

Who Best to Tame Grade Inflation?

Thomas Cushman

There has been much high-blown rhetoric lately about the problem of grade inflation in American higher education. All across American campuses, deans and college presidents lament the problem. Such attention, though, focuses mostly on outlining the extent of the problem rather than offering concrete strategies for alleviating it. In most cases, expressions of concern are more ritual statements by administrators who want to show that they are concerned about grade inflation. Ritual acknowledgments of the problem, however, are seldom accompanied by any concrete solutions. This is mostly due to the fact that grade inflation is a direct result of the policies which the recent generation of administrators have pursued with unrequited vigor: the relaxation of admissions standards for certain classes of students, the treatment of higher education as a consumer commodity in which the paying customer demands a marketable grade point average, and the steady erosion of professorial authority in response to student objections to more rigorous standards, just to name a few.

One is heartened by the fact that administrators are speaking out about the problem of grade inflation. Some administrators are doing more than others. At Boston University, for instance, professors who inflate grades are notified of that fact and urged to alter their grading procedures. Yet for the most part, the hands of administrators are tied by a consumer culture in higher education that they themselves have created. The unfortunate fact is that grades have become the stock-in-trade of contemporary higher education, the product that is being sold to students in exchange for exorbitant tuitions.

I am fortunate enough to teach at a college that attracts some of the most capable and qualified students in the world. I have noticed that students who come to Wellesley College in their first year expect to be graded according to the rigorous standards that are on the books. I cannot remember a time when a first-year student complained about a bad grade, or blamed her poor performance on me. Such students generally want to know what to do to improve themselves rather than to focus on my shortcomings. Within a very short time, however, they are told by elder student peers that a B is a bad grade and that they should come to expect an A- on average, even for work that is deficient.

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This socialization experience is buttressed by the fact that there is a critical mass of my peers who create, by assigning grades that students don't really deserve, the expectation of higher grades across the board. I suspect that the same thing happens at all elite colleges and universities in the United States. Soon after arriving at college, students come to embrace the cultural logic of the consumer culture. They develop an expectation of higher grades from their professors. The onus is then on professors to comply, and if they don't, they pay the price. No doubt, there are a few pedagogical maestros who are able to grade according to rigorous standards. Yet these standard bearers have become the deviants within contemporary academic culture, rather than models for the preservation of academic excellence.

When education was seen as a privilege rather than a right or a commodity, grades had a very different meaning than they do in the consumer environment of modern higher education. The existential climate of higher education has changed, so much so that grades hardly mean anything anymore. Inflated grade point averages make it nearly impossible to know that some students are truly superior or more capable than others. The only way for prospective employers and graduate programs really to know if a student with, say, a 3.7 grade point average is truly excellent is to rely on letters of reference, because in an environment where lower grades bring them blame, professors are only willing to tell the truth in such letters.

Even if academic administrators wanted to buck the trend of "grades for dollars," there is another reason why they can do little: if an institution takes it upon itself to wage a unilateral fight against grade inflation, it potentially jeopardizes its own students in relation to students from other institutions that choose to do nothing about grade inflation. No one wants to take the chance of being the first out of the gate on this issue. In an atmosphere of competition for quality students, the latter are liable to be scared away from applying or matriculating to colleges and universities that have a reputation for tough grading policies. Administrators rightly fear that they will lose their market share of paying customers. In society at large, the grade point average has become a reified measure of quality. It is one of the few standard measures by which graduate schools and employers can assess quality, and people who use this measure do not often understand the cultural context in which the measures are produced.

Students inherently recognize this, which is why they become obsessed with grades and why they learn very early on, usually after their first year, to put pressure on those professors who don't accommodate their rational desire for the highest grades possible, regardless of the quality of their work. No institution, especially in difficult economic times, can be expected to pursue a policy that would jeopardize the ability of its students to succeed, especially since such success is so fundamentally related to the future ability of the institution to ask for donations from its graduates. In other words, keeping the customer

happy with high grades during their college years pays off down the road. Generally, the most we can expect from most academic administrators are periodic rhetorical statements about “the problem.” I have seen such statements at my own institution throughout the thirteen years I have worked here, and grade inflation has only increased. Such statements of concern are largely performative. That is, in the terms of the philosopher J. L. Austin, they assume that the act of *saying* something about grade inflation is equivalent to *doing* something concrete about it.

Since it is clear that one cannot expect administrators to lead the way in the fight against grade inflation, and since students would never lobby to fight grade inflation the way they might for, say, multicultural programs, the expansion of their role in evaluating faculty, or the reduction of course requirements, the burden of leading the fight necessarily falls on professors. Because they are the ones who assign grades, they must collectively bear the responsibility for, and the consequences of, solving the problem of grade inflation. The whole problem could be solved in one academic year if professors across the land would simply agree, *en masse*, to grade according to more rigorous standards. If such a collective action were to occur, it would do much to restore the integrity of both the teaching profession and academic institutions. Yet, the willingness of professors to take decisive action is impeded by the psychological, social, and cultural milieux in which professors work. Such impediments are deeply structured into the fabric of academic life in the consumer age and overcoming these impediments is not only difficult, but liable to involve much personal and professional cost to professors who “take the plunge.” What are the obstacles that stand in the way of a sustained and generalized policy of grade deflation?

Perhaps the most obvious factor leading to grade inflation is, quite simply, professorial complacency and downright laziness. The simple fact is that giving students lower grades means more work for professors. Every professor knows that he or she has to spend much more time writing comments to justify lower grades and, in most cases, professors who give students lower grades have to spend more time with students defending their choice of grade. Those encounters, as most of us know who dare to give grades lower than a B, can be excruciatingly unpleasant. I seldom encounter a student who gets an A and who wants to know more about why she receives it. But I can count on students who get a C or below (and very often, these days, a B) to make contact with me. Very often, such students appear in my office in a belligerent state of mind. In some cases, they bring in the heavy artillery: several years ago, a senior in one of my classes received a C for the class, the first C she had ever received. Actually, the C was something of a gift, for the student, even after three years, could not write basic English. I was, in fact, stunned that this was the first C she had ever received at college. Subsequently, her parents wrote a vitriolic letter to the president of the college denouncing me. Fortunately, the

president defended me, but had I been an untenured professor, I am quite certain that the letter might have had some adverse consequences.

And so it is that many professors, eager to avoid the hard work involved in grade deflation and the concomitant unpleasantness that arises from dealing with disgruntled students, go the way of grade inflation. What emerges is a *quid pro quo* system: professors give higher grades and students accept them and don't make waves. The professor satisfies the student consumer's demand for an acceptable product and, in return, avoids the taxing and unpleasant duties of assigning and defending lower grades.

At my institution, which also suffers from grade inflation (the average grade being somewhere between a B+ and an A-, except in the natural sciences), professors are required to fill out a form that explains to the dean of the college the reasons for any grade of C- or below. On its face, this seems a reasonable procedure, since such grades can be damaging to a student and they are entitled to explanations of their grades. But such a procedure necessarily creates more work for the professor and puts the professor on the defensive, as if the lower grade were the professor's problem rather than the student's. I know of one colleague, a teacher who is perhaps the most rigorous grader at the college, who was personally called by the dean of the college because she had assigned one half of all the F's given at the college in one semester (and I would note that she did so as a junior professor, which qualifies her for some kind of academic medal of honor). But this is the rare colleague, indeed.

In considering why students are given grades that they don't deserve, it is probably useful, as well, to think of the psychology of the university professor. There have been many criticisms of the rise of therapeutic culture in the university, a culture that seems designed as much to cultivate self-esteem as it does to enforce academic standards or competitive rewards. Yet the culture of self-esteem is not limited to students. Professors also exist in a culture of self-esteem, made all the more pronounced by the fact that they are constantly judged by their peers and can be made or broken by peer review of their teaching or research. The fragility of the academic ego and the overweening sensitivity of many academics to perceived slights and criticisms is startling. This legendary weakness of the academic ego plays a part in grade inflation: professors who are insecure about themselves or their abilities often look to students as a source of self-esteem. Professors want to be liked by students. In some cases this desire to please the students is overwhelming. We all know colleagues who flagrantly pander to students as a means of increasing their popularity and self-esteem (to say nothing of boosting teaching evaluations, a topic I will discuss momentarily). Such professors—our local term for them is “cookie-bakers,” because they make and distribute treats on evaluation day—are a central driving force behind grade inflation. They can hardly be expected to be rigorous in their grading practices. Professors who need affirmation from students to boost their self-esteem are part of the culture of “other-directedness,” of

which the eminent sociologist David Riesman wrote in his classic book, *The Lonely Crowd*. Such professors are not driven by internalized standards of excellence, but, rather, by the need to be liked by their students. Those professors who are, in Riesman's terms, "inner-directed," those who grade according to standards that they have developed over years of study and reflection, are at a distinct loss in the culture of affirmation that characterizes modern higher education.

To be sure, there are some heroes on the grade inflation front. Last year, Professor Harvey Mansfield of Harvard University made headlines with a novel grading procedure whereby his students were given two grades, one that was in keeping with the system of inflated grades at the university, and the other a grade that reflected his opinion of what the student actually deserved. Professor Mansfield's strategy was calculated and effective in exposing the divide between what students actually know and what Harvard University certifies that they know. He is protected and empowered in his quixotic experiment by his sterling reputation and stature in the field. In some ways, though, Professor Mansfield did not go far enough. He failed to use his bully pulpit to the best effect. He could have simply given students the grades that he thought they deserved, urged other colleagues to do the same, and compelled administrators to support them in this joint effort to combat this particular form of academic fraudulence.

Mansfield's strategy did much to call attention to the depth of the problem at Harvard. Yet, such clarion calls need to be matched by more resolute practices at all levels and across different types of institutions. In the final analysis, Mansfield's strategy leaves a system in place in which professors create false judgments about the quality of student work and in which those in the outside world are deprived of a meaningful measure by which to evaluate students for important jobs and graduate programs. And, speaking of Harvard, the case of Lawrence Summers, the feisty president of the university, is interesting in this regard. Last year, Summers redressed Professor Cornel West for grade inflation (among other things), but ended up being dragged into the mud by West and his colleagues in the Afro-American studies department, who used all of the usual tactics of academic racial politics to humiliate Summers. To see someone of Summers' capabilities and resolute personality so easily defeated reinforces the feeling of desolation and demoralization that many teachers feel in the face of grade inflation (even though having West leave Harvard was, in the end, a victory of sorts, as most Harvard faculty would tell you). If Larry Summers cannot be successful in fighting the problem at Harvard, one cannot expect other academic administrators to lead the fight by sanctioning professors who are not enforcing the high standards in their classrooms.

Another factor that leads to grade inflation, one that is probably the most crucial, is the reification and misuse of students' teaching evaluations by academic administrators. These instruments are perhaps the most glaring evi-

dence of the victory of consumer culture in higher education. Imagine, if you will, a system in which those who have spent their lives in serious study of the topics that they teach are adjudicated by those who are half their age and who have little or no expertise in the subjects being taught or in theories of pedagogy. Yet this is exactly what the administrators of the consumer culture of higher education have created and over which they preside.

The battle against grade inflation will be difficult, since academic administrators in the consumer culture have proven as often as not to be intermediaries between students and faculty rather than supporters of faculty autonomy to teach and grade as they see fit. Nonetheless, the battle will have to be waged by professors if it is ever to be waged at all.

For those who are brave enough to deflate grades and organize others to do so, certain consequences can be expected:

- Teachers who deflate grades can expect to suffer significantly on teaching evaluations, since this is the primary instrument by which students tell administrators directly what they think of them. Those professors who deflate grades can expect more negative evaluations. Because teaching evaluations have become completely reified as a measure of teaching effectiveness, one can expect that such negative comments will have an actual effect on such things as promotion, tenure, and salary increases. One very often hears (especially from administrators) that there is no relationship between the grades a teacher gives and evaluations. In defense of the student evaluation, administrators will usually trot out some social scientific study or another. But anyone who has taught for any appreciable amount of time and who has been subjected to the annual abuse from students who have received bad grades knows that this argument is chimerical. It is inconceivable that anyone with even a hint of knowledge about human psychology could argue such a thing, but the explanation of “no correlation” is quite functional for the administrators. To argue otherwise would be to acknowledge that the instruments are problematic and practically useless for measuring actual learning. But administrators are aware that, if the evaluations were abandoned, they would be deprived of their principal means of power over tenured faculty, who have no other significant restraints on their behavior. In this case, the old sociological adage applies to the relationship between grading practices and evaluations: if people define situations as real, it does not matter whether they are real or not, they have real consequences. When professors think that students will judge them negatively if they give lower grades, they will most likely adjust their grading practices accordingly. If it were possible, it would be interesting to do a controlled experiment in which professors systematically deflated their grades in the same class over a period of time, and to examine teaching evaluations over that same period of time. Basic professorial intuition would predict a corresponding deflation of positive evaluations. Does anyone with any experience of teaching really believe that students who receive F’s, D’s, and C’s will evaluate a professor in the same way as students who receive A’s and B’s?
- Teachers who deflate their grades can expect a certain degree of what sociologists call “reputational entrepreneurship” on the part of the students whose grades are deflated. Those students who receive lower grades can be expected in some, but of course not all, cases to attempt to tarnish the reputations of

grade deflators on campus. This can have the consequence of reducing enrollments in the classes of grade deflators. As we all know, at the level of student culture, enrollments are often seen as a measure of popularity and, at the political level, they are used by administrators as a measure of teaching effectiveness. Departments with hard graders can expect to have lower enrollments and the latter figure prominently in the calculations of administrators who make staffing and tenure decisions. Again, does anyone with any experience of teaching in today's culture believe that professors who give F's, D's, and C's on a regular basis are going to enjoy a high degree of popularity and get high enrollments (especially in elective classes)? Students these days tend to be narcissists rather than masochists.

Junior faculty are particularly vulnerable to the pressure to inflate grades. Therefore, the fight against grade inflation must be led by tenured professors. One cannot reasonably expect junior faculty to lead this charge: they are trying to get tenure and those who try to enforce rigorous standards of grading risk committing academic suicide.

An anecdote from my own personal experience is telling. Before coming to Wellesley College, I taught at the University of Texas at Austin. There, as everywhere, grade inflation was becoming a problem and, to their credit, the dean of the college specifically cautioned new assistant professors that grade inflation would be frowned upon in the promotion process. Upon arriving at Wellesley, a very different institution, I used the entire grade scale in my first semester classes. Within a month, students (mostly the seasoned seniors who had learned to play the game) complained to the department chair, who advised me, in the interests of professional survival, that I had to adapt to local grading norms if I stood any chance of survival. This admonition was reinforced by several of my senior colleagues. I cannot speak for the experience of the current generation of junior professors, but it is hard to imagine that many of them have not felt similar pressures.

The fight against grade inflation must be led by tenured professors, and especially those of the highest stature in their respective institutions, who must make a conscious decision to act as leaders, inspire others to recognize the importance of bringing back meaningful standards in higher education, and protect those who are vulnerable should they choose to get on the bandwagon. When the time comes to evaluate junior colleagues for tenure, senior professors must defend rigorous grading as a value rather than a liability. It may well be that professors who choose to fight grade inflation might bear some personal cost in terms of loss of reputation and loss of merit pay increases. The question is whether some commitment to the values of academic integrity can supercede professors' rational choices to protect those things that are most valuable to them: their reputations and their incomes. We professors are, after all, human—all too human.

In order to counter grade inflation, what is necessary is nothing short of a

grassroots movement within the university spearheaded by the most important entity: the faculty. Very simply, professors must collectively take the hard road to deflate grades. This does not have to be done too dramatically, but should start incrementally: grades should be reduced incrementally and according to the prevailing standards at the university. I am happy to say that there is some significant movement on the part of administrators at my own institution to foster such incremental reductions in grades. Yet, in spite of that, it is ultimately professors who must implement the policy and they remain somewhat vulnerable so long as the other aspects of academic culture, which mitigate against excellence, remain in place. Professors at all levels and at all institutions must act *as a bloc* to counter the two main constituencies that are likely to object to doing something legitimate about grade inflation: students and administrators. Professors have much more power than they think on this issue, especially those with tenure. The only thing that stands between them and legitimately doing something about grade inflation is the will to do it.

The American Association of University Professors should also make stronger statements about grade inflation and say more about how professors who attempt to counter grade inflation are treated by their respective administrators. To my knowledge, there is virtually no discussion of this problem by the AAUP. Yet, in fact, grade inflation is a labor issue for faculty. Grades are the measure of what teachers' "produce," a measure of their professional authority in the workplace. In many ways, grades are for the professor what a diagnosis is for a physician: the tangible evidence of his or her assessment of the individual under his or her care. One is hard pressed to imagine that patients or hospital administrators could prevail upon doctors, *en masse*, to alter their diagnoses. Yet professors' diagnostic measures are regularly subjected to pressures from students and, since these measures no doubt influence student evaluation, are directly implicated in the process of promotion and tenure. The mission of the AAUP "is to advance academic freedom and shared governance, to define fundamental professional values and standards for higher education, and to ensure higher education's contribution to the common good." According to this definition, the problem of grade inflation falls directly under the purview of the AAUP. The pressure to assign grades other than what the professor deems to be appropriate seems to be a direct challenge to the academic freedom and autonomy that is the center of the professorial vocation. If the AAUP is charged with defining standards for higher education, it ought to be more active in decrying grade inflation and "naming and shaming" administrators who foster and tolerate it. If the AAUP's mission is to ensure higher education's contribution to the higher good, it ought to take seriously the fact that the public good is ill-served by churning out students whose G.P.A.s are not an accurate measure of their abilities and talents as they go on to positions of responsibility in society.

Perhaps one step might be for the AAUP, or some other body, to publish a list of grade distributions at colleges and universities, so that the public, prospective employers, and accrediting bodies could make their own assessments as to how rigorous institutions of higher learning are in enforcing high standards. At the national or the local level, faculty committees should be formed to monitor the progress of the war on grade inflation, and such committees could provide some sense of real security and support for those who are brave enough to fight inflation. At the very least, such a committee could make public the obnoxious and defamatory comments that students, who retaliate against the imposition of higher standards, make through their anonymous and unaccountable evaluations. The fight against grade inflation could extend to a re-assessment by administrators of their weighting and interpretation of student evaluations of faculty. It is certainly the case that evaluations can detect excellence or deficiencies in teaching, but in a climate in which administrations might try to save money by rolling back on salary increases or the granting of tenure, any negative information collected from this widespread surveillance procedure assumes dangerous dimensions, especially when used against professors who attempt to destabilize the consumerist mentality that provides high G.P.A.s for exorbitantly high tuition prices.

The fight against grade inflation must be led by those who control the grading process itself. Teachers must take action with the knowledge that it is they themselves who will bear some of the unfortunate consequences for doing the right thing. Most professors I know, having chosen to be professors, have endured much sacrifice. But we are presented with a battle worth fighting. It is only the professors who can preserve what beleaguered standards remain, and resurrect those that most of our administrative “leaders” have abandoned.

The Summer 2004 catalogue of Duke University Press tells of a forthcoming volume, edited by Linda Williams.

Porn Studies resists the tendency to situate pornography as the outer limit of what can be studied and discussed. It moves beyond futile feminist debates and distinctions between a “good” erotica and a “bad” hard core. This volume acknowledges that with revenues totaling between ten and fourteen billion dollars annually—more than the combined revenues of professional football, basketball, and baseball—visual, hard-core pornography has emphatically arrived as a central feature of American popular culture. It is time, Williams contends, for scholars to recognize this and give pornography a serious and extended analysis. . . . To take pornography seriously as an object of analysis also means teaching it.

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