

Simple Strategies for Avoiding Grade Inflation

Dr. Sekhar Anantharaman





ABSTRACT

In the current environment of rampant grade inflation at all educational levels, faculty members are slowly losing sight of the primary purpose of grades as an accurate indicator/assessment measure of student performance in a course. This paper discusses grading, in general, and the causes and effects of grade inflation in detail. More importantly, the paper seeks to revive the sanctity and importance of tying grades to performance and presents some useful guidelines on how one can grade fairly and accurately while avoiding grade inflation.

Key Terms: *Grade, Grade Inflation, Assessment*

** Chair and Professor of Accounting, Indiana University of Pennsylvania (USA)*



INTRODUCTION

The current system of awarding letter grades to students on a five point scale (A-F) has been in use for a very long time. The scale itself is reflection of the system's desire to classify a student's performance in a course as either "A -exceptional scholarship," "B-distinctively above average," "C-average," "D-below average/barely passing," or "F-failure". The system works fine as long as grades are truly reflective of student performance (a measure of student learning) in the course. It is when we are faced with the problem of grade inflation that the system breaks down and grades become meaningless.



GRADING—ITS PURPOSE AND FUNCTIONS

Grading through the ages has been influenced by the personal philosophies of the grader and to a large extent by their psychology. The personal philosophies of graders could vary ranging from one as simple as grade being an indicator of a student's knowledge and skill relative to other students in the class to one where grades are subjective assessments of a student's learning and knowledge in relation to his/her individual potential. Regardless of personal philosophies, grades are really meant to be a measure of the intellectual performance of a student in the classroom, which in turn is a proxy for their knowledge and skill. This goal is achieved if grading is conducted in a standardized objective manner and based on clearly defined criteria that are fair and reasonable. This would then allow for the process itself to be repeatable over time without significant deviation in the results.

Grading serves four primary purposes. The first one is obviously to provide feedback to the students about how they are performing in class. This can be a useful tool if additional information is given to the students about their deficiencies and how they can address them. A second purpose of grading is to provide information to the student, and others, about the grader's professional assessment of the student's performance in course in relation to the content being studied. The above two purposes can be accomplished through the following functions of grading. First, grading should objectively evaluate the merit of the work completed. Second, it should inform the instructor of what the students have learned and what they have not. Third, it can help students to identify good work and thus, stimulate and motivate them to do it. Finally, it can serve as a tool for instructors to identify outstanding students. The instructors can then choose to reward these students and also provide career guidance by advising them to pursue higher studies.

Grades are always an area of concern for both students and instructors. Students can sometimes take bad grades as a personal affront and form a negative opinion of the instructor. Instructors, on the other hand, have to walk the thin line between being strict and lenient. However, as long as grading policies are objective, fair, and reasonable and communicated ahead of time, both instructors and students can avoid undue stress.

There are several techniques that instructors can adopt to minimize student complaints regarding grading. These include setting clear grading policies in the course syllabus

and discussing these in class, having clear policies for work submitted late, providing students with ample opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge, keeping accurate records of grades, communicating directly with students dissatisfied with their grades, encouraging poor performers, and above all, avoiding changes in grading policies during the term.



GRADE INFLATION

What is grade inflation? The simplest definition would be that current students receive higher grades for the same quality and quantity of work done than students in the past. Alternatively, weaker students or students with poorer academic skills, currently, receive the same grades that stronger students did in the past. Grade inflation can also be caused by deflating the content or requiring less work and consequently less learning. (Cohen, 1984)

The current educational environment is strife with grade inflation. Even the supposed pinnacle of American education, Harvard University, is not above grade inflation. Merrow (2006) says that former Harvard Dean Henry Rosovsky reported finding that in 2006 nearly 70 percent of Harvard students got a B+ or better as compared to only 15 percent in 1950, while in 2005, 50 percent of the grades at Harvard were either A or A-, significantly higher than the 22 percent in 1966. Dean Rosovsky also reported that 91 percent of seniors graduated with honors (Merrow, 2006). In an earlier study Mansfield (2001) reported that 91 percent of all undergraduate grades awarded at Harvard in 1992 being B- or higher and 83.6 percent of all Harvard seniors graduating with honors in 1993. A long-term critic of grade inflation Dr. Harvey C. Mansfield (2001), says that "the grades that faculty members now give -- not only at Harvard but at many other elite universities -- deserve to be a scandal."

Harvard is not the only elite institution of higher learning struggling with the problem of grade inflation. Stanford University until recently did not even permit faculty to award an "F" grade (Leo, 1993). Merrow (2006) further reports that 80 percent of the grades are A's and B's at the University of Illinois, and 50 percent of Columbia University students make the Dean's List.

Grade inflation exists regardless of discipline. It is more pronounced in some areas but nevertheless it exists across all disciplines (Shea, 1994). The current trend of grade inflation was revived in the mid-1980s and has continued to grow. Some researchers have pointed out that grade inflation originally began in the 1960s, when professors gave good grades to their male students to keep them from being drafted (Mansfield, 2001). The researchers further assert that current faculty members were students then and retain similar grading styles that lead to grade inflation. In fact, Goldman (1985) blames faculty as being solely responsible for grade inflation and for failing in their traditional role as gatekeepers.

Grade inflation in higher education has been a topic of hot debate for the last two decades. The problem of grade inflation has increased to such an extent that some Universities are now trying to adopt measures to fight it.

Causes of Grade Inflation

Many causes of grade inflation have been cited in literature. These include (1) faculty seeking to get good student evaluations by awarding higher grades, (2) content deflation by faculty, (3) faculty hoping to retain more students, (4) faculty hoping to become and remain popular with students, (5) faculty hoping to be labeled as someone “who cares” about students, (6) faculty giving in to pressure from students, and (7) faculty resorting to more subjective forms of grading that often result in grade inflation.

Non-tenured or tenure-track faculty often award higher grades to “buy” good student teaching evaluations. This is a major source of grade inflation and is very difficult to prove or prevent. Since teaching evaluations are a critical component of the tenure application packet, new faculty are often pressured by fears of being denied tenure due to poor teaching evaluations and resort to grade inflation in hopes of getting good ones.

Some faculty resort to “content deflation” as a more subtle way of awarding higher grades. If a current student is expected to study less “content”, do less homework and is tested on this reduced material, then the grade the student receives is automatically inflated when compared to a past student who would have been expected to cover more content and do more work to earn a similar grade.

A major issue that most faculty struggle with frequently is one of student retention. No faculty likes to have too many students withdrawing from his/her course. If a faculty member is having trouble retaining students in his/her course(s) on a regular basis, then this could give rise to the person seriously doubting his/her teaching ability and could lead to low self-esteem. Too often faculty members resort to grade inflation in order to stem the flow of students withdrawing from their courses. Although this might work in the short term, the faculty are leaving themselves open to contempt from the students.

Some faculty award inflated grades in order to achieve “popularity” with the students. It makes the faculty member feel good to hear of how students “love” the way the class is taught and what a great person the faculty is. Almost all faculty members, tenured or otherwise, can fall prey to this type of ego boosting from students and give higher grades.

Most faculty members truly “care” about their students. However, caring about one’s students does not necessarily have to translate into grade inflation. But this is just what some faculty members do. They feel the need to go the “extra mile” to prove to students that they care. An easy way for the faculty to do this in addition to lending students a sympathetic ear and addressing specific student issues would be to award higher grades in their courses.

Mostly new and inexperienced faculty members succumb to pressure from students for grade inflation. A new faculty member is constantly “pushed” by students in the direction of grade inflation. New faculty members are especially sensitive to student complaints about their teaching and are often pressured into awarding higher grades. They feel that giving

higher grades to students in the first few semesters of teaching will minimize student complaints and allow the faculty member to establish themselves as “good” teachers. A favorite technique of students in a new faculty member's class is to wait until the first exam grades are given and then go and complain to the department chair that the faculty member cannot teach or that they (the students) cannot understand the faculty member, etc. All it takes then is just one phone call from the department chair to scare the new faculty into “toeing the line” (in the students' view) and start awarding higher grades.

In order to be fair and consistent, the grading process needs to be totally objective. The further away from objective grading a faculty member gets the more is the danger of grade inflation. Subjective grading is to be avoided under all circumstances. Subjectivity opens the door to grading being influenced by the faculty member's personal opinions and feelings. Although, subjectivity more often than not results in higher grades being awarded, there is still a very real danger of it resulting in “lower” grades in some cases.

Effects of Grade Inflation

Grade inflation does not help anyone in the long run. If grades are highly inflated, then the basic purposes of grading as presented earlier are not being served. Inflated grades do not provide accurate feedback to the students regarding their performance in the class. The students do not get to identify their areas of weakness or recognize gaps in their knowledge. Inflated grades do not communicate “good information” about the students' level of knowledge and skills either to the students or to their potential employers. If employers are consistently faced with a severe disparity between a student's Grade Point Average (GPA) and his/her actual performance on the job, then they might stop relying on GPA and resort to other methods of gauging the knowledge and skill level of applicants. If the problem remains unresolved, then employers might even stop recruiting from the schools where grade inflation is rampant.

Grade inflation hurts the “good” students, especially the ones that truly study hard and work diligently to master the course content. These students resent the entire concept of grade inflation which results in weaker, under-prepared, students receiving similar grades to them. A serious student would not feel good about receiving an “A” from a class where nobody receives less than a “B”, or where students doing half the work receive “A’s”. Faculty members have been known to proclaim that a grade of “A” meant something in their classes while awarding A grades to 95% or more of their classes.

Another direct effect of grade inflation is heavy demand for classes taught by the faculty member indulging in it. This has been observed firsthand by the authors of this study. Once word gets out that a faculty member is “easy”, students flock to his/her classes. This often creates a scheduling problem for the department chair as the other sections taught by faculty with a “not so easy” reputation do not attract students and are low enrolled. A bigger issue is one where faculty in an entire department or major routinely award inflated grades. Very soon that major increases in demand and in the short run, attracts many majors. However, over time as students graduate

from this area and are unable to perform on the job, employment opportunities for graduates decline and eventually disappear. In the short term, however, this is a serious problem for other majors in the College that have a “tougher” reputation and hold students to higher standards. This is an unfortunate truth that once identified, would need to be dealt with by the Dean of the College with a firm hand.

Faculty that are “easy” with grades are often not rated highly by the very students that flock to their classes. Once students graduate and are unable to perform on the job, their instinct is to blame the faculty members that did not demand higher performance from them and awarded them higher grades than deserved. Unfortunately, these faculty members are often disrespected and spoken of in derogatory terms. Grade inflation does not help anyone, and clearly not the faculty indulging in it.

Grade inflation results in undermining the sanctity of academics and leads to a reduction in the value of getting a college education. In a certain instance, when continued virulent grade inflation over many years had completely devalued a certain University's prestige in town, residents were overheard remarking that anybody could sit through classes there and graduate with a perfect 4.0 GPA.

Fighting Grade Inflation

So, what can we do about this cancer eating away at the roots of academia? There is no one correct response to this question but it is clear that whatever needs to be done must be done quickly to prevent further deterioration of the value of a college education. The fight against grade inflation must begin with individual faculty members at the classroom level. Faculty members need to regain their sense of duty and pride and not be swayed into awarding higher grades for short term personal gratification.

There are several simple strategies that can be adopted by faculty members to make grades more meaningful. Faculty can detail clear objective grading policies in their courses and tie them to reasonable yet high expectations of student performance. A faculty member can grade fairly and accurately by simply doing the following, (1) state clear grading policies upfront and communicate them to students, (2) grade objectively only on a student's mastery of the subject content, (3) keep accurate grades, preferably numerical ones of their students performance, (4) communicate grades to students and keep them continuously appraised of their progress in the course, and (5) avoid changing grading policies in the middle of the semester.

Setting high but achievable standards that are reasonable would be a first step in avoiding grade inflation. Some have argued against the existence of grade inflation saying that students today are smarter and better prepared than students in the past. There is no data available in support of this argument. In fact, most of the data seems to point the other way. But even if students nowadays are more prepared then should not the professors challenge them even more and expect more of them instead of lowering their standards? It is true that our kids know a lot more about certain things than us. But does this not place the onus upon us to raise the standard

and challenge them to higher performance? If we fail to do this, then we would have failed to safeguard the sanctity and integrity of academic and condemned these students to a life of mediocrity and underperformance.

Minimize the impact of student teaching evaluations on the tenure decisions by using other instruments to evaluate teaching performance of tenure-track faculty. This could include surveys of students, peer-review by faculty who rotate sitting in on courses taught by untenured faculty, announced classroom visitations by the department chair or even the dean, or in some cases department visitations by certified education (teaching) specialists. A new instrument could also be devised that calculates an overall teaching score for the faculty member taking into account the grade distribution in the class, the student evaluations scores, the discipline of the course taught, the level of the course taught, the newness of the course preparation, the number of courses taught and preparations by the faculty member, and the class sizes thereof. Such a comprehensive instrument would minimize the impact of only the student evaluation of teaching on a faculty member's tenure decision. This strategy would remove the incentive for non-tenured and tenure track faculty to practice grade inflation.

Adopt common standardized comprehensive final exams for multi-section courses and ensure that the final exam grade is a large enough percentage (to be same across all the sections) of the student's final grade for the course. This will ensure uniform content coverage and minimize the ability of individual instructors to inflate grades.

Another method would be to adopt a new grading scale that involves more than five ranges. Many universities are actually using a “+/-” to each letter grade. So this system would then result in 13 actual letter grades as compared to the commonly used five grade system of “A”, “B”, “C”, “D” and “F”. This would prevent instructors from being lenient and “bumping” borderline students to the next higher letter grade.

Universities could develop and implement strict policies that prevent the “curving” of grades. In the absence of any such clearly articulate policies, individual instructors are free to devise creative ways of grade inflation by resorting to “curving”. Several methods of curving of grades exist, including, curving grades based on the highest grade in the class, awarding bonus points to students, building in bonus points in the examination itself, dropping the lowest test score, replacing the lowest test score with the final exam score, counting homework, attendance, and quiz points as bonus, or simply dropping the respective floors of the grade ranges to where even an average of 75 is an “A” in the class and a 40 is a passing grade. Others curve by giving each student at least 50 points in the course and then add more points for each correct answer. Some give students 100 points to being with and then take away points for wrong answers. This method is commonly used and can result in severe grade inflation where subjectivity is involved.

Finally, students could be required to pass externally developed national exit examinations before being allowed to graduate. The Major Field Test in different disciplines developed by the Education Testing Service (ETS) is a good

example of this method. The results from such an examination can then be used to identify possible areas of obvious grade inflation. For example, if students from a particular major with high GPAs score poorly in their own discipline area, this would clearly be evidence of grade inflation. Once these courses are identified then the department chair and dean can then take appropriate measures to prevent grade inflation in future.



CONCLUSION

Grading is an important tool in the realm of academia and should be used constructively and wisely. To indulge in or succumb to grade inflation is to demean the value of education and to cheat the students, potential employers, the University,

and oneself. Grade inflation does not help anyone in the long run.

Grade inflation must be fought at all levels by faculty everywhere. It is not good for one solitary faculty member to fight grade inflation in an entire University. Although it speaks to the credit of the faculty member, in all possibility all it will earn him would be the animosity of the students and possibly visits to the department chair's or dean's office for a discussion on his/her grading policies.

This paper attempts to explore the nature, purpose, and importance of grading to academia. It also thoroughly examines the grade inflation problem and suggests possible solutions for avoiding it.

REFERENCES

- i. Cohen, Henry, "Inflated Grades, Deflated Courses: How Insecurity Induced Compromise," *Change*, Volume 16, No. 4 (May/June, 1984), pp.8-10.
- ii. Goldman, Louis, "The Betrayal of the Gatekeepers: Grade Inflation," *The Journal of General Education*, Volume 36, No. 2 (1985), pp. 97-121.
- iii. Leo, John, "A for Effort, Or for Showing Up," *U.S. News and World Report*, October 18, 1993, p.22.
- iv. Mansfield, Harvey C., "Grade Inflation: It's Time to Face the Facts," *The Chronicle Review*, April 6, 2001, p. B24.
- v. Merrow, John, "Grade Inflation: It's Not Just an Issue for the Ivy League," *The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*, 2003.
- vi. Shea, Christopher, "Grade Inflation's Consequences," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Volume XXXX, No. 18 (January 5, 1994), A45-A46.