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Reconsidering Grade Inflation in Higher Education

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Grade inflation has been a “hot topic” in the higher education literature for some time now, due primarily to conflicting interpretations of grade-change data. While definitions of grade inflation vary, most seem to indicate that inflation has occurred if a higher grade is awarded without a co-occurring increase in student achievement, and is the outcome of decreased rigor in the assessment of student learning (see Boretz 2004; Young and ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education 2003). Thus, the controversy is in regard to whether or not reported changes in GPA and grade distributions reflect instructor leniency.

Before I examine the debate however, it would be helpful to review the two most-often cited sources of empirical evidence documenting an apparent inflationary trend in collegiate grades. Specifically, one study reported increases in GPA of approximately 0.15 each decade since 1960 (totaling an overall increase in GPA of 0.6; Rojstaczer [2009](#)). Another study compared the grades awarded to undergraduate students at various universities in 1969 to those awarded in 1993, and found an increase in the number of A-grades awarded (from 7% to 26% of students receiving A’s) and a decrease in the number of C-grades awarded (from 25% to 9% of students receiving C’s; Levine and Cureton 1998).

Yet, several studies have reported findings that directly contradict those reported by Rojstaczer, Levine, and Cureton. For instance, Adelman reviewed student transcripts at more than 3000 colleges and reported that student grades have actually declined slightly over the last 20 years (as cited in Young and ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education 2003). Additionally, in response to the charges that students are now receiving A’s and B’s for average level work, the National Center for Education Statistics released a report stating that a study of 16.5 million undergraduate grades awarded between 1999 to 2000 indicated that only 14.5% of students received mostly A-grades (as cited in Young and ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education 2003).

Below then, I will review the debate, recounting apparent evidence of grade inflation and its causes, as well as the rebuttals presented by those who do not believe that there is a crisis of grade inflation within the academy. I will begin by distinguishing between grade inflation and grade *increase*, and discuss reasons for grade *increase*. I will then revisit the charges raised by those who believe that inflation is indeed occurring, and finally, I will discuss causes of grade *inflation*, focusing on the role of instructor-level factors, as well as institutional policies that may affect the ways in which grades are assigned.

Grade Increase

Grade increase refers to rising grades that are the result of various factors that improve students’ chances of receiving “good” grades. These factors, such as changes in curriculum design, improved teaching skills, and changes in the mindset that students take in approaching their collegiate education, result in higher grades. Thus, grade-increase trends may not indicate that educational standards have been relaxed.

Improved Teaching

Institutions of higher education are increasingly implementing programs that provide faculty members with information on effective teaching strategies, and many graduate programs now offer training in college-level teaching to students interested in pursuing academic careers. These courses address a variety of topics including curriculum design, how to foster student learning, and effective syllabus construction. As instructors become more informed about teaching options, they presumably are able to deliver course content in more effective and efficient ways. It might be argued that a result of these changing practices is improvement in student learning, better exam performance, and ultimately, better grades.

This emphasis on effective teaching has also resulted in faculty members becoming increasingly aware of and sensitive to variations in student learning styles. Consequently, many instructors have altered the ways in which they view and utilize exams and writing assignments. It has been suggested that “the concept of assessment itself has evolved, so that today it is more a means for allowing students to demonstrate what they know” (Kohn 2002, para. 7). Therefore, faculty members are more willing to accept retests and paper revisions as a means of deepening students understanding of the material (Boretz 2004). Obviously, by allowing students to retest and/or submit paper revisions, students’ grades improve.

Additionally, in an effort to meet the needs of graduates entering the job market, instructors have increasingly implemented “real-world” experiences (such as practica and service-learning projects) as course requirements. Unfortunately, these types of experiences are difficult to grade and that ambiguity is most easily resolved by awarding good grades to all students who simply complete the project requirements, which of course, results in higher overall course grades (Schiming 2009). It is important to note, however, that this particular issue does not represent the lenient nature of grade inflation; it simply indicates that instructors have not been provided with inventive alternatives to their current grading procedures.

Student Motivation and Use of Strategy

Societal practicalities have also motivated students to strategically pursue good grades. It has been suggested that the provision of financial aid pursuant to academic achievement has forced students to pursue their studies with greater vigor (Boretz 2004). Similarly, as greater numbers of people pursue higher education, the competition for employment in jobs requiring a college degree has become fierce. Students thus perceive that having a better academic record than other job candidates will increase their ability to obtain employment post-graduation. As such, students have become increasingly strategic in regards to the choices they make. Students may repeat courses in order to improve poor grades (Schiming 2009), and they are more willing to withdraw from courses that they are struggling in, thereby preventing a poor grade from appearing on their transcripts (Kohn 2003). They may choose to take lighter course loads in order to devote greater time and energy to each class and some students may chose to enroll in courses taught by more lenient instructors, in “easier” programs of study. In so doing, students are able to influence their GPAs. And, while some of these strategic behaviors may be frowned on by some, they do not constitute grade inflation.

Student Demographics

Higher education is now, more than ever, accessible to students of various backgrounds. Especially important to the topic of grade increase is the fact that women and more mature, nontraditional

students are pursuing college degrees in record numbers.

In both the US and UK some fifty years ago, males outnumbered females in higher education by roughly three to two. In contemporary higher education in these countries, the ratio is more or less reversed. With females on average tending to gain higher grades than males, this demographic shift is likely to influence general patterns of grading. (Yorke 2008, 128)

Additionally, it “is important to consider the rise in the median age of undergraduates. Students that are older and most likely are more mature bring more experience and a sense of responsibility to the classroom, yielding better academic performance overall” (Boretz 2004, 43).

The increased number of female, older, and minority students has also likely altered instructors’ grading practices. Faculty recognize that nontraditional students often have a variety of obligations (both professional and personal) that might impact their abilities to complete coursework in a timely fashion. Similarly, they may be sensitive to the plight of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom obtaining a college degree could potentially create better life-opportunities. Consequently, it has been argued that instructors are more attentive and sensitive to students’ personal crises, and that they are more willing to assign incomplete grades, thus allowing these students more time to produce higher quality projects and obtain better grades (Schimig 2009).

Grade Inflation

Those who believe that grade inflation is indeed occurring have presented evidence that there are disparities between incoming students’ academic potential (as indicated by scores on standardized exams and by indicators of college preparedness) and grades received. Specifically, they claim that SAT scores have gone down over time and more college students are now required to take remedial courses prior to undertaking courses counted toward the degree. These indicators of lower academic potential, they argue, are discrepant with grades received in college.

Those wary of grade inflation claims have responded to this charge by arguing that this trend likely reflects the fact that as more average-level students look toward pursuing college degrees and therefore take the exam in order to gain entry to an institution, the median score reflecting the potential of what was previously obtained primarily from a sample of the above-average and exceptional students is lowered (Kohn 2002). Moreover they argue that this comparison is inappropriate because these assessments are incongruous; the standardized test conveys information about a person’s general learning abilities, whereas grades for college course work indicate learning within a particular program of study. Similar claims are made regarding the apparent increase in the number of remedial courses taken; this trend reflects the increased admission of less academically-skilled students into college.

Causes of Grade Inflation at the Faculty Level

A common charge is that faculty members have resorted to grade inflation because they are reluctant to assign failing grades which will reflect poorly on their teaching abilities. This, inflationists argue, is particularly salient for adjunct and untenured faculty who are not guaranteed continued employment (Sonner 2000). Others have responded to these arguments by stating that while adjunct instructors do tend to give higher grades, that this is not done out of self-interest, but is rather a reflection of

inexperience. As they gain experience in distinguishing good student performance from less skilled performance, the grades they award will become more normally distributed (Moore and Trahan 1998). And, as noted previously, it is possible that the newly minted college instructors, who constitute a large percentage of the adjunct and untenured faculty pool, are more likely to have had training in how to effectively present their discipline's material to undergraduates, and therefore may simply be more effective teachers than the more seasoned faculty who have not received such training (Moore and Trahan 1998).

Causes of Grade Inflation at the Institutional Level

Yorke (2008) argues from the position that "where grade inflation exists, the grades suffer collateral damage arising from policy and practices adopted for other purposes" (110). One such factor is institutional interest in student retention (Schiming [2009](#)). Assigning students failing grades (increasing the likelihood that they will be asked to leave the institution for failure to meet the school's academic standards) is imprudent considering the current zeitgeist. Also, budget-minded administrators are hiring adjunct instructors, who work for notably less pay than tenure-track or full-time faculty, in greater numbers than ever before (Sonner 2000). And, as noted previously, adjuncts tend to award higher grades than full-time faculty (Sonner 2000; Kezim, Pariseau, and Quinn 2005).

Additional institutional factors contributing to grade inflation may include the increasing number of open-access colleges which are generally attended by less academically skilled students. It has been argued that the faculty at these institutions may use grades as a means to encourage students to continue pursuing an education (Yorke 2008). Schiming ([2009](#)) states:

A fairly liberal admissions policy, a large number of non-traditional students, a large number of working students all tempt professors to lower their expectations by reducing the number of textbooks, the amount of writing, and the amount of homework in the course. The goal may be laudable in responding to the particular needs of a specific student body but the result may be inflated grades. (Causes of Grade Inflation, sub-point 7)

While this may indeed be a factor in the phenomenon of grade increase, I believe that factors such as the latter do not qualify as true instances of grade inflation and actually constitute *content deflation*.

Discussion

The last two decades have seen institutions of higher education place greater emphasis on addressing student needs, most notably with initiatives aimed at improving learning via changes in classroom climate and instructional practices. When one considers that these initiatives have spurred a dramatic change in the ways in which instructors think about and approach course instruction, the charges of grade inflation seem overly simplistic and unjustifiably fatalistic. Although there are a few factors, such as institutional policies, which may produce grade inflation within individual institutions, a critical examination of the literature indicates that there is insufficient evidence to conclude that grade inflation is an academy-wide crisis. Rather, if grades are increasing (and that in itself is uncertain), a better interpretation of the trend is that it is the result of a plethora of factors, including changes in instructor attitudes and practices, as well as increased strategizing by students.

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