

Grade Inflation, Compression, and Inequality

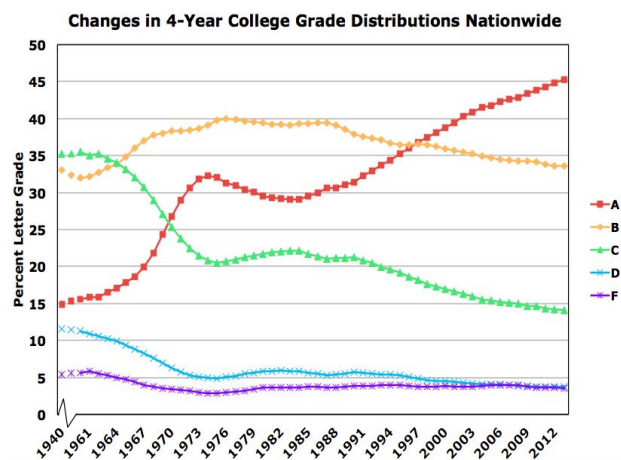
Prepared by Rachael Barlow, October 10, 2018

HISTORY

That college students have been earning increasingly better grades has been a topic of concern in and out of the academy since at least the late 1960s.¹ For many, it is a sign of grade inflation, or the “student attainment of higher grades independent of increased levels of academic attainment” (Eiszler, 2002, p. 489). Signs of grade inflation are worrisome in light of research that suggests current college students now spend less time studying than previous generations.²

Particularly well-known are Rojstaczer and Healy, who maintain the website gradeinflation.com. On their website and in published articles (2010, 2012), they use aggregated data across US institutions to highlight that:

- Grades began rising in the 1960s, leveled off in the late 1970s and rose again in the 1980s.
- By 2012, A’s were 43% of all grades (see graph).
- Private institutions award more A’s and B’s than public institutions of similar selectivity. Faculty at southern and STEM schools grade more harshly.



Others, Adelman (2008) chief among them, claim that national studies and media accounts exaggerate the problem of grade inflation. Aggregated data, they argue, masks a variety of demographic, policy, and pedagogical shifts. When taking into account these shifts, what looks like grade inflation might not be because:

- **Current students may be better prepared** and so deserve the better grades they receive, while the more significant rise in grades seen at more elite institutions may be an artifact of these institutions’ more competitive admissions processes.
- **Current faculty may be better equipped to teach.** Armed with student-centered pedagogies, support systems and staff, and various mechanisms that catch students who are falling behind, they are increasingly able to motivate students and improve their academic performance and learning.³
- **Institutions have fewer general education and other curricular requirements.** Students can thus avoid demanding courses and departments and gravitate towards courses and majors they will enjoy or in which they expect to earn higher grades.
- **Alternative grading options are increasingly common.** Lenient late-withdrawal policies and pass/fail courses eliminate some of the poor grades that would otherwise be factored into the aggregate measures that cause many to voice concerns about grade inflation.⁴

¹ Biggs (2008) argues that concerns about grade inflation actually date back to the turn of the twentieth century.

² Babcock & Marks (2011) report that college students spent, on average, 14 hours studying per week, down from 24 hours in 1961. Meanwhile, the 2009 CIRP survey found that 21% of first-year students reported spending “10 hours or fewer” on academics in high school (Ruiz, Sharkness, Kelly, DeAngelo & Pryor, 2010, p. 8).

³ Hunt (2008) suggests that student-centered pedagogies may have risen in response to the increased use of teaching evaluations and are not necessarily better pedagogies than what came before.

⁴ Notably, Adelman (2008) has also argued the opposite: that the courses mostly likely to have been converted to pass/fail in recent years are those in which students earned As in the past (experiential learning courses, etc.).

- **Current faculty have changed how they grade.** They have moved away from norm-referenced approaches to grading (i.e. using a bell curve to distribute student grades) and towards criterion-referenced grading, in which it is possible for all students to earn As in a course as long as they meet its established criteria.

While each of these explanations may have some merit, some national studies that use the student as the unit of analysis, and can thus control for various student characteristics, *do* observe **moderate signs grade inflation** (Kostal, Kuncel, & Sackett, 2016; Kuh & Hu, 1999). So do **institutional studies** that take into account local policy variation and idiosyncratic student populations (Bar, Kadiyali, & Zussman, 2009; Butcher, McEwan & Weerapana, 2014; McSpirt & Jones, 1999; Princeton, 2014).

CAUSES

Scholars mention a set of interrelated causes for the inflation that the above studies find. Some are speculative, not having not been studied empirically. Others are disputed, but still deserve mention here. For example:

- **Students may think differently about their role** in college. They are more likely to view their enrollment from the perspective of a consumer paying for a service. “Grade grubbing,” or what Franz (2010) calls “students’ nuisance,” is a natural extension of this point of view and may become more common as students come from increasingly grade-inflated high schools.⁵
- **Faculty may think differently about their role** in assigning grades. They are increasingly reluctant to play gatekeeper to students’ educational and professional opportunities and engage in the sorting of students. This shift in thinking may have begun with (or was at least accentuated by) the Vietnam War when, it is often reported, faculty inflated male students’ grades to help them stay in school and avoid the draft.
- Increased reliance on **student evaluations of teaching** to inform personnel decisions may encourage some faculty to trade inflated grades for job security.
- The increased reliance on **adjuncts** has produced a set of faculty whose positions are insecure and who may not be well enculturated into a department’s or institution’s academic standards. They may be especially prone to assigning inflated grades.
- **Faculty compete** with each other for course enrollments. This may cause some faculty to inflate grades to attract students to their courses and majors.
- **Institutions compete** for students (i.e. tuition, revenue), while low retention rates, job placement rates, and alumni satisfaction can affect rankings. Inflating grades may allow institutions to elevate retention and satisfaction rates and give their alumni advantages in the marketplace.⁶
- The “**individualist nature of teaching**” (McCabe & Powell, 2004, p. 211) limits faculty members’ ability to align their academic standards and philosophies in ways that might limit grade inflation.
- To preserve time to meet heightened research expectations and to avoid the bureaucratic response that often follows the assignation of a poor grade, some faculty may actually be **holding students to lower academic standards**.

⁵ An increasing number of public high schools require their teachers to use “standard-based grading” in which teachers must only grade student work on what it demonstrates students can *do*, and not on extraneous behaviors like whether they turned their work in on time.

⁶ Kamber (2008) argues that similar institutional competition for enrollments occurred in the 1970s in response to the decline in college-bound students at that time and may have been partially to blame for that period’s grade inflation (p. 53).

CONSEQUENCES

Many argue that grade inflation, and the grade compression it causes, has consequences that we should not ignore:

- **We give students misleading information** about their skills, limiting their ability to learn and mismatching them to intellectual and professional opportunities. As Kamber (2008) puts it, “what [grade inflation] harms *most directly* is the capacity of grades to provide meaningful information to students” (p. 57).
- **We give departments unclear information** about students’ readiness to take higher-level courses after completing lower-level ones (Sabot & Wakeman-Linn, 1992, p. 169). Prerequisite structures become less useful if grade inflation inappropriately promotes students to the next level of a discipline.
- **We give employers and graduate schools unclear distinctions** about students.⁷ Consequently, those making hiring and admissions decisions may find other ways to differentiate candidates. Goldman (1985) worried that employers would turn to more formal mechanisms, like standardized tests controlled by ETS, while Rovosky et al. (2002) predicted that decision-makers will turn to *informal* mechanisms, like personal evaluations delivered through phone calls and emails, that advantage better-networked, more privileged students (p. 12). Babcock and Marks (2011) argue that employers are already less dependent on grades to evaluate job candidates. Instead, they are more sensitive to the prestige of the institutions from which students come. In other words, the college from which students graduate is the main differentiator to which employers turn, not the grades students earn while they are in college.
- **We give members of the public reason one more reason to distrust us**, since they may view the grade inflation they often hear about in the media as evidence of declining standards that appear to be at odds with rising tuition costs.

We should, however, distinguish between grade inflation and **grade inequality**, “when similar quality student work receives different grades across departments, courses, or sections” (Aufderheide et al., 2016, p. 4). Aufderheide et al. argue that while grade inflation is somewhat of a problem, grade inequality is a bigger one, since it results in uneven experiences for students. For example:

- Students’ course choices are sensitive to grades in ways that may **disadvantage some subpopulations**. For example, Butcher et al. (2014) suggest that women are more likely to choose courses to maintain a high GPA, and so move away from fields in which they are already underrepresented (p. 202). Bar et al. (2009) found a similar pattern with weaker students.
- Institutions often steer support services (tutoring, etc.) towards departments and courses where students are more likely to earn Ds and Fs (Butcher, McEwan & Weerapana, 2014). **Departments with grade inflation may miss out on funds to deliver services** from which their students could benefit.

⁷ Notably, Pattison, Grodsky & Muller (2013) present evidence to the contrary--that grades still have “signaling power”--but the concern remains. And Adelman (2008) argues that schools have ways to supplement grades with other signals of strong and poor student performance (recommendation letters, Phi Beta Kappa and other honor societies, placement on academic probation, etc.).

POLICY INTERVENTIONS

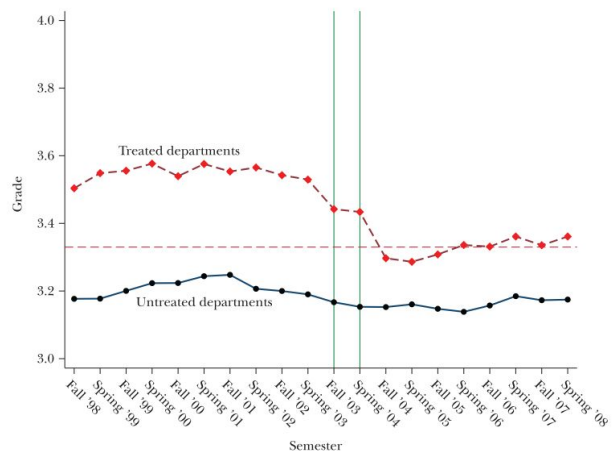
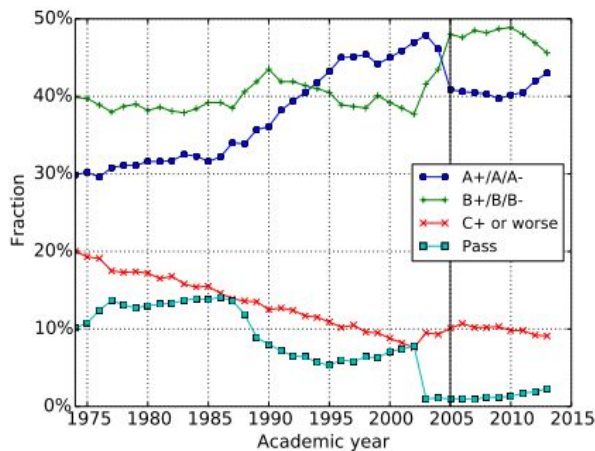
Some institutions have implemented policies intended to curb grade inflation. One method is to **put grades in context** for both students and faculty by publicizing course grade distributions. For example, at **Indiana University**, the *Expanded Context Record* is an addendum to students' transcripts that includes, among other items, how many students in a course section earned the same grade or better as the student in question. IU also posts a database of grade distributions that anyone can query.⁸

Meanwhile, in 1998, **Cornell** began posting median course grades online for public viewing. It discontinued the practice in 2011, after finding that the practice did not curb inflation and that it encouraged weaker students to enroll in courses known for higher grades (Bar, Kadiyali, & Zussman, 2009). Like IU, Cornell also posts median course grades on students' transcripts, a practice it began in 2008 and continues to this day (Aufderheide et al, 2016, p. 16).

More controversial is the practice of **rationing grades**, in other words, prescribing specific grade distributions for courses of certain levels or sizes (Aufderheide et al., 2016, p. 15). In 2005, **Princeton** mandated that departments limit the proportion of A-range work awarded to 35% of students (50% for tutorials and other independent work). The policy ended in 2014, after a committee argued that:

1. Standardizing grades across departments, an initial goal of the policy, was impossible when departments vary in their provision of service courses;
2. The brief deflation of grades after 2005 (see first graph below) was caused by the faculty's dialogue about academic standards prior to the policy's implementation, not the policy itself; and
3. The policy lowered the admission yield and unnecessarily raised student anxiety (Princeton, 2014).

In 2004, **Wellesley** legislated that the average grade in large 100- and 200-level classes⁹ cannot be above a B+ (Butcher, McEwan & Weerapana, 2014). In departments most affected by the policy--those in the social sciences and humanities--students were 18% less likely to earn an A or A- (see second graph below). This policy is still in effect today. It now exists along a shadow-grading policy, instituted in 2013, that allows only Pass/Fall grades to appear on first-year, first-semester students' transcripts.¹⁰



⁸ See <http://gradedistribution.registrar.indiana.edu/>

⁹ Defined as having more than 10 students.

¹⁰ See https://www.wellesley.edu/registrar/grading/grading_policy/shadow_grading_policy/node/42290

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