Grade Conflation: a Question of Credibility

By RICHARD KAMBER and MARY BIGGS

Grade inflation is back in the news. Several months ago, Harvard University stirred media attention with a report that, in 2001, half of its undergraduate grades were A or A-minus. More recently, a second report, sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, marshaled statistical evidence of nationwide grade inflation and suggested ways for institutions to improve their evaluation of student performance.

Although such renewed attention is a welcome sign that the country is beginning to take a long-neglected problem seriously, both reports fall short of describing grade inflation's pervasive grip on American higher education. The problem is not only that most institutions have accepted grading practices that persistently blur the distinction between good and outstanding performance, while they award passing grades for showing up and turning in work -- even when that work is poor. It is also that students and faculty members, administrators and trustees, accrediting bodies, and higher-education associations have been united for more than 25 years in their willingness to ignore, excuse, or compromise with grade inflation rather than fight it.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, when grade inflation first surged, it was widely regarded as an embarrassment, if not a scandal. Today it is widely accepted as a fact of academic life. The institution where we teach, the College of New Jersey, is no exception. In the fall of 2001, A's and A-minus's accounted for 43 percent of all grades (A's alone made up 26 percent), B's accounted for another 38 percent, and C's for just 13 percent. Only 3 percent were D's, and only 3 percent were F's.

If our colleagues have learned to live with grade inflation, why are we so against it?

Grade inflation subverts the primary function of grades. Grades are messages. They are means of telling students -- and subsequently, parents, employers, and graduate schools -- how well or poorly those students have done. A grade that misrepresents a student's performance sends a false message. It tells a lie. The point of using more than one passing grade (usually D through A) is to differentiate levels of successful performance among one's students. Inflating grades to please or encourage students is confusing and ultimately self-defeating.

Unlike price inflation, where one might try to keep pace with the declining value of a currency by paying out more of that currency, grade inflation is trapped by the upper limit of the grading system. When the highest grade ceases to identify a student's work as outstanding, the grades below it also lose power to recognize and reward appropriately, as well. Thus, we find the phrase "grade inflation" misleading and prefer to speak instead of "grade conflation."

The worst results of grade conflation come from giving too many A's as well as too few F's. When A no longer distinguishes outstanding from good, teachers lack a formal means to inspire the long reach, the passionate striving, that is the only way students ever achieve their academic potential. On the other end of the scale, great damage has also been done by the metamorphosis of F from an academic grade for "failing to do acceptable college-level work" into a disciplinary category for "failing to come to class" or "failing to submit assignments."

By passing students for going through the motions of learning, faculty members and their institutions are adopting the practice of social promotion that has stripped high-school diplomas of credibility. Thousands of college graduates are staffing businesses, teaching children, providing critical social
services, and even winning admittance to graduate and professional schools without having mastered college-level skills or knowledge.

With four out of five students graduating with GPA's of B-minus or better, with a college degree ensuring neither knowledge of subject matter nor basic skills, employers and graduate schools have had to rely on other measures to sift applicants. Standardized-test scores and institutional "reputation" have become more important than the judgments of teachers and scholars. The discouragement of excellence, the concealment of failure, the torpedoing of our own credibility: harsh accusations, hard to believe, and yet these are the consequences of grade conflations.

Grade conflations have prevailed for decades on campuses because it links in unwitting collusion all of the constituencies involved in providing, receiving, and paying for higher education. Legislators, accrediting bodies, and trustees urge institutions to strive for better retention rates. Presidents and provosts goad departments to attract and retain majors by apportioning resources on the basis of enrollments. Deans and department chairs overemphasize the importance of high ratings on student evaluations for reappointment, tenure, and promotion. Faculty members, enmeshed in this perverse reward system, follow the path of least resistance and rationalize their conduct. Students, conditioned by grade conflations in high schools and convinced that high grades are essential to future success, campaign for lenient policies on the dropping and retaking of courses and the expunging of unwanted grades.

Given the pervasive and tenacious grip of grade conflations, what can be done to correct it?

The American Academy of Arts and Sciences report, by Henry Rosovsky, a professor emeritus of economics at Harvard, and Matthew Hartley, a higher-education lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania, endorses a number of conventional suggestions for dealing with this problem at the institutional level: sharing grade-distribution data within departments and schools, establishing curves for large classes, and including mean class grades on transcripts, among others. Yet the authors don't deal with the need for national and regional leadership, nor the conversion of individual faculty members.

Now is an opportune moment for other national associations and agencies to follow the academy's lead and sponsor further research and debate on grading practices. In addition, regional and professional accrediting bodies should require the institutions and programs they accredit to provide grade-distribution data. They should also recommend standards for grading practices. Accreditors must recognize that giving low grades for low performance -- even if this causes students to transfer, drop out, or fail -- is not only a legitimate college function, but is essential to the fulfillment of the academic mission in society. Yes, institutions should offer support services for students with special needs, but their adequacy should be assessed by examining the actual services, not raw retention rates.

Given national and regional backing, individual institutions will be in a stronger position to initiate the steps that Rosovsky and Hartley endorse. Meanwhile, colleges must also handle student evaluations differently. Rather than deferring to "overall" course ratings, institutions should focus on specific objectives. More attention should be paid to students' written comments, especially those that reveal the extent to which class time was used productively and not just amusingly, the work demanded of them, and the perceived rigor of grading. Moreover, colleges should always examine student evaluations in tandem with grading data.

Although nationwide reform can gradually change the way everyone perceives grades, the success of grade reform will, in the end, depend on the commitment of individual faculty members to giving
grades that tell the truth about performance. For most teachers, lenient grading is habit-forming. It requires less work, thought, and courage than rigorous grading. Mulling over student work and providing detailed feedback demand time and patience. Student complaints about fair, but uncomplimentary, grades are aggravating. No student challenges an A, and most can live with a B, but a grade of D or F must be explained in detail, and may still be protested.

It is painful to watch a student dissolve in tears or to be shunned in a corridor rather than greeted with a smile. Yet that pain is more than offset when a student strives and improves. Hearing a student say, "You're tough, but I learned so much," should be more satisfying to an educator than a hundred refrains of "You're so nice and your classes are really fun," or "I love when you bring doughnuts."

For the sake of everyone involved and the integrity of higher education, the fight against grade conflation needs to be joined at the national, regional, institutional, and individual levels. Will the leaders please step forward?

Richard Kamber is a professor of philosophy and the chairman of the department of philosophy and religion at the College of New Jersey. Mary Biggs is a professor of English at the college.

Copyright © 2002 by The Chronicle of Higher Education