

Grade Inflation in Higher Education: Causes and Consequences

Grade inflation has quickly risen to become an educational practice throughout high schools and universities across America. Along with the growth of the twenty-first century, the value of a college degree has rapidly increased, greatly expanding the prevalence of grade inflation witnessed across the United States. As sophomores, the college hunt is now becoming serious and the effects of grade inflation unquestionably make a difference in which colleges will accept certain people and how scholarships will be distributed to students. This issue of grade inflation is even more extensive within higher education. In fact, according to a study of over 135 American universities, 43% of grades now given by universities are A's, compared to only 15% in 1960 (Rojstaczer, Healy). Grade inflation compares to economic inflation when A's and B's are excessively awarded by professors to students, causing the value of the grade to decrease in the educational environment. Grade inflation creates opportunities for students who may not be as deserving as other students solely because of their higher grades. With grade inflation post-higher education pursuits can be complicated for all parties involved, often benefiting those with inflated grades at the expense of those without. Although inflated grades are distributed by teachers to their students, this system also affects high schools, universities, and employers in various ways. While grade inflation can, in some instances, reinforce students emotionally, it ultimately results in an educational environment that promotes mediocrity and indolence in higher education.

The Origin of Grade Inflation

Grade inflation was first introduced in higher education with the onset of the Vietnam war beginning in 1955. A professor at the University of Florida recalls the conflicts he faced, describing how, “when grading time came, and we knew that giving a C meant that our student (who deserved a D) would go into the jungle, we did one better and gave him a B” (Jacobs). This statement reveals the situation teachers were placed in, when considering the consequences of grading on students’ lives. Currently, grade inflation serves a different purpose in the education system. The overall intention of grade inflation throughout history has remained the same but the situations have changed dramatically. Before the war had hit its peak, in 1961 the average student may have spent an estimated 40 hours a week devoted in studying, Where as in 2003, just 12 years ago, this number dropped to about 26 hours a week (Massoia). As surprising as it may seem, students in lower educational settings were more devoted to their schoolwork than learners in today’s more advanced school systems. The negative spiral in time spent on homework portrays the lackluster attitude students feel towards school. When grades determined whether or not one could have possibly gone to war and risked his life, work ethic was at its peak and schoolwork was much more important to students. Education has not always been mandatory for children, so in the past students had to work hard and maintain reasonable grades to be allowed to pursue higher education. Students have quickly come to realize that even with low levels of work ethic, passing and continuing on to higher education is likely.

The average GPA at four-year colleges and universities was 2.52 in the 1950s. As of 2006 the average GPA was 3.11 (Newlson). Although this influx of higher GPAs appears positive and may allow students access to more opportunities later on, it is inherently becoming

an inaccurate measure of student performance, potentially generating issues for students after college.

Money Matters

Why does grade inflation continue to persist? Evidence of its continued prevalence is plentiful, with the mean grade point average rising at a rate of “between 0.1 and 0.15 points per decade,” (Boleslavsky, Cotton). But while this rate of increase is considerable, grade inflation causes and influences aren’t necessarily as clear. Using extensive proofs and economic theory, University of Pennsylvania economics researchers Huanxing Yang and Chun Seng Yip set out to explain why grade inflation occurs and what it means for students, universities and employers. Evidence found suggests all universities have an incentive to inflate grades under normal conditions, as it can improve/maintain the strength of student job outcomes, thus benefiting the university and student (Yang, Yip 22). Furthermore, The National Association of Colleges and Employers reported in 2013 that “66 percent of employers screen candidates by grade point average (GPA), and 58 percent of employers indicated that a GPA below 3.0 all but eliminates a candidate's chance of being hired,” (Swift et al.). This data suggests how a low GPA often limits a student’s job prospects, whereas a higher GPA is economically favorable to the student and their alma mater. Consequently, grade inflation has been introduced and even embraced among numerous institutions.

Moreover, with the cost of a four-year degree per student growing by nearly “five times the rate of [U.S. Dollar] inflation since 1983,” according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, (“American Universities Represent Declining Value”) colleges and students alike are finding

grade inflation an increasingly favorable practice to remain economically viable in the marketplace. These universities have thus also begun to inflate grades to justify their higher tuition rates, promising the idea of a fast return on investment for their students through improved job prospects (Swift et al). This practice has led to a multitude of consequences for all parties involved, ranging from decreased student workplace preparedness to unprecedented bias in hiring practices due to the skewing of grades.

How Fair is Grade Inflation?

Grade inflation ethically impacts students and teachers across America each year. The ethical implications of grade inflation have been disputed amongst experts throughout the nation. Some teachers in modern education inflate grades in an attempt to save themselves from the overwhelming complaints expressed by both parents and students because their expected grade was not met. Other teachers who do not support inflating grades continue to feel the constant pressures by the school administration, parents, and students to inflate grades. "Washington Post" writer, Jay Mathews, discusses with a Washington D.C. high school teacher about how he was nearly fired by the school administration for refusing to raise grades in his class as the school claimed it was, "damaging school grades" (Mathews). The competition to be the best school in the county, state, or nation is very real, and contributes to the influx in grade values over the past few decades. Administrations are no longer concerned with the students' academic understanding as much as they are with the students' ability to graduate on time and find a job. Eventually, the initial short-term window of satisfaction later disappears, leaving students unprepared for the future.

Ethics and Public Policy Center writer Stanley Kurtz states, “The official addition of pluses and minuses at many institutions has enabled what is effectively the substitution of an A, A-, B+, B scale for the old A, B, C, D scale (while allowing students to fool employers who remain unaware of the shift)”. Although grade inflation may motivate students to work harder and give those less academically inclined students more qualifications for future jobs, how does this affect those with the real qualifications and proper work ethic? Not well, due to the fact that grade inflation skews the competition market for future jobs; Kurtz stated, “allowing students to fool employers who remain ignorant of the shift” (Kurtz). Therefore, if employers are unaware of grade inflation, they will not be able to cipher out the best-fit employee as easily. Grade inflation ethically does more harm than good in the long run leaving students who believed they were once prospering in a class left to figure out the truth that they do not really understand the material they once thought they knew when they enter college and later the workforce. With the added pressure to inflate grades by school administrations, teachers have no choice but to inflate the grades of their students or else risk losing their jobs.

Grade Inflation's Implications on Student and Teacher Mentality:

Research indicates grade inflation dramatically influences a student’s mindset and self-confidence. Students view their grades as an equivalent measurement of their personal intelligence and skill level. A study at the University of Michigan found that 80 percent of students surveyed based their self-worth on academic performance (Thomsen). Therefore, students obtain a much greater sense of self-worth when receiving more positive academic feedback. Distinguished Psychology author, Mitterer Coon writes, "Many students equate grades with their personal worth. That is, they act as if grades tell whether they are good, smart people

who will succeed in life."(Coon) However, if inflated grades develop faulty measurements of student capability, is false confidence ultimately a benefit? Many teachers take on the "people pleaser" attitude when dealing with student grades, but do not realize their benevolence does not benefit students in the long run. "Some teachers equate caring with liberal grading policies designed to enhance student self-esteem" (Blake). Grades are a very temporary confidence boost for students because once they graduate, their grade no longer defines them and their knowledge is the only thing remaining.

Academic inflation can influence the mentality on the significance of quality education to students and teachers alike. Students have become more concerned with ensuring that their grades reflect success rather than authentically succeeding in absorbing and utilizing the content. Published author and mathematics professor Alexander Stanoyevitch, who has a PhD from the University of Michigan-Ann Arbor, expresses his findings in which "Grade inflation tends to deteriorate the work ethic of students who experience it. Because grades were conceived to be an unbiased measure of student success, undeserved higher grades give the signal to students that they don't need to apply themselves to their greatest potential. This attitude can easily carry over into subsequent classes and, later, into the workforce."(Stanoyevitch) This statement supports the notion that grade inflation allows learners to not apply as much effort into their academics, while still receiving impressive grades. Founder of the Network for Irish educational standards, Martin O'Grady writes, "Being more assured of higher grades for poorer performance, there is no reward for further effort". Therefore, students feel it unnecessary to put in extra work if the end result will still meet their expectations. When students academic effort begins to decline, they become unmotivated to capture the initial purpose of education and rather focus on the level of

achievement their grades reflect. O'Grady also states, "The more inflated grades are in a particular subject, the less motivated that the students will be to exert themselves to achieve high standards and the less that teachers will be motivated to teach high standards." This promotes the conclusion that grade inflation allows students to become more relaxed on learning the content compounded with, educators not prioritizing that students are fully learning the material necessary, undermining the delivery of quality education.

The effects of grade inflation span further than just the report card. In an interview with Elaine Woo, a Los Angeles Times writer, former College Board president Donald M. Stewart stated that "Educators who give high grades for average or below average performance promote a hollow, 'just good enough' attitude that is detrimental to students and society" (Woo). Grade inflation in itself may not appear as a looming threat, but with all of the negative influences of grade inflation, society as a whole can suffer immensely. Moreover, William C. Dowling, a researcher at Rutgers University, published an article concerning how grade inflation creates a "level of dishonesty" within the education system (qtd in Caruth). In short, Dowling argues that grade inflation establishes a lackluster attitude toward assignments. These students quickly learn that many students will receive a decent grade almost regardless of the amount of effort given on certain assignments, and thus many choose to show very limited effort on said coursework. This thus translates into a student body that is, while pleased with easy grades, often inadequately prepared for the future.

How Grade Inflation Influences Future Generations:

In tandem, grade inflation can result in multiple long-term implications for students, professors, college administrators and employers. When grades are unjustly increased, it makes it more challenging for employers to differentiate between multiple qualifiers. Assistant professor in the Department of Economics at the University of California, Philip Babcock writes “Without grade inflation, a truly outstanding student might be awarded an A, while a very good student might receive a B+. With grade inflation, both students receive A’s, making it hard for employers and graduate schools to differentiate them.” (Babcock) While this may temporarily benefit the student, it ultimately inhibits this ability to perform by allowing this to receive a position they are unprepared or unqualified. This may potentially lead to struggle when in an occupational setting where individuals are expected to perform skills that they have not developed. Yet colleges are aware of the great emphasis third parties place on grade point averages, and therefore relax grading standards, despite the overriding effects (Popov and Bernhardt). Judith Eaton, President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation, asserts that employers have become dissatisfied with grading feedback arguing that, “Government and businesses want to know more specifically what kind of competencies students have” (qtd. In Rosovsky). Grade inflation shifts grading standards, and therefore complicates hiring standards, frequently resulting in ill-prepared students entering the work force.

Conclusion and Potential Solutions:

With grade inflation continuing to thrive under the facade of improved student performance and confidence, it is important to consider the negative externalities that its presence reinforces. Grade inflation has negatively affected higher education from instigating rapidly deteriorating student-teacher relations to grossly misrepresenting performance to teachers, schools, employers, and even students themselves. This current prevalence and dominance of grade inflation in higher education signifies an underlying shift in the foundations of higher education. Accurate grading has been replaced by a system that reinforces grading inconsistencies, rewarding those who achieve the bare minimum at the expense of others. With this shift, the premise of excellence in academia has been overshadowed by an attitude with which mediocrity is accepted as a standard, and achievement is triumphed by biased grading standards.

What can be done to effectively combat the negative effects of this phenomenon that afflicts modern education, whilst reinforcing its positive influences? One potential solution is to lessen grade transparency to students, and instead focus on providing detailed feedback on tests, essays, and so forth. For example, at Reed College professors do not give students grades during the course, but instead provide insightful and detailed feedback on all papers and exams. Reed has thus largely avoided grade inflation, yet still ranks fourth in the nation in “per capita production of future PhDs,” (“Grades at Reed”). By giving concise, effective feedback rather than assigning letter grades, professors can be much more effective when teaching students, while still avoiding grade inflation and motivating students to perform well.

This premise is not without fault, however. One potential consequence is bias in grading standards. For example, a teacher who prefers one student to another may arbitrarily score the preferred student higher than others. While this practice occurs regardless of grade transparency, bias could result on a higher scale when subjective grading and limited grade transparency are combined. Additionally, this solution assumes both that a professor and student are willing to provide and utilize feedback and constructive criticism in an appropriate and effective manner. This is simply not the case. As detailed earlier, student time investment to coursework is on the decline, and just because feedback may be provided, it does not necessarily follow that all students may utilize this feedback appropriately. Even with these considerations, however, this method of grading could effectively dampen the influence and prevalence of grade inflation in higher education, potentially improving student-teacher relations and student motivation concurrently.

Another slightly less drastic option would simply be to place less weight on grades when evaluating students. By removing the shackles of greatly skewed grades, students who may be more capable, motivated, and passionate about their studies can truly shine both during and after their studies. Unique abilities, commitments, and qualifications should be highlighted rather than grades when comparing learners of different styles and capabilities. By placing emphasis on other aspects of student achievement and motivation, higher education can strengthen along the notions of learning from which it was formed, providing innumerable benefits to all of those involved. (2,715)

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