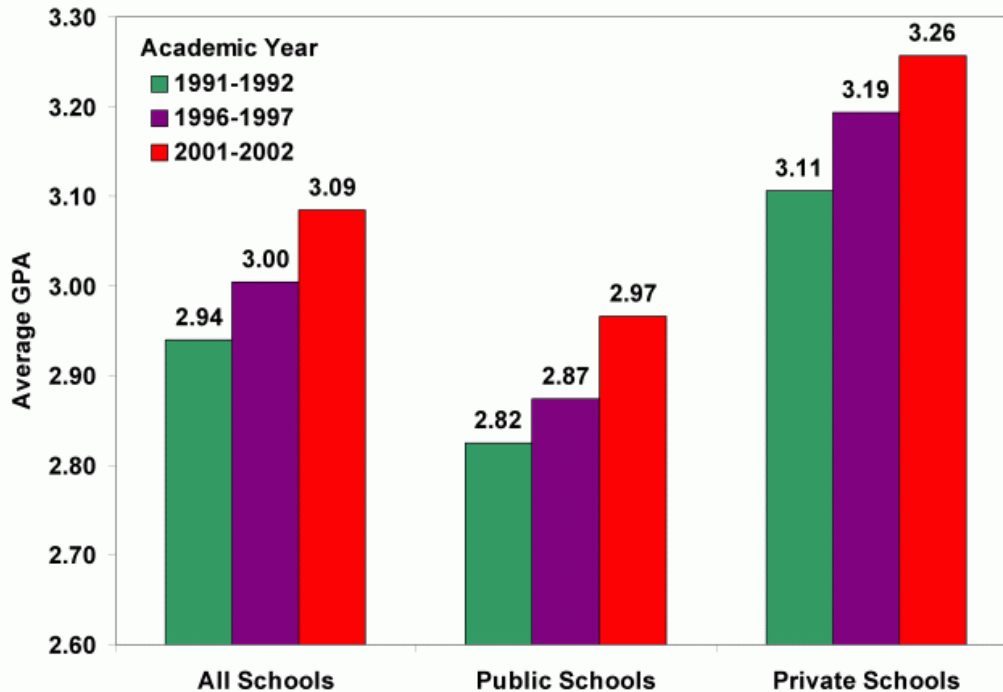


# GradeInflation.com

## Grade Inflation at American Colleges and Universities

Recent GPA Trends Nationwide\*



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

**Last update, March 17, 2003**

### Introduction

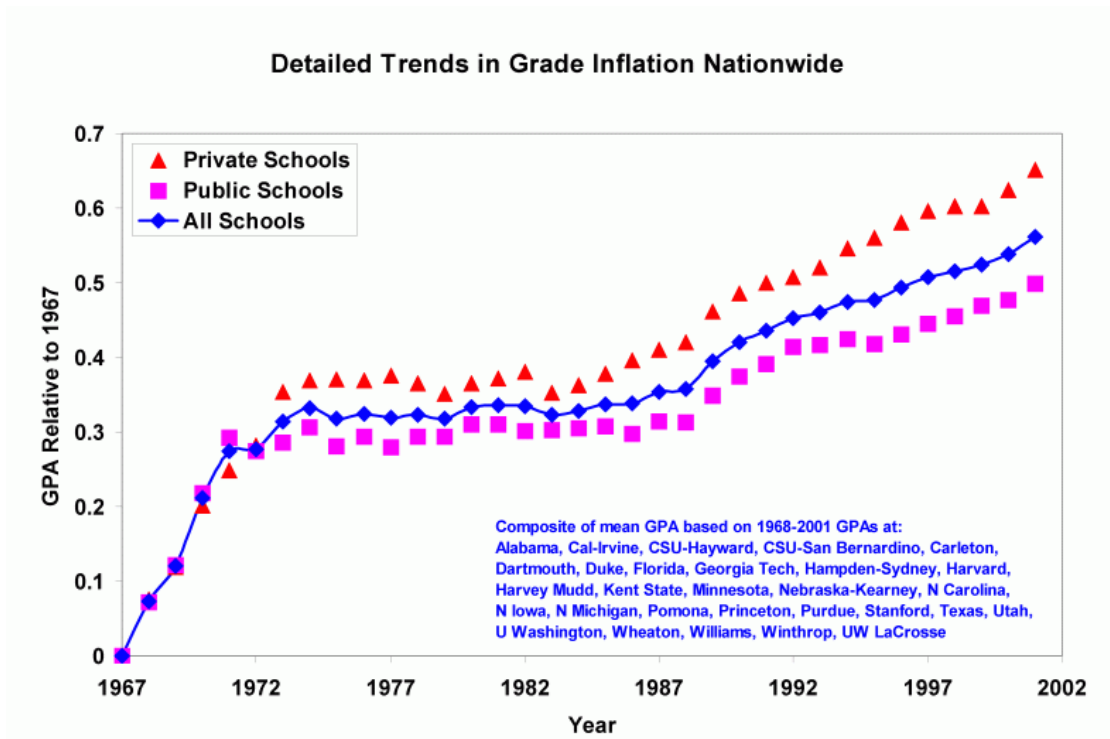
This web site is an outgrowth of an op-ed piece that I wrote on grade inflation for the *Washington Post*, "[Where All Grades Are Above Average](#)". In the process of writing that article, I collected data on trends in grading from about 30 colleges and universities. I found that grade inflation, while waning beginning in the mid-1970s, resurfaced in the mid-1980s. The rise has continued unabated at virtually every school for which data are available.

Contributions since the op-ed piece came out have allowed me to display data on grading trends at over 80 schools (with a combined enrollment of over 1,000,000 undergraduate students). I want to thank those that have helped me by either sending information or telling me where I can find it. I especially want to thank Lee Coursey from Atlanta who uncovered about a dozen web sites with detailed data. I also want to thank those that have sent me emails on how to improve my graphics. Additional suggestions are always welcome. Send them to me at: [this address](#).

### General Trends

The chart below shows general trends in GPA for the 29 institutions for which I have detailed data of twelve years or longer. Data are scant for the first few years on the chart, and the curves for that portion of time have a good deal of uncertainty. The curves represent composite averages over the time period shown.

The chart is the grading equivalent of a consumer price index over time. It suggests that GPAs increased on average by 0.6 from 1967 to 2001 with private schools undergoing grade inflation at a rate that is about 25-30% higher than public schools. The chart suggests that the GPA gap between public and private schools has widened over time (for the schools examined, private schools have a mean GPA 0.3 higher than public schools). However, the overall trend for both the public and private schools is very similar. Both public and private schools have undergone considerable grade inflation over the last 35 years.



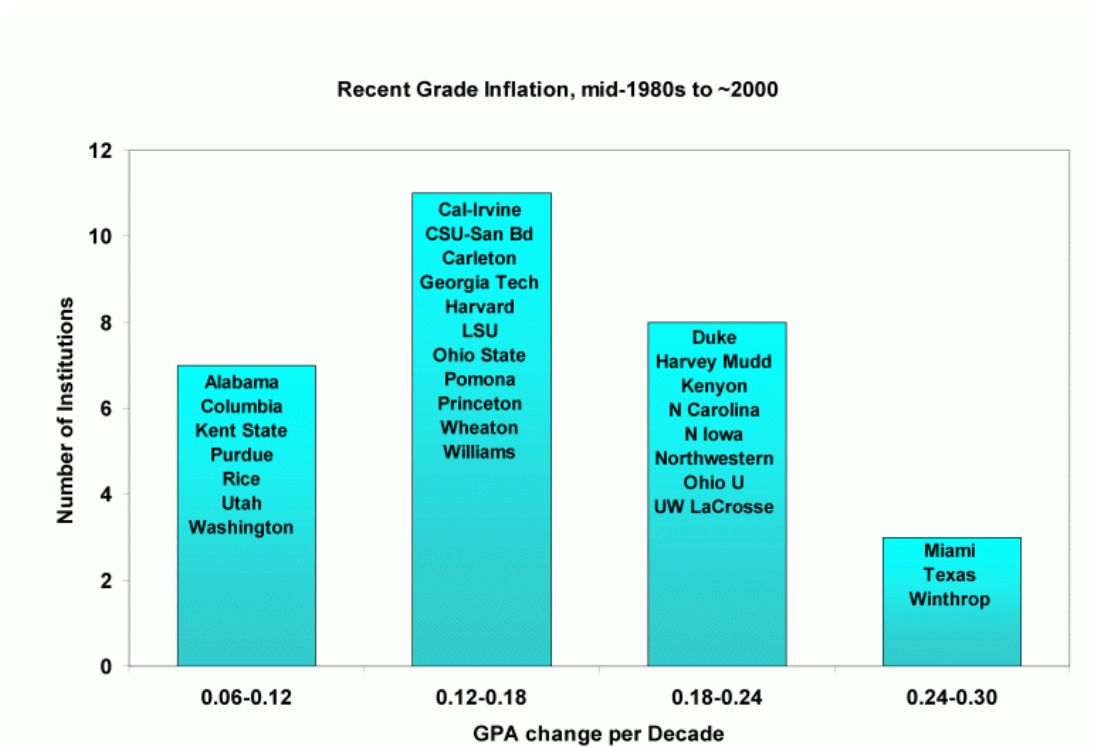
The trends present for the composite curves are also present for most of the individual schools. It's worth noting that the odds of these trends being similar due to random chance are extremely small. If these institution's GPA trends are representative of the nation, grade inflation nationally was rapid in the 1960s, lulled from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, and then took off again. Both figures above suggest that rates of grade inflation show no signs of waning.

At Cal-Irvine, Harvey Mudd and Purdue, trends are significantly different than the composite curve shown above. GPA trends at these three schools are "u" shaped, dropping in the 1970s, and bottoming out in the mid-1980s before rising again. At CSU-Hayward, the "u" shape is relatively more subtle and bottoms out in the late-1980s.

Over the last 35 years, GPAs have increased by roughly 0.15 per decade, a rate that is consistent with the trends over the past 11 years noted in the first figure and is also consistent with the other institutions for which data are available (see next figure).



The chart below examines the magnitude of the rate of grade inflation from the mid-1980s to present for the institutions for which I have sufficient data on contemporary trends. GPAs have increased at an average rate 0.16 per decade (an average rise of about 0.25 in GPA since the mid-1980s). Inflation rates appear to be independent of institution selectivity. Private schools on average have higher inflation rates during this time period. CSU-Hayward is not shown on the figure because of its low inflation rate over this time period (0.03 per decade).



### Attempts to Relate Recent Grade inflation to Improved Student Quality and Other Factors

Some administrators and professors have tried to ascribe much of the increase in GPA since the mid-1980s to improvements in student quality. Almost all of these statements linking GPA to the presence of better students have been qualitative in nature. But there have been some attempts, notably at Duke, Texas and Wisconsin, to quantify this relationship using increases in SAT or ACT as a surrogate for increases in student quality.

Such quantitative efforts are of dubious worth because even the organization that administers the SAT test, the College Board, is unable to show that SAT scores are a good predictor of college GPA. A recent study by the University of California system of matriculates showed that SAT scores explained less than 14% of the variance in GPA. Bowen and Bok, in a 1998 analysis of five highly selective schools, found that SAT scores explained only 20% of the variance in class ranking. Their analysis also indicated that a 100 point increase in SAT was responsible for, at most, a 5.9 percent increase in class rank which corresponds to roughly a 0.10 increase in GPA. This result matches that of Vars and Bowen who looked at the relationship between SAT and GPA for 11 selective institutions. McSpirit and Jones in a 1999 study of grades at a public open-admissions university, found a coefficient of 0.14 for the relationship between a 100 point increase in SAT and GPA.

At both Texas and Duke, GPA increases of about 0.25 were coincident with mean SAT increases (Math and Verbal combined) in the student population of about 50 points. At Wisconsin, ACT increases of 2 points (the equivalent to an SAT increase of about 70 points) were coincident with a GPA rise of 0.21. The above mentioned studies indicate that student quality increases cannot account for the magnitude of grade inflation observed. The bulk of grade inflation at these institutions is due to other factors.

While local increases in student quality may account for part of the grade inflation at some institutions, the national trend cannot be explained by this influence. There is no evidence that students have improved in quality nationwide since the mid-1980s.

There are many factors that contribute to grade inflation and quantitative assessments of causes will likely prove to be inconclusive. An oft-cited reason for grade inflation in the 1960's was the kindness of faculty members toward students trying to avoid the military draft during the Vietnam War.

The influence of affirmative action is sometimes used to explain grade inflation. However, much of the rise in minority enrollments occurred during a time, the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, when grade inflation waned. As a result, it is unlikely that affirmative action has had a significant influence.

The author believes that the resurgence of grade inflation in the 1980s principally was caused by the emergence of a consumer-based culture in higher education. Students are paying more for a product every year, and increasingly they want and get the reward of a good grade for their purchase. In this culture, professors are not only compelled to grade easier, but also to water down course content. Both intellectual rigor and grading standards have weakened. This conjecture is based on personal experience and anecdotal evidence. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove.

## Additional Contributions Wanted

If you have verifiable data on grading trends not included here, and would like to include it on this web site, please contact me, [Stuart Rojstaczer](#). I will acknowledge your contribution by name or if you prefer, the data's origin will remain anonymous.

## The Data Currently Available

The data presented here come from a variety of sources including administrators, newspapers, campus publications, and internal university documents that were either sent to me or were found through a web search. If you see any errors in the data currently available, please report them.

Much of the data originated as charts. I digitized these charts using commercially available software. Some of the data were reported in terms of grade point average (GPA). A good deal of the data were in terms of percent grade awarded. I converted these data into GPA using a formula that I developed using the Duke University data set or through direct calibration with limited data on GPAs at these institutions.

To obtain data on GPA trends, click on the institution or national survey of interest. Note that the data consist of two types, "GPA equivalent" and standard GPA. GPA equivalent is not the actual mean GPA of a given class year, but represents the average grade awarded in a given year or semester. GPA for a class year can be expected to be significantly higher than the GPA equivalent. When data sources do not indicate how GPAs were computed, I denote this as "method unspecified." All non-anonymous sources are stated on the data sheets.

<a href="#">Alabama</a>
<a href="#">Arizona</a>
<a href="#">Auburn</a>
<a href="#">Brown</a>
<a href="#">Cal-Berkeley</a>

[Cal-Irvine](#)

[Cal-Riverside](#)

[Cal-Santa Barbara](#)

[CSU-Hayward](#)

[CSU-Sacramento](#)

[CSU-San Bernardino](#)

[Carleton](#)

[Central Michigan](#)

[Chicago](#)

[Clarion](#)

[Colby](#)

[Colorado](#)

[Colorado State](#)

[Columbia](#)

[Dartmouth](#)

[Dixie State](#)

[Duke](#)

[Eastern Oregon](#)

[Florida](#)

[Georgia Tech](#)

[Hampden-Sydney](#)

[Harvard](#)

[Harvey Mudd](#)

[Houston](#)

[Illinois](#)

[Indiana](#)

[Iowa State](#)

[James Madison](#)

[Kent State](#)

[Kenyon](#)

[Lehigh](#)

<a href="#">LSU</a>
<a href="#">Minnesota</a>
<a href="#">Missouri</a>
<a href="#">Montana State</a>
<a href="#">Nationwide 1</a>
<a href="#">Nationwide 2</a>
<a href="#">Nebraska-Kearney</a>
<a href="#">Norfolk State</a>
<a href="#">North Carolina-Chapel Hill</a>
<a href="#">North Carolina-Greensboro</a>
<a href="#">Northern Iowa</a>
<a href="#">Northern Michigan</a>
<a href="#">Northwestern</a>
<a href="#">Ohio State</a>
<a href="#">Ohio University</a>
<a href="#">Old Dominion University</a>
<a href="#">Pacific Lutheran</a>
<a href="#">Pennsylvania</a>
<a href="#">Pomona</a>
<a href="#">Princeton</a>
<a href="#">Purdue</a>
<a href="#">Rice</a>
<a href="#">Sam Houston State</a>
<a href="#">Southern Illinois</a>
<a href="#">Southwest Missouri</a>
<a href="#">Stanford</a>
<a href="#">Stetson</a>
<a href="#">SUNY-Geneseo</a>
<a href="#">SUNY-Oswego</a>
<a href="#">Swarthmore</a>
<a href="#">Texas</a>

<a href="#">U Miami</a>
<a href="#">U Southern Cal</a>
<a href="#">U Washington</a>
<a href="#">UW-Green Bay</a>
<a href="#">UW-La Crosse</a>
<a href="#">UW-Oshkosh</a>
<a href="#">Utah</a>
<a href="#">Virginia</a>
<a href="#">Washington State</a>
<a href="#">Wesleyan</a>
<a href="#">Western Michigan</a>
<a href="#">Western Washington</a>
<a href="#">Westmont</a>
<a href="#">Wheaton</a>
<a href="#">William &amp; Mary</a>
<a href="#">Williams</a>
<a href="#">Winthrop</a>
<a href="#">Wisconsin</a>