Changing the Grading Culture at the University of Oregon

The Problem
A systematic analysis of grading trends at UO from 1992-2004 was commissioned by the Undergraduate Council (UGC). That study (http://tiny.cc/brPcR) documented:

- The proportion of A’s increased by 10%
- The proportion of A’s and B’s together increased by 7%
- There is differential grade inflation across UO, with variation by school/college and CAS division
- Despite grade inflation, SAT scores of incoming students showed only a modest increase in the math portion of the test and no change in the verbal section

The extent of grade inflation at UO is comparable to national-level data (Figure 1; http://www.gradeinflation.com/).

- GPA increase at UO over the period of study was 5% – about the same as the national average

![Detailed Trends in Grade Inflation Nationwide](image)

**Figure 1.** Grade inflation at selected US universities.

One important aspect of grade inflation is grade compression.

- It has become difficult or impossible to distinguish passable work from good work, and good work from outstanding work
- At the same time, there has been a documented shift by university students towards an expectation of high grades
  - The common assumption by many students is that grades reward effort or good intentions rather than performance – some students believe that merely showing up and doing minimal work deserves an A or at least a B

Very few published, official guidelines presently exist at UO on what grades mean.

- The only university-wide statement addressing what grades mean is the definition of letter grades in the UO catalog: A, Excellent; B, Good; C, Satisfactory; D, Inferior; F, Unsatisfactory (no credit awarded)
  - There is no discussion of the purpose of grades or the university’s grading philosophy
- There is uneven use of grades by individual faculty and across academic units
  - Many students are aware of differences in grade distributions across departments/majors and evidence suggests that some students respond to these differences by steering clear of courses, departments, and majors where grading is considered rigorous
- Further, grading practices can influence students’ evaluation of instructors, which can influence promotion and tenure decisions, and may steer instructors away from candid, realistic grading

The conclusion by the UGC is that grade inflation/compression at UO is real and is harmful.

- The fundamental meaning and value of grades has been lost and transcripts are less useful
Possible Solutions
The UGC examined strategies for combating grade inflation that have been implemented at other universities in the US and Canada. However, there is little published evidence on the effectiveness of various solutions.

- One exception is Princeton’s highly publicized (and successful) effort to combat grade inflation by capping at a departmental level the percentage of A’s; however, we feel that this solution is overly draconian and do not recommend implementing it at UO
- Other solutions have not been systematically evaluated; however, anecdotal evidence has shown that certain strategies, such as providing contextual information on transcripts (e.g., at Indiana University and Columbia), show promise in combating grade inflation

Proposed Solutions
The UGC decided in 2008-2009 to take several steps to combat grade inflation at UO, including changing student culture by educating incoming students on the meaning of grades, and implementing a series of university-level changes in order to clarify grading practices within and between units.

In 2008-2009, the UGC worked with the Office of Undergraduate Studies as well as the larger community of academic advisors and student affairs staff to implement several key changes beginning with the 2009-2010 freshman class. The changes are meant to explain to new students (and their parents) at the outset how our grading criteria at UO may differ from the ones they have encountered previously. The changes were made in new student orientation programs, such as IntroDUCKtion, and are being reinforced through FIGs and residential experiences during the freshman year.

The UGC is also recommending that UO explore implementation of several campus-wide solutions. The UGC feels strongly that we need to hear comments and suggestions on the recommended changes from the larger campus community. The UGC proposes three specific strategies:

1. Each department and undergraduate program should discuss its grading practices and formulate a rationale for them that will be available to their faculty and students, as well as the rest of the university academic community through the department/program website
   - Departments should also discuss the degree to which grade inflation threatens to compromise their evaluation practices and, if appropriate, develop discipline-specific ways to address inflation

2. Instructors of record should receive a report of the grade distributions in their undergraduate courses, plus the average grade distributions in other courses that are considered comparable by their departments. These summaries would not be publicly posted. This information will allow instructors and department chairs to examine individual grading practices in relation to the following:
   - An individual’s own practice in the same or similar courses over time
   - The department’s practice in comparable courses offered that term (if any)
   - The department’s practice in comparable courses offered over time

3. Grades reported on transcripts should be accompanied by contextual information that indicates the frequency with which students in those courses earned higher or lower grades. This contextual information provides a way for transcript readers to more effectively evaluate grades in a grade-inflated environment. Several different kinds of context information are in use (e.g., mean grade, median grade, and percent A-range grades). The UGC proposes adopting this general approach and deciding later the specific information to be reported. To preserve confidentiality, the context would not be reported for courses with low enrollments (e.g., <20 students).

The UGC also recommends that UO publicize its efforts to combat grade inflation in order to minimize the potential negative impacts (e.g., acceptance of our students into post-graduate programs). This would likely include a statement on all transcripts describing our commitment to addressing grade inflation at UO.

For more information or to comment on this proposal, contact the UGC through the council chair (Ian McNeely; imcneely@uoregon.edu, 346-4791).