

## EXAMPLES OF RESPONSES TO GRADE INFLATION

The Undergraduate Council's examination of grading patterns in University of Oregon undergraduate courses from 1992 to 2004 revealed significant grade inflation (see the attached Grade Inflation Report, February 2006). This pattern is not unique to the University of Oregon, and similar trends nationally have prompted a significant number of colleges and universities to respond locally within their own campus communities. For example, the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Princeton, Georgia Institute of Technology, and Indiana University are addressing the problem of grade inflation. UNC introduced its report with the following anecdote to sum up the state of grading and student grade expectations at UNC in February 2000:

A faculty colleague recounts meeting a former student:

"I took your course last year and it was the worst experience of my life."

Oh?

"Well, I mean, I enjoyed the course and I learned a lot, but it just about destroyed my GPA."

[Fearing the worst] What grade did you receive?

"A **B+**."

Current efforts to improve matters are motivated by the understanding that faculty responsibility for the curriculum includes an obligation to provide meaningful evaluation of student work. Such evaluation requires a clear understanding of the meaning of each grade, and the capacity to distinguish multiple degrees of mastery of subject matter. At the same time, this responsibility is balanced by academic freedom, which allows faculty members to grade as they deem appropriate. Clearly, if the UO decides to distinguish itself as one of the institutions attempting to address the problem of grade inflation, faculty members will need to collaborate within their departments to develop approaches that respect both the responsibility and the freedom involved in the act of grading students.

We recognize that curbing grade inflation is difficult. A number of market forces favor the tendency to award high grades, and there is concern that if grade deflation is not universal, UO students will be at a disadvantage with respect to their peers at other institutions. On the other hand, inaction will quickly lead to a grading system that is of little value. The growing public demand for standardized proficiency demonstrations may well be prompted by the lack of evaluative information in college grades. From this perspective, if the University of Oregon were to succeed in curtailing grade inflation, our students would likely benefit from the University's enhanced reputation for rigor.

In the interest of stimulating a productive campus-wide conversation, the Undergraduate Council has considered possible ways to curb grade inflation on our campus and has compiled

them in Section I below. These ideas represent an initial frame for the conversation and should not be confused with recommendations. Any recommendations that come forward will do so through a process of campus-wide discussion coupled with further research into their feasibility. The Council has also gathered approaches that are already practiced by some individual UO units or by other AAU institutions. These practices are summarized in Sections II and III, and are available in complete form on the Undergraduate Council website (<http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/~ucouncil>) under “Resources & Links”. Section IV is a summary of some additional topics that came up during the Council’s discussion of grade inflation. Many of these are potential causes of grade inflation. Although they are worth noting, the Council discovered that establishing causality for a phenomenon as complex as this one is next to impossible. It is our belief that the most productive course of action at this point is to identify policies that have the potential to curtail grade inflation, but do not require a detailed understanding of its cause(s).

**Next steps:** We expect that a lively campus-wide discussion of the Grade Inflation Report will generate many proposals for action. We invite all interested members of the academic community to participate and to send ideas to the Undergraduate Council, in care of Cathy Kraus ([ckraus@uoregon.edu](mailto:ckraus@uoregon.edu)). Contributions will be posted on the Undergraduate Council website. After discussion and feedback during Spring Term of this year (2005/06), we anticipate formulating recommendations based on the ideas that emerge. An approximate time table would put the Council’s consideration of possible recommendations in Fall Term 2006, and a motion to the University Senate in early in Winter Term 2007.

## **I. Possible ways to curb grade inflation**

### **A. Collect and disseminate grading patterns**

The Registrar’s Office could periodically disseminate grade distributions for all CRNs in a standard form to the appropriate departments/schools and individual faculty. For example, faculty might be given grade distributions for their own courses, and for comparable ones, at the end of each term. Broader comparisons of grading patterns – among departments and schools and colleges - could be made available on a yearly cycle.

### **B. Articulate the meaning of grade levels and develop departmental grading guidelines**

- 1) For the university as a whole, faculty could define what each grade level means. Although formal grade definitions are provided in the UO Catalog (“A, excellent” and so forth), the subject is not emphasized and is seldom discussed. It might be useful to elaborate the current one-word definitions.

- 2) P/NP could be substituted for the letter grade option in certain kinds of classes – for example, performance-based classes, *practica*, or classes in which, historically, no significant distribution of grades exists.
- 3) Each department could establish guidelines for grading -- such as the GPA range that is appropriate for certain kinds of courses or the % of As and Bs that is expected in them. Grade distributions could be included in the departments' evaluations of teaching performance. Grading guidelines, and the use of grade distributions in evaluation, should be accompanied by a plan for review and improvement over time.
- 4) Practices and progress in limiting grade inflation could be monitored and compared with relevant national standards, such as those at AAU institutions. Locally, departmental grading guidelines, and annual reports of progress, could be submitted to the Vice President for Academic Affairs for review.

### **C. Present UO grading philosophy and expectations clearly**

- 1) Before they begin teaching, new faculty members, including GTFs, could be introduced to university philosophy and departmental guidelines related to grading.
- 2) New students could be clearly informed of general UO grading practices as part of their orientation to the university. If needed, more specific information could be provided by individual departments or programs.
- 3) To provide an appropriate context for grades earned by UO students, the university could communicate its effort to eliminate grade inflation to external constituents such as employers, parents, alumni and donors.
- 4) Contextual information for grades could be provided on transcripts. For example, the mean grade for each CRN and the deviation of the individual student's grade from the mean could be included.

## **II. Anti-grade inflation measures already in use at UO**

### **A. Lundquist College of Business**

#### **LCB QUARTERLY GRADE REPORT**

At the end of each term, the LCB emails an Excel file to all LCB faculty members (tenured, tenure-track, instructor, adjunct, GTF) and to all LCB administrators responsible for academic programs. The file includes the following categories of information for all sections of all courses offered that term:

- Subject Code
- Course #
- Instructor's Name
- CRN
- Number of A's Given / Percentage of A's Given
- # of B's / % of B's
- # of C's / % of C's
- # of D's / % of D's
- # of F/N's / % of F/N's
- Total Number of Grades Given
- GPA for that Section
- GPA Guidelines for that Section (See "Guidelines" below)
- Variance from the Guidelines
- Five-Year Average for that Course
- Variance from the Five-Year Average

### LCB GRADING GUIDELINES

"The table below lists the guidelines developed by the LCB for undergraduate and masters courses. We recognize that there is variation in ability and effort of students. However, we believe the standards listed below are sufficiently broad to accommodate reasonable variation in performance. Department heads, program directors and the associate deans will monitor grades awarded relative to these guidelines, provide quarterly information on grade distributions, and follow-up on significant exceptions." (excerpted from LCB policy document, fall-2002)

#### Average Grade Point Ranges by Type of Classes

| Class Level                        | Average Grade Point Range |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Undergraduate Pre-Business Classes | 2.3 - 2.8                 |
| Undergraduate Minor Classes        | 2.7 - 3.2                 |
| Undergraduate Major Core Classes   | 2.6 - 3.1                 |
| Undergraduate Major Electives      | 2.7 - 3.2                 |
| Undergraduate Honors Classes       | 3.2 - 3.5                 |
| MBA Core Classes                   | 3.1 - 3.4                 |
| Other Masters Classes              | 3.2 - 3.5                 |

## **B. Economics Department**

### **ECONOMICS DEPARTMENT GRADING POLICY      Fall 2000**

"The department rule-of-thumb for percent A's and B's (excluding grades of P, NP, I, X, and W) for undergraduate courses will be 55% for lower division courses, i.e., Ec 101, 201, and 202; and 65% for 300-level and 400-level upper division courses (excluding Ec 411, 413, 423, 424, and 425). Reasonable deviations of course would be expected, for example when a class does quite well or quite poorly. But we expect deviations (WITH RARE EXCEPTION) to lie within 10 percentage points of the above-stated means."

## **III. Anti-grade inflation measures at other institutions**

### **A. Perspectives on the Problem of Grade Inflation**

#### **EVALUATION AND THE ACADEMY: ARE WE DOING THE RIGHT THING?**

By Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley

What are the characteristics of a good grading system?

- It should be rigorous, accurate, and permit meaningful distinctions among students in applying a uniform standard of performance.
- It should be fair to students and candid to those who are entitled to information about students.
- It should be supportive of learning and helpful to students in achieving their educational goals.

Short of a fundamental systemic overhaul or return to an earlier day, neither of which are realistic possibilities, we review various suggestions that are contained in the literature.

#### **GRADE INFLATION ...WHY IT'S A NIGHTMARE\***

By Jonathan Dresner

#### **Solutions Already Being Tried**

There are a few active attempts to solve the problems of grade inflation and educational effectiveness. Some of them are at the level of the individual school; more come from 'suggestions' of accrediting agencies; post-graduation testing is already standard in graduate school admissions and certain professional arenas.

Colleges and universities have tried a variety of techniques to deflate grades. Some have adjusted their grading systems: Princeton instituted a limit to A-level grades. Harvard adjusted its GPA calculation to narrow the A-/B+ gap and that has reportedly been effective in reducing the A-level overload slightly.

## **B. Steps Taken Elsewhere to Curb Grade Inflation**

### **Princeton University**

#### **GRADING POLICIES IN UNDERGRADUATE COURSES AND INDEPENDENT WORK**

Beginning with fall term 2004-05, grades awarded at Princeton University reflect new institutional grading expectations for undergraduate courses and independent work ... Princeton's new expectations posit a common grading standard for every academic department and program, under which A's (A+, A, A-) shall account for less than 35 percent of the grades given in undergraduate courses and less than 55 percent of the grades given in junior and senior independent work. These percentages are consistent with historical grading patterns at Princeton for the two decades between the early 1970s and the early 1990s. For departments that have maintained these patterns over the last decade, the new policy will affirm established practice. For other departments, the new policy will mark a significant break with recent practice. Overall, implementing the new expectations across the University will, at least at present, set Princeton's grade distribution well apart from those of its closest peers.

### **Indiana University**

#### **THE EXPANDED GRADE CONTEXT RECORD**

by Mark McConahay and Roland Coté

... The Faculty Council charged its Educational Policies Committee (EPC) to develop a grade-indexing scheme that would put individual student grades into a context that would be meaningful to students as well as to all others who viewed the information. The result, introduced in the spring of 1998, is IU's Expanded Grade Context Record, a system that generates a student record that includes elements from a traditional transcript as well as additional elements that place the grade into a broader context.<sup>1</sup> The additional information includes:

- Index (number of students in the course section receiving the same or higher grades over the total number of GPA grades awarded) Grade distribution (number of students receiving each possible grade, including withdrawals)
- Instructor name
- Class GPA (average of all GPA grades awarded in the course section)
- Average student GPA (average GPA of all students in the class who received a GPA grade)

- Majors (percentage of students in the class whose major matches the school or department offering the course).

The information in the record is distributed via standard reports such as transcripts and is also made available for inquiry via the World Wide Web. To ensure privacy, neither the index nor the context information appear when fewer than five students were enrolled in the course section or received a GPA grade.

**University of North Carolina -Chapel Hill**  
**GRADE INFLATION AT UNC – CHAPEL HILL:**  
**A REPORT TO THE FACULTY COUNCIL**  
Prepared by The Educational Policy Committee  
February 2, 2000

Principles Guiding Reform

Our study of grade inflation at UNC-Chapel Hill leads us to propose a set of principles that should guide any attempt to restore the integrity of the grading system:

1. It is the Faculty, acting through the Faculty Council, that determines the purpose and the form of the grading system. Reiterating long-standing faculty policy we assert that the purpose of grades is to identify degrees of mastery of subject matter. Moreover, letter grades have specific meaning with respect to the mastery of that material ...
2. Grades measure performance, not innate ability or individual worth. They should fulfill the functions described above, and only those functions.
3. The meaning of letter grades should be widely published.
4. Schools and departments should bear the primary responsibility for maintaining the integrity of their grading systems, but they must be responsible to the University as a whole.
5. Grading practices of schools, departments and instructors should be public information and departmental standards should be subject to ongoing faculty review.
6. The forces that pressure instructors to award high grades should be reduced to a minimum.
7. The faculty, acting through the Faculty Council, must have the means at its disposal to insure the integrity of the grading system.

### Some Suggested Reforms

The principles just enumerated suggest some specific reforms that might help to achieve them:

- ~ The Faculty Council should adopt clear quantitative guidelines for the grading system at UNC-Chapel Hill.
- ~ The faculty needs the ability to insure that the norms of the grading system are observed.
- ~ At the beginning of each academic year, the Chair of the Faculty should send to the parents of all incoming freshmen a letter that details the substantive meaning of the grading system and informs them as to the distribution of grades to be found at UNC.

### **Georgia Institute of Technology**

#### **REPORT ON GRADE INFLATION DEFINITIONS, INTERPRETATIONS, DATA: GRADING AND GRADE INFLATION AT GEORGIA TECH**

Prepared by the Student Academic and Financial Affairs Committee of the Academic Senate, Spring 2003

This sections reviews remedies for grade inflation, both proposed and attempted by other institutions:

- . Adoption of more clear and specific grade definitions
- . Adoption of a plus/minus grading system
- . Establishment of a University/Institute average GPA
- . Expanded transcript data
- . Changes to student honors
- . Broad dissemination of grading definitions and policies
- . Training for teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, and tenure-track faculty
- . Self-calibration of grade distributions
- . External calibration of grade distributions
- . External enforcement of grade distributions
- . Standardized testing
- . Changes to student course evaluations

## **IV. Additional Topics Related to Grade Inflation that the UGC Considered**

**A. Are there courses that are “outliers” with respect to the frequency with which high grades are awarded?** Such courses could contribute to the appearance of generalized grade inflation within a unit when data are presented as averages. In



addition, they have the potential to compress a wide range in the quality of student work and thus de-value the best efforts.

**B. How do the grading practices of institutions from which our students transfer**

**compare with ours?** Are grading practices at community colleges and universities significantly different?

**C. To what extent has “syllabus deflation” occurred?** This is another form of grade inflation. As course content is reduced, the accomplishment represented by a good grade is diminished.

**D. Do opportunities for earning extra credit compress the top end of the grading scale?**

**E. Do practices concerning exceptional situations (for instance, withdrawals and grade changes after the end of term) contribute to grade inflation?**