the information.

The result, introduced in the spring of 1998, is IU's Expanded Grade Context Record, a system that generates a student record that includes elements from a traditional transcript as well as additional elements that place the grade into a broader context.<sup>1</sup> The additional information includes:

- Index (number of students in the course section receiving the same or higher grades over the total number of GPA grades awarded)
- Grade distribution (number of students receiving each possible grade, including withdrawals)
- Instructor name
- Class GPA (average of all GPA grades awarded in the course section)
- Average student GPA (average GPA of all students in the class who received a GPA grade)
- Majors (percentage of students in the class whose major matches the school or department offering the course).

The information in the record is distributed via standard reports such as transcripts and is also made available for inquiry via the World Wide Web. To ensure privacy, neither the index nor the context information appear when fewer than five students were enrolled in the course section or received a GPA grade. The Expanded Grade Context Record system was jointly developed by members of the [Office of the Registrar](#) and [University Information Technology Services](#) (UITTS).

<http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/html/cem/cem98/cem9840.html>

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## **UNC-Chapel Hill**

### **GRADE INFLATION AT UNC – CHAPEL HILL: A REPORT TO THE FACULTY COUNCIL**

Prepared by The Educational Policy Committee  
February 2, 2000

EXCERPT:

#### Principles Guiding Reform

Our study of grade inflation at UNC-Chapel Hill leads us to propose a set of principles that should guide any attempt to restore the integrity of the grading system:

1. It is the Faculty, acting through the Faculty Council, that determines the purpose and the form of the grading system. Reiterating long-standing faculty policy we assert that the purpose of grades is to identify degrees of mastery of subject matter. Moreover, letter grades have specific meaning with respect to the mastery of that material:

“A”: Outstanding mastery of course material. Students earning an “A” have exhibited performance far above that required for credit in the course and far above that usually seen in the course. The “A” grade should be awarded sparingly and should identify student performance that is relatively unusual in the course. “The A grade states clearly that the student has shown such outstanding promise in the aspect of the discipline under study that he/she may be strongly encouraged to continue.”<sup>6</sup>

“B”: Superior mastery of course material. Students earning a “B” have exhibited mastery clearly above that required for credit in the course. The “B” grade should represent student performance that is strong and very clearly above performance that is generally held to be satisfactory. “The ‘B’ grade states that the student has shown solid promise in the aspect of the discipline under study.”<sup>7</sup>

“C”: Satisfactory mastery of course material. Students earning a “C” have exhibited satisfactory mastery of course material. The “C” grade should reflect performance that is satisfactory on all counts and that clearly deserves full credit for the course. “The ‘C’ grade states that, while not yet showing any unusual promise, the student may continue to study in the discipline with reasonable hope of intellectual development.”<sup>8</sup>

“D”: Mastery of course material that is unsatisfactory or poor along one or more dimensions. Students achieving a “D” have exhibited incomplete mastery of course material but have achieved enough to earn credit for the course. “The ‘D’ grade states that the student has given no evidence of prospective growth in the discipline; an accumulation of ‘D’ grades should be taken to mean that the student would be well advised not to continue in the academic field.”<sup>9</sup> standards. These norms and standards should be determined by the entire faculty, acting through the Faculty Council.

“F”: Unsatisfactory mastery of course material. Students earning an “F” have not demonstrated sufficient mastery of course material to earn credit for the course. “The ‘F’ grade indicates that the student’s performance in the required exercises has revealed almost no understanding of the course content. A grade of ‘F’ should warrant an adviser’s questioning whether the student may suitably register for further study in the discipline before remedial work is undertaken.”<sup>10</sup>

We wish to emphasize that we have not changed the meaning of the grading system. The verbal descriptions above are essentially the same as those that the faculty has, in theory at least, been using the past twenty-four years. We will, however, propose a system for insuring the integrity of the grading system, something the Faculty Council did not do in 1976 and 1978.

2. Grades measure performance, not innate ability or individual worth. They should fulfill the functions described above, and only those functions. Moreover, we wish to reiterate the Faculty Council’s views concerning the use of plus and minus with the above grades: “... pluses should not be attached to ‘A,’ and minuses should not be attached to ‘D.’ Plus (+) should denote a shading toward the next higher grade; and minus (-) toward the next lower.”<sup>11</sup>

3. The meaning of letter grades should be widely published. All concerned persons, including students, faculty, administrators, parents and other interested parties, should understand what each of the letter grades signifies in terms of intellectual achievement in a course.

4. Schools and departments should bear the primary responsibility for maintaining the integrity of their grading systems, but they must be responsible to the University as a whole.

5. Grading practices of schools, departments and instructors should be public information and departmental standards should be subject to ongoing faculty review.

6. The forces that pressure instructors to award high grades should be reduced to a minimum.

7. The faculty, acting through the Faculty Council, must have the means at its disposal to insure the integrity of the grading system. Without those means, we believe that it would be very difficult to achieve a grading system that meets the expressed standards of the

faculty or to maintain such a system, should it ever be achieved.

### Some Suggested Reforms

The principles just enumerated suggest some specific reforms that might help to achieve them:

- ~ The Faculty Council should adopt clear quantitative guidelines for the grading system at UNC-Chapel Hill. We do not suggest any kind of officially mandated curve; rather, we note that a University-wide undergraduate GPA of 2.6 to 2.7 would lead to a distribution of letter grades that, while not being unduly punitive, would better reflect the substantive meaning of the letter grades presented above. The 2.6 - 2.7 GPA range is consistent with research undertaken some years ago in the College of Arts and Sciences, which suggested that University-wide GPAs lower than this range would seriously affect student eligibility and progress to an undesirable extent.
- ~ Not only should the overall undergraduate grade average reach this range, but the GPAs of each individual department and school should also achieve it. Note that we are not suggesting that each and every course reach this objective; as is the case in today's departments that inhabit the lowest quartile, there is a wide range of GPAs among courses.

Some may question our recommendation that schools, such as the School of Education or the School of Business, be held to the same overall standard. Why, one might ask, should a school such as the Business School, which has a minimum GPA entry requirement, not grade its students to a higher average? The answer to this question reflects back to the purpose of the grading system: it is to distinguish degrees of mastery. We do not expect the vast bulk of entering freshmen to continue to earn grades at the same level they did in high school. Neither should students who have been admitted to a restricted program expect to earn grades at the same level that they did during the first two years of college. It is the obligation of the professional schools to provide a learning experience that challenges their students to precisely the same degree that students in other units are challenged. If that requires additional effort from this selected group of students, it is precisely that which the faculty demands.

- ~ The faculty needs the ability to insure that the norms of the grading system are observed. The Faculty Council should, therefore instruct a University official acting in its behalf -- perhaps the Chancellor or the Provost -- to put in place a mechanism that will insure overall adherence to faculty norms. This mechanism might include the following:
  - Every semester the Provost should publish widely the GPAs of each individual department and school, taking care to identify those departments that are not meeting the University norm.
  - The Provost, as part of the written report on University and departmental GPAs, should remind the faculty as to the meaning of the letter grades and the university's target grade average.
  - The transition period toward the lower overall GPA should last three years, after which schools and departments should be penalized budgetarily for grading practices that do not adhere to the University norm. This potential sanction may appear to be unprecedented; but the grade inflation that we face is unprecedented also. When the private benefits that instructors and departments receive from high grading cannot, even in theory, be offset by credible sanctions, we have little hope that grade inflation can be controlled. In fact, we doubt that these sanctions would ever be used; once they are in place, their mere existence will likely have the desired effect.

- ~ At the beginning of each academic year, the Chair of the Faculty should send to the parents of all incoming freshmen a letter that details the substantive meaning of the grading system and informs them as to the distribution of grades to be found at UNC.
- ~ Every semester each department and school should indoctrinate new graduate teaching assistants into the grading system, explaining to them their responsibility to grade fairly, objectively and within the overall University norm.
- ~ Deans and departmental chairs should be assigned the responsibility of monitoring the grading practices of instructors in their respective schools and departments. They should inform instructors whose grading practices do not meet University norms.
- ~ All student evaluations of instructors should be adjusted to purge instructor ratings of factors that are known to affect student evaluations but are not germane to assessment of the instructor's performance. These include: students' expected grade in the course, size of course, and student assessment of how demanding the course is.
- ~ The undergraduate transcript should carry a notice to the reader something like the following:

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill strictly monitors its grading system in order to insure fairness and consistency both across units and over time. Therefore, the grades on this transcript reflect an overall grade average of 2.6-2.7. Special care should be taken in comparing grades on this transcript with grades from colleges and universities that have not controlled grade inflation. See the distribution of grades on the back of this transcript.

In addition, the University should develop as many ways as possible to notify users of its transcripts that the overall level of grades at UNC is likely to be lower than at other universities that either promote or do not control grade inflation.

- ~ In its annual report to the Faculty Council, the Educational Policy Committee should summarize the condition of the University's undergraduate grading system and recommend remedial action as necessary. This set of policies represents a comprehensive approach to grade inflation at UNC. It makes clear the meaning of each letter grade, both to students and their parents and to instructional staff. It sets clear quantitative guidelines that will achieve equity and fairness across instructional units. It provides for the regular dissemination of information regarding grading standards so that all can witness how successfully the common obligations of equitable grading are being met. It provides a mechanism to familiarize new and continuing teachers with university-wide grading norms.<sup>12</sup>

At the same time, this program deals with some of the underlying causes of grade inflation. It provides a mechanism whereby student evaluation of teaching is divorced from factors that should not influence it. It provides a normative framework that will withstand pressures, from whatever source, to inflate the grading system. It addresses the issue of inter-university comparability of grading standards by using the student transcript as a "bully pulpit" to proclaim

our commitment to integrity in grading. Finally, a program such as this would make it abundantly clear that this high quality institution recognizes its obligation honestly and clearly to report its qualitative standards to the world at large.

12 The reforms proposed above seek to end grade inflation and return the grading system to a previous state. Another approach is to accept that inflation in the awarding of letter grades is here to stay, but to index those grades by adjusting the quality points assigned to letter grades on a course-by-course basis. Indexing would work as follows:

In a course in which, say, all students receive A's, that letter grade would be assigned 2.0 quality points when computing the student's overall GPA. In a course, say, where 25 percent of the letter grades are A, the student would receive 4.0 quality points. In this way, the student's overall GPA would reflect both his/her performance and the grading practices of instructors. The overall GPA would adjust for inflation, no matter what the grading practices of individual instructors. This approach might appeal to some who would look askance at direct Faculty Council involvement in setting the grading norms.

<http://www.unc.edu/faculty/faccoun/reports/R2000EPCGrdInfl.PDF>

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## **Georgia Institute of Technology**

### **REPORT ON GRADE INFLATION DEFINITIONS, INTERPRETATIONS, DATA: GRADING AND GRADE INFLATION AT GEORGIA TECH**

Prepared by the Student Academic and Financial Affairs Committee of the Academic Senate, Spring 2003

#### **EXCERPT:**

How do these changing patterns of grade distribution affect teaching and learning at Georgia Tech? What differences do they make for our students and faculty? To answer these questions, we need first to consider the basic purposes grading serves: 1. to provide feedback and assessment to individual students, which may serve to a) reinforce learning objectives and b) offer incentives for performance; 2. to provide instructors with a) a means of shaping student learning and b) a tool for assessing the effectiveness of their pedagogy and the performance of various student cohorts; and 3. to provide information regarding performance to third parties such as employers, professional schools, fellowship and prize committees, promotion and tenure committees, accreditation teams, and Institute funding agencies. Grade inflation – or, more accurately, grade compression at the top of the scale – clearly has implications for each of these. As grades grow increasingly concentrated at the top of the scale, they lose their ability to convey meaningful information about distinctions in student performance. What happens then? One supposition, frequently heard in discussions of the subject, is that performance slackens among the best students, who no longer have the ability to gain recognition for superior achievement. While this may have happened at Georgia Tech, such behavior is notoriously difficult to

document. The changes in our student cohorts at admission, moreover, hardly suggest a population that is less likely to seek high achievement. What seems more certain is that as grading loses its utility as a means of identifying distinction, people turn to alternative sources of information about student performance. Students seeking recognition in individual classes, for instance, might look more closely at their numerical averages. Or they might place greater emphasis on comments from instructors on key assignments rather than on the final grade itself. Students might think in terms of building a portfolio of academic accomplishments rather than merely a record of good grades. 39

**Potential Remedies for Grade Inflation** This section reviews remedies for grade inflation, both proposed and attempted by other institutions. When available, dissenting opinions and data describing the outcome of the attempted reform are presented. Information presented here has been gathered largely from reports from other institutions addressing this issue in recent years. Additionally, some of the material comes from technical and non-technical literature on this subject. It is the goal of this section to review possible means of addressing the issue of grade inflation at Georgia Tech; specific recommendations for courses of action, if any, are not provided. Those reforms proposed or implemented at other institutions include:

- Adoption of more clear and specific grade definitions
- Adoption of a plus/minus grading system
- Establishment of a University/Institute average GPA
- Expanded transcript data
- Changes to student honors
- Broad dissemination of grading definitions and policies
- Training for teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and tenure-track faculty
- Self-calibration of grade distributions
- External calibration of grade distributions
- External enforcement of grade distributions
- Standardized testing
- Changes to student course evaluations

Each of these potential remedies is described in further detail herein. Most institutions, seeking to effectuate a university-wide shift in grading, have employed a combination of the strategies surveyed here. It is also worth noting that a number of reports and authors have cited the need for a broader review of the issue of grade inflation nationwide and for broader remedial actions. Manhire [2000], for example, recommends a national study of grade inflation by a broader agency, like NSF, ABET, or ASEE, prior to considering developing academic standards to counteract apparent grade inflation. Other institutions have expressed concern that “recalibrating” their grading standards, in the absence of a broader national shift in grading, would hurt their students, making them less competitive for jobs and admissions to graduate/professional school. Don Drakeman, a Princeton politics lecturer and a company president, sums up this dilemma well, “(Curbing grade inflation at Princeton is) just going to allow the McKinseys of the world to say, ‘I’ve got a kid from Princeton with a 3.4 (GPA) and kid from Stanford with a 3.8 – let’s take the kid from Stanford” [Witte, 1998]. It is this committee’s opinion that all these concerns be weighed with the perceived severity of the grade inflation at a particular institution when considering options to counter grade inflation.

Adoption of more clear and specific grade definitions Grade definitions at Georgia Tech, peer institutions, and other universities have been described in Chapter 1 of this report. Georgia Tech's current grade definitions are brief, with little descriptive information linking the letter grade to the expected level of student achievement. In one of the most extensive reports on this topic, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Educational Policy Committee [2000] recommended that "clear and quantitative" guidelines be adopted for the University grading system, and these should be widely published so that there is a clear understanding of their meaning among students, faculty, administrators, and parents. The report provides descriptive meaning for each of the letter grades, A, B, C, D, and F, which clearly relate the meaning of the grade to the student's level of mastery of the material. The definitions provided in the report, such as that given below for an "A", are based upon earlier definitions provided by their committee on grading. All of the grade definitions used at UNC-CH are included in Chapter 1, under "Other Universities". "A": Outstanding mastery of course material. Students earning an "A" have exhibited performance far above that required for credit in the course and far above that usually seen in the course. The "A" grade should be awarded sparingly and should identify student performance that is relatively unusual in the course."

Adoption of a plus/minus grading system As shown in Chapter 1, most peer institutions assign plus/minus grades, while Georgia Tech currently does not. While not reporting directly on the issue of grade inflation, the report by Cal State University, Los Angeles [Jordan et al., 2002] has bearing one potential remedial measure – the implementation of a plus/minus grading system. Cal State implemented plus/minus grades (i.e., A through D and F, no A+ and no D-) in Fall 1996 and sought to examine the impact of this system on grade distribution. Data showed that, after this grading change, three-quarters of the grades assigned remained "whole grades" and that minus grades outweighed plus grades almost two-to-one. Overall GPAs for precollegiate and graduate coursework declined moderately (0.02 and 0.10%, respectively), while GPAs for lower and upper division courses tended to increase (0.08 and 0.10%, respectively). This data suggests that the institution of a plus/minus grading system may not be effective in combating grade inflation.

Establishment of a University/Institute average GPA While the UNC-CH report [2002] does not suggest that an official curve for grading be mandated, it does suggest the implementation of university norm for undergraduate GPAs. Only a few other reports make a similar recommendation - for example, University of Wisconsin-LaCross [Bulk and Monte, undated]. Rather than a university-wide curve, 42 Rosovsky and Hartley [2002] believe that standard grade distributions may make sense particularly in larger classes. At UNC-CH, the average undergraduate GPA of each individual unit (i.e., department or school) should fall within the 2.6 to 2.7 range. "University-wide undergraduate GPA of 2.6 to 2.7 would lead to a distribution of letter grades, that, while not being unduly punitive, would better reflect the substantive meaning of the letter grades" [UNC-CH, 2002]. The UNC report also recommends the establishment of mechanisms to insure observation of this suggested norm. The proposed mechanisms for this include: (1) wide publication, by the Provost, of the GPAs of each unit, noting those that do meet the norm, (2) reminders to the faculty, from the Provost, as to the meaning of the letter grades and the target GPA, and (3) after a three year transition period, units failing to meet the norm will be penalized budgetarily.

Expanded transcript data Providing additional information on a transcript may allow outsiders to better evaluate a student's performance in context with his/her peers. Also, when institutions do take action to curb grade inflation, there may be some concerns that outsiders will not recognize that the grades recorded on a student's transcript reflect the more stringent standards at that university. Some universities, including Columbia, Dartmouth, Indiana, UNC-CH, and Eastern Kentucky, have elected to provide additional contextual information on student transcripts. University of Miami [Carbollo et al., 2001] opined, "Surely the computer age makes it possible to offer students a more meaningful description of their performance in each class." Some universities, like UNC-CH, have added statements to student transcripts notify outsiders to grade definitions and policies that may be particular to an institution. At UNC-CH, for example, this notice on the transcript reads, "The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill strictly monitors its grading system in order to insure fairness and consistency both across units and over time. Therefore, the grades on this transcript reflect an overall grade average of 2.6-2.7. Special care should be taken in comparing grades on this transcript with grades from colleges and universities that have not controlled grade inflation. See the distribution of grades on the back of this transcript." Transcripts from Columbia and Dartmouth give some additional information. Columbia transcripts show the percentage of the class that earned the same grade as the student, while those at Dartmouth give the median class grade [Abrams, 2002]. However, it is unclear that this additional information on the transcript has brought about any change in grading. At Dartmouth, for instance, the number of A's given remains 80-90% [Westfall, 2000]. Indiana University at Bloomington uses an indexed transcript to allow outsiders to better gauge student performance. In addition to the grade for each class, the transcript gives (1) the number of students who received the same grade or higher, (2) the grade distribution, (3) the average, (4) the average GPA of enrolled students, and (5) the percentage of students in that class who major in that department. Students receive copies of this transcript and can choose to send it or a traditional transcript to outsiders. The University of Miami is also considering some form of "indexed transcript". In addition to the traditional information, University of Miami transcripts might also report the average GPA for the course and the number of A's awarded might be shown [Carbollo et al., 2001]. Korshin [2003] at the University of Pennsylvania provides a dissenting opinion. Korshin believes that indexed or expanded transcripts only call outside attention to the "lack of grading standards" at a university that opts for this solution. Korshin, instead, favors external enforcement of grading standards and standardized testing. Both of these approaches are described further in this section.

Changes to student honors A few reports on grade inflation specifically address the non-uniformity of grading across various units on campus and the resulting impact on honors awarded to students at graduation. Specifically, Wankat and Oreovicz [2002] state, "We should stop punishing students in departments that control grade inflation. Basing university honors and other awards strictly on GPA puts students in those departments at a disadvantage." An ad hoc committee formed at UNC-Ashville [2000] concurs and recommended the University lower its GPA requirements for Latin honors. The UNC-Ashville committee sought to make the award of honors "fairer" to those students enrolled in more "objective" areas of study and those who seek out the more challenging courses. Rosovsky and Hartley [2002] proposed the reduction of the typical A to F grading system to a simpler system of "honors", "pass", and "fail" to reestablish "pass" as an average and to reserve "honors" for the truly exceptional.

Broad dissemination of grading definitions and policies In addition to building awareness of grade definitions and grade distributions among the faculty, administrators, and students, UNC-CH makes a point of making parents aware of the University's grading policies. To this end, at the start of each academic year, the UNC-CH mails to parents of incoming freshman a substantive description of the grading system and a description of the grade distribution. In addition, UNC-CH includes a statement on student transcripts (X.X) notifying the reader of the University's grading policies.

Training for teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and tenure-track faculty To effectuate an Institute-wide reform on grading, it is important to make teaching assistants and adjunct faculty, in addition to tenure-track faculty, aware of Institute grading policies. That is, those who perform the evaluations of students must "buy-in" to the Institute's objective to curb grade inflation. Rosovsky and Hartley [2002] believe that greater comparability of grading standards would result by engaging in an "institutional dialogue" where a key objective would be to give guidance and training to faculty on evaluating student performance. They also note that the academic profession is "the only one that provides 44 virtually no formal training or guidance to new entrants concerning one of their primary responsibilities: teaching and evaluation [Rosovsky and Ameer, 1998]". Rosovsky and Hartley [2002] cite adjunct teachers, in particular, as "more tolerant" graders. University of Southern California (USC) [1999] specifically recommends that adjunct faculty attend orientation sessions before or during their first semester of teaching. Also, at UNC-CH, it was recommended that each unit at the start of each semester explain to its graduate teaching assistants their responsibility for fair and objective grading and conformity to the University norm. Data published in this report shows that at Georgia Tech non-tenure track faculty, except in a few notable cases, consistently assign substantially higher grades than tenured and tenure track faculty. These variations in grade assignments may suggest that greater uniformity in grade definitions is needed.

Self-calibration of grade distributions A common strategy among institutions seeking to curb grade inflation, including Duke and Harvard among others, is the publication of grade distributions within units and across campus. For example, at UNC-CH, it was recommended that each department annually review its grading practices and relate them to grading practices across the university to build awareness within a department of how its grade distribution compares to others across campus. Also, at UNC-CH, to build awareness among the faculty, each faculty member will be provided annually with a report of their grading and information about grading patterns across their department, in other departments, and in other divisions. USC [1999] tracks grading by each professor over a period of several years, providing the professor and unit head with this data to prevent grades from "creeping up". USC proposed to provide professors with both a list of courses taught over a 3-4 year period (with class GPA, ratio of class GPA to cumulative student GPA, and letter grade distribution) and similar data for a comparison group (e.g., all introductory Engineering courses). Examination of instructor grading, even self-examination, may be felt by some to infringe upon the academic freedom enjoyed by faculty. In addressing grade inflation at the University of Arizona, Penner [undated] emphasizes that each faculty member "must be free to grade as he or she thinks right", respecting the diversity that exists among UA's departments, courses, classes, teachers, and students. Penner sees the solution

to grade inflation as a “change achieved through the innumerable, freely made decisions of all the teachers” and not from rules imposed on the faculty from above.

**External calibration of grade distributions** In addition to “internal” or self-calibration of grading by the faculty via review of their grades in comparison to unit and institute grades, some universities have proposed external review of grading within units. At UNC-CH, for example, deans and departmental chairs bear the responsibility of monitoring grading within their unit, addressing those instructors whose practices do not meet the norm. In addition, an existing committee at UNC-CH – the 45 Educational Policy Committee - also monitors the undergraduate grading system and reports annually to the Faculty Council to recommend remedial actions, as needed. At USC [1999], it was proposed that chairs and program heads regularly receive a report giving grading trends for individual faculty in their unit. Some favor “true” external review of grading, through the use of outside examiners. Korshin [2003], for example, likes the system of external examinations used at British Universities. Under this system, at the end of each year, a team of examiners visits each unit, reviews all grades awarded that year, and adjusts grades and honors based on some broader criteria. Korshin [2003] readily admits, however, that such a system is unlikely to be used in American universities.

**External enforcement of grade distributions** Some universities have elected to enforce grading and grade distributions by tying unit conformance to university policies with their budgets. After a three-year period under the new grading guidelines, units at UNC-CH failing to meet the norm will be penalized budgetarily. Manhire [2000], who has researched extensively the issue of grade inflation and has authored a number of academic papers on the subject, also recommends the enforcement of academic standards through budgetary control.

**Standardized testing** In addition to budgetary enforcement of grading, Manhire [2000] recommends standardized testing of university students. At USC, one recommendation is to have standardized exams for different sections of the same course, as many sections of foundational courses may be offered each semester with wide variations in grades awarded. This would require instructors to agree upon a common syllabus and set of learning objectives. Korshin [2003] also favors a system similar to the French baccalaureat. Here, a national exam is given to students in a given major. Each university, then, would determine the appropriate GPA for a student’s performance on the national exam.

**Changes to student course evaluations** Several universities and reports [Aleamoni and Kennedy, 1985; Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002; Wilson, 1995; Williams and Ceci, 1997] have emphasized the role of student evaluations in the overall inflation of grades. Several universities have proposed to change the way teaching is evaluated to remedy the perceived or actual influence of student evaluations on grading. The UNC-CH report [2000] recommends that student evaluations be changed to purge them of factors (e.g., expected grade, size of course, student assessment of how demanding the course is) that “are known to affect student evaluations but are not germane to assessment of the instructor’s performance.” At the University of Miami, it was recommended that annual reviews of faculty teaching should place more emphasis on “discursive” replies to student evaluations, rather than “numerical” replies. Smith at the University of Michigan [2001] sees student evaluations as a primary cause of grade inflation and favors a more balanced method for teacher evaluations, including peer evaluation.

Conclusions In fall of 1972, the average GPA for undergraduate students at Georgia Tech was 2.45, by fall 2002, the average GPA for undergraduate students was 2.86. The trend shows the average GPA increasing each term. Each spring term has a higher GPA than the other two terms. There is no question that grade compression is occurring at Tech, as well as elsewhere in academia. It would be much harder to prove that the compression is actually the inflation, as the undeniable fact (with plentiful evidence throughout this report) that quality of our students has also increased. Dealing with such a controversial issue, it is not easy to decide what conclusions should be drawn from the study. This committee is of the opinion that Professor Marr's suggestion should be supported (the initiative to the appointment of ad hoc committee with the charge of exploring and evaluating what quality undergraduate academic experience is, or should be at Georgia Tech, and ways of sustaining the highest possible quality commensurate with the abilities of our students). There is no better way for us to serve in the best interests of the students than to find out how to maximize their opportunities. In the words of Bertold Brecht: "The world of knowledge takes a crazy turn When teachers themselves are taught to learn." 47

Grading Definitions: California Institute of Technology

[http://pr.caltech.edu/catalog/01\\_02/geninfo/grades.html](http://pr.caltech.edu/catalog/01_02/geninfo/grades.html) Carnegie Mellon University

<http://www.cmu.edu/esg-cat/general/acadregs.html> Cornell University

<http://www.cs.cornell.edu/coursewebsite/GradeInfo.html> Johns Hopkins University

<http://www.wse.jhu.edu/pte/2000catalog/regulation.html> Massachusetts Institute of Technology

<http://web.mit.edu/firstyear/2006/acadindex/grading.html> North Carolina State University

[http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/academic\\_policies/grading/reg.htm](http://www.ncsu.edu/provost/academic_policies/grading/reg.htm) Northwestern University

<http://www.registrar.northwestern.edu/nucatalog/nucatalog2001-03/wholecatalog2001-03.pdf>

Pennsylvania State University <http://www.psu.edu/bulletins/bluebook/intro/gi-073.htm> Purdue University

[http://www.purdue.edu/oop/usp/pages/Handbook/Academic%20Policies/grading\\_system.htm](http://www.purdue.edu/oop/usp/pages/Handbook/Academic%20Policies/grading_system.htm)

Stanford University <http://www.stanford.edu/> Texas A&M University <http://student-rules.tamu.edu/rules10.htm>

University of California-Berkeley

<http://registrar.berkeley.edu/Records/gradeskey.html> University of California-Los Angeles

<http://www.registrar.ucla.edu/catalog/catalog-30.htm> University of Florida

<http://www.reg.ufl.edu/02-03-catalog/regulations/grades.html> University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign

[http://www.uiuc.edu/admin\\_manual/pos/current/general/grades.html](http://www.uiuc.edu/admin_manual/pos/current/general/grades.html) University of Minnesota

<http://www1.umn.edu/usenate/policies/gradingpolicy.html> University of Texas-

Austin <http://www.utexas.edu/student/registrar/grades/> University Washington

[http://www.washington.edu/students/genecat/front/Grading\\_Sys.html](http://www.washington.edu/students/genecat/front/Grading_Sys.html) Virginia Polytechnic and

State University <http://pamplin.cob.vt.edu/busunder/grades.html#GRDS>

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<http://www.irp.gatech.edu/GradeInflation2003.PDF>

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