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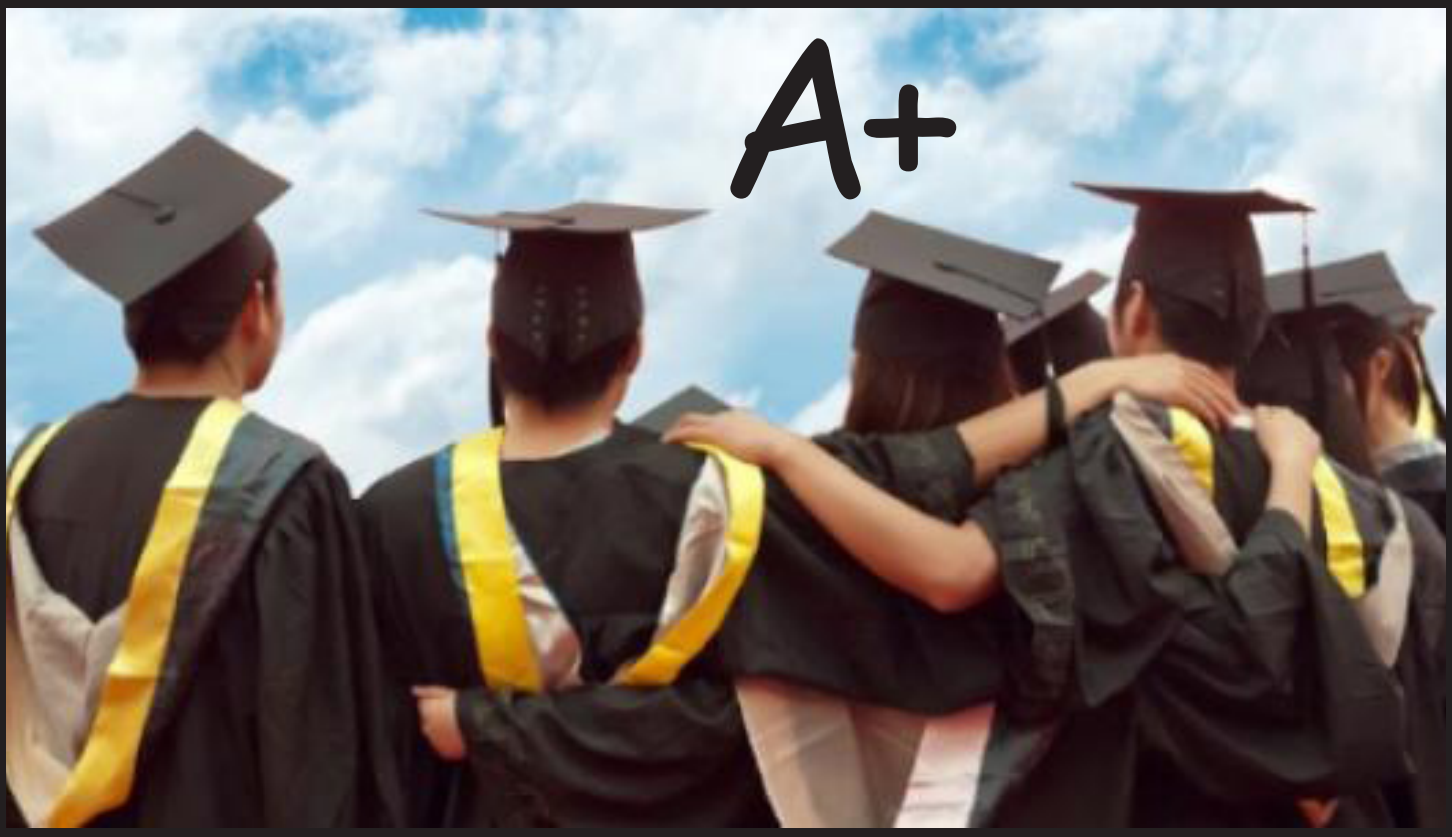
Combating the "Other" Inflation:

Arresting the Cancer of College Grade Inflation



August 2014
Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D.

Texas Public Policy
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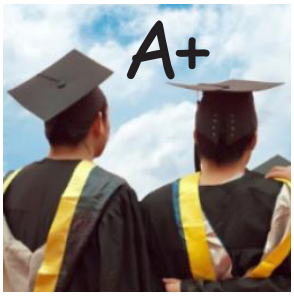
Celebrating 25 Years



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Texas Public Policy Foundation

Table of Contents

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by Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D.

Executive Summary

There is a crisis in higher education. Over the past five decades, grade inflation has been debasing academic standards and undermining morale. To begin to address this, legislation mandating transcript transparency is required.

The facts indicate the severity of the problem. In the early 1960s, 15 percent of all college grades nationwide were A's. Today, that number has nearly tripled—43 percent of all grades are A's. In fact, an A is now the most common grade given in college nationwide. Seventy-three percent of all college grades nationwide today are either A's or B's. Studies show that students reward easier-grading professors with better teacher evaluations, which are crucial in deciding faculty tenure, promotion, and salary.

As monetary inflation devalues the dollar, grade inflation debases the currency of education: student transcripts. No surprise, grade inflation makes it increasingly difficult for would-be employers to distinguish truly excellent students from those who have taken courses and majors with lax standards.

Grade inflation is most virulent in the humanities, whereas the natural sciences and mathematics have better maintained standards. As a result, and as studies show, grade inflation disincentivizes students from majoring in the sciences and mathematics—at the same time that the country cries out for more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) graduates.

Legislation requiring transparency in student transcripts, e.g., Texas' "Honest Transcript Bill," is required to alert students, their parents, taxpayers, and legislators to those schools and majors that have maintained standards and those that haven't.

Key Points

- Grade inflation is a growing cancer—diluting standards, crushing morale, and disincentivizing student effort. As monetary inflation debases the dollar, so grade inflation debases the currency of education: student transcripts.
- Grade inflation makes it increasingly difficult for would-be employers and graduate schools to distinguish truly excellent students from those who have taken courses with lax grading standards.
- Grade inflation is most virulent in the humanities, whereas the natural sciences and mathematics have maintained standards. Studies show that grade inflation thereby disincentivizes students from majoring in the sciences and mathematics.
- To arrest grade inflation, a number of colleges have implemented transcript transparency. But a much more massive comprehensive effort is required if we are successfully to address this crisis.
- Legislation requiring transparency in student transcripts, e.g., Texas' "Honest Transcript Bill" is required to alert the public to those schools and majors that have maintained standards and those that haven't.

Introduction: The Growing Alarm Over Grade Inflation

Bok: "There's no question that students are studying less. I think something happened in the 1960s in the relationship between students and faculty that shifted influence much more to the students. … So I think that there has been a significant erosion, yes."

Question: "Does that mean that in your mind the erosion has led to an erosion in the quality of an education that students walk out the door with at the end of their four years?"

Bok: "I don't think see how you can reach any other conclusion. … How much students develop and learn in college is very much related to how much of an effort they put into it. So if they are studying less, there has got to be a price to be paid in terms of the amount that they learn."

~ Interview of Derek Bok, former president of Harvard July 9, 2010, interviewed on radio station WBUR[1]

A crisis exists. Current assessment practices are flawed, and both students and faculty know it. Unregulated grading practices change student enrollment patterns and penalize students who pursue demanding curricula. They permit students to manipulate their GPAs [grade point averages] through the judicious choice of their classes rather than through the moderation of their performance in those classes. Disparities in grading also affect the way students complete end-of-course evaluation forms [of their professors' teaching performance], and so result in inequitable faculty assessments. As a consequence, academic standards are diminished. … To right the boat, two things must happen: More principled student grading practices must be adopted, and faculty assessment must be more closely linked to student achievement.

~Valen E. Johnson, *Grade Inflation* (2003)[2]

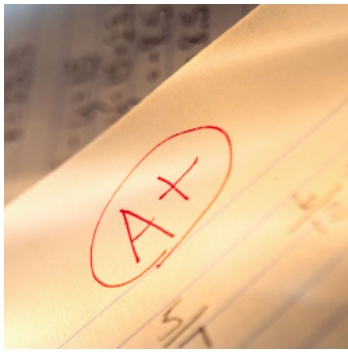
In a healthy university, it would not be necessary to say what is wrong with grade inflation. But once the evil becomes routine, people can no longer see it for what it is. Even though educators should instinctively understand why grade inflation is a problem, one has to be explicit about it. … Some of my colleagues say that all you have to do to interpret inflated grades is to recalibrate them in your mind so that a B+ equals a C, and so forth. But the compression at the top of the scale does not permit the gradation that you need to rate students accurately.

~Harvey C. Mansfield, professor of government, Harvard University[3]

Early Warning Shots: Stuart Rojstaczer's work in bringing the issue to the public's notice

According to a growing chorus of academic studies, grade inflation is real and rampant. Although the public has only recently begun to become aware of it, some universities have been keen to the dilemma for some time. For example, the Dartmouth faculty implemented a program 20 years ago by which median course grades and class size were added to student transcripts next to the individual grade each student received for each class. This it did when the faculty learned that the mean grade point average at the school had risen from 3.06 in 1968 to 3.23 by 1994. This move toward transparency notwithstanding, researcher Bradford Wilson found that, by 1999, grades of A and A- had grown at Dartmouth to 44 percent.[4] Three years, later, in 2002, Harvey C. Mansfield, professor of Government at Harvard University, wrote in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to try to alert the academic community of the peril of grade inflation.[5]

These early efforts and statements coming from within the Academy arose out of recognition that grade inflation has been occurring for a half-century. However, public awareness of the phenomenon appears not to have arisen until the last decade or so. One of the early, wide-circulation, popular press exposés of grade inflation appeared in a 2003 *Washington Post* opinion piece by Professor Stuart Rojstaczer, "Where All Grades Are Above Average." The then-professor of geophysics at Duke University confessed in the piece: "The last time I gave a C was more than two years ago. That was about the time I came to realize that my grading had become anachronistic. The C, once commonly accepted, is now the equivalent of the mark of Cain on a college transcript. I have forsworn C's ever since." He went on to explain that the data show that "not only is C an endangered species but that B, once the most popular grade at universities and colleges, has been supplanted by the former symbol of perfection, the A." At Duke, C's now represent fewer than 10 percent of all college grades, whereas in 1969, C's accounted for more than 25 percent of all grades. A's surpassed B's as the most common grade awarded in the early '90s.



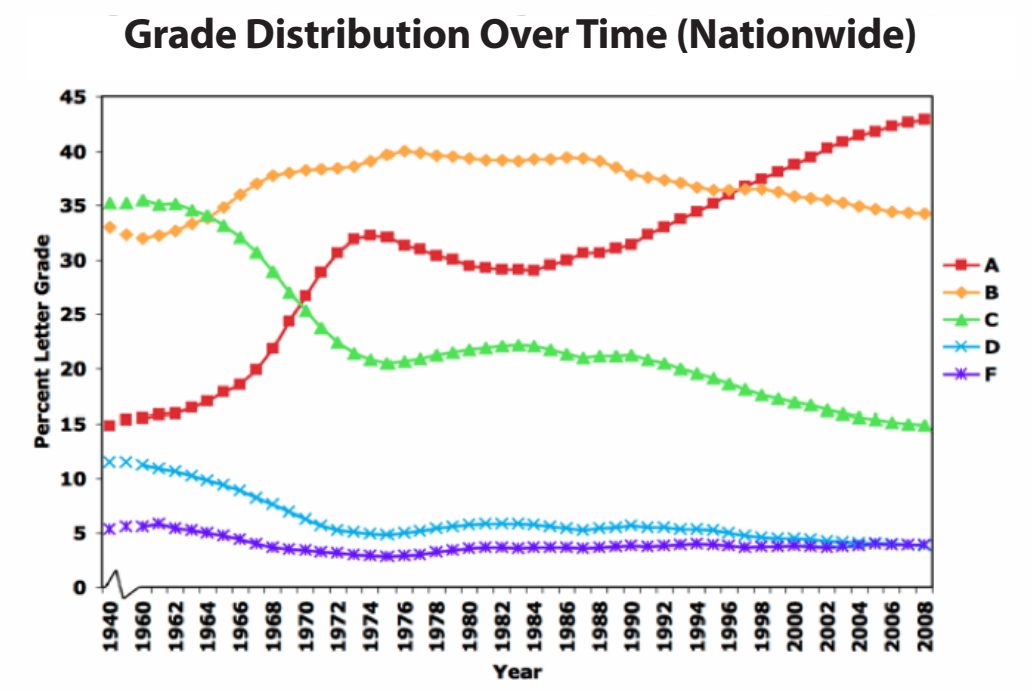
Nor, Rojstaczer argues, are private schools like Duke the only culprits in grade inflation. Far from it, in fact. He finds that, nationwide, A's constituted "more than 40 percent all grades and outnumber C's by almost three to one." He traces the fall of C's and the rise of A's to the 1960s and public unrest over the Vietnam War: "The previous signs of academic disaster, D and F, went by the wayside in the Vietnam era, when flunking out meant becoming eligible for the draft. At Duke, Pomona, Harvard and elsewhere, D's and F's combined now represent about 2 percent of all grades given."[6]

Since penning the op ed, Rojstaczer's ongoing tracking of grade inflation finds that today 43 percent of all college grades given nationally are A's, compared to 15 percent overall A's in the early 1960s.[7] Moreover, 73 percent of all grades given today in college are either A's or B's.[8] Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, corroborates Rojstaczer's findings. Levine's study of the trajectory of college grades finds that, in 1969, 7 percent of two- and four-year college students responded that their GPA was an A-minus or higher; by 2009, 41 percent of students reported this grand GPA.[9]

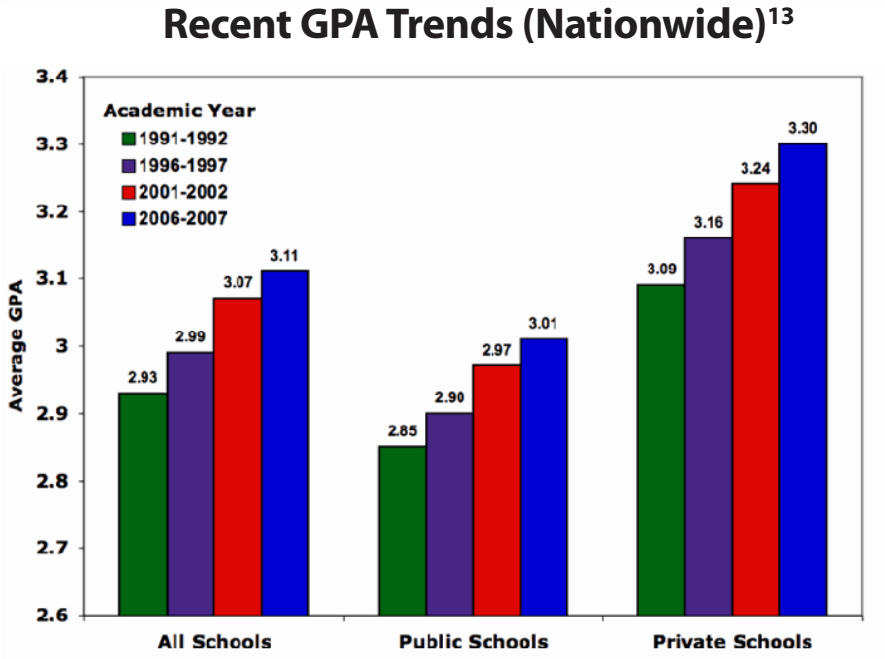
Examining the data made available by cooperating universities, Rojstaczer found grade-point averages ascending at a rate of approximately 0.15 points per decade—a rate that, if continued, would yield by mid-century a world in which "practically everybody on campus will be getting all A's." Why? Today it has become "impossible for a professor to grade honestly." Awarding C's to students who do merely average work, though just, will yield "declining enrollments in future years," which are deemed "a sign of poor-quality instruction." In addition to enrollment pressure from administration, the would-be rigorous grading professor is confronted with the fact that, as one instructor writes, "parents and students want high grades. … So I don't give C's anymore, and neither do most of my colleagues. And I can easily imagine a time when I'll say the same thing about B's."[10]

Rojstaczer's analysis turns grimmer when he reflects on the effects of grade inflation on students and the country as a whole. As a result of grade inflation, he argues, college classes today "suffer from high absenteeism and a low level of student participation. In the absence of fair grading, our success in providing this country with a truly educated public is diminished. The implications of such failure for a free society are tremendous."[11]

In addition to his national op-ed on the subject, Rojstaczer created a website, GradeInflation.com, where can be found extensive data and analysis of college grading trends over the past 50 years. The site includes the following graphs on grading nationwide:[12]

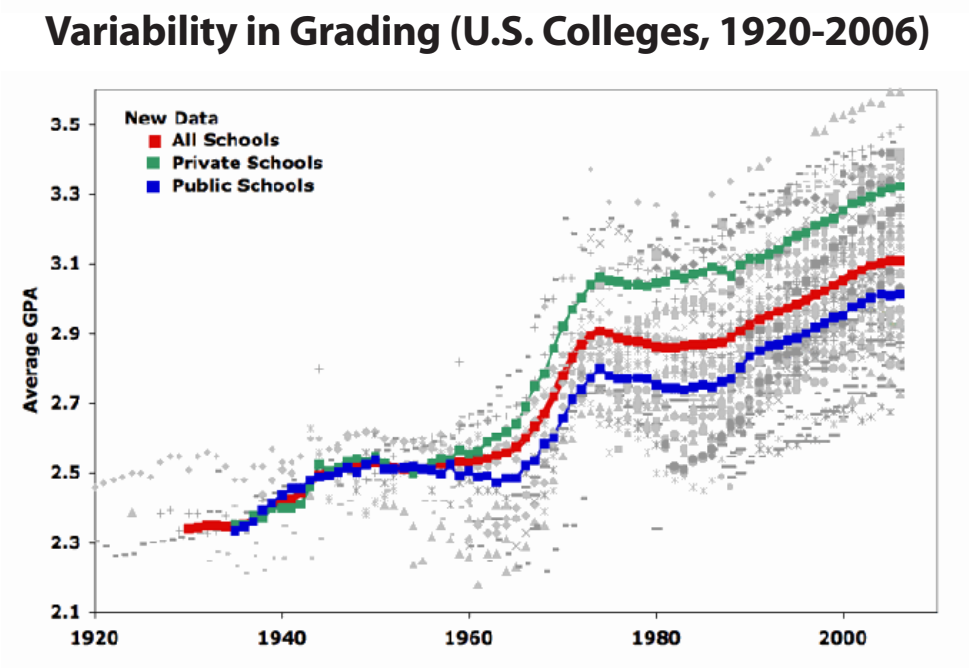


Source: www.GradeInflation.com



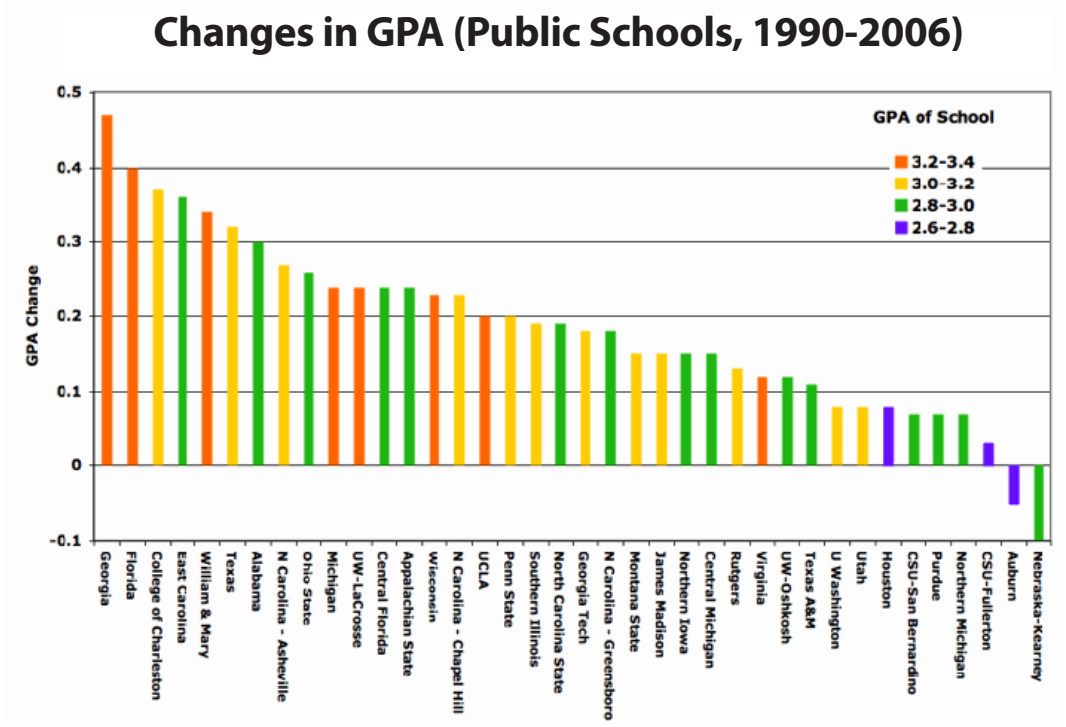
Source: www.GradeInflation.com

The above graph shows that grade inflation, though it diminished somewhat beginning in the mid-1970s, re-emerged in the mid-1980s and has climbed ever since "at virtually every school for which data were available." GradeInflation.com has amassed data on average college grades from more than 230 schools, with a combined enrollment of more than two million undergraduates. Among its findings is the fact that private and public colleges graded similarly until the "until the late 1950s or 1960s, when grades began to bifurcate." Today, private schools grade approximately 0.3 higher than their public counterparts (see graph, next page).[14]



Source: www.GradeInflation.com

Rojstaczer's data analysis reveals the incorrectness of the theory held by some that "grade inflation is confined largely to selective and highly selective colleges and universities." Instead, "significant grade inflation is present almost everywhere and contemporary rates of change in GPA are only slightly higher for private schools." Moreover, "flagship state schools in the South have the highest contemporary rates of grade inflation for this sample of public schools" (see graph, below).[15]



Source: www.GradeInflation.com

The data show that "moderately selective liberal arts colleges" tend to have "the highest rates of contemporary inflation." The trend discovered in the majority of highly selective colleges, as of 2006, led Rojstaczer to predict that "A will be average in the coming decade at most of the highly selective private colleges and universities in the U.S." As we shall see later in this study, that prediction has largely proved true.[16]

The study also addresses whether grade inflation varies among disciplines. The common assumption that "there is more grade inflation in the sciences than in the humanities" needs to be qualified. Both disciplines have experienced grade inflation over the past 50 years, but each began from a different starting point (the natural sciences began from a lower starting point, and the humanities, from a higher one).

Also in need of qualification is the common view that the Ivy League schools are guilty of the worst excesses in grade inflation. The data show that, since the 1980s, "the average GPA of a school has been strongly dependent on its selectivity." Highly selective, private schools were found to have an average GPA of 3.43, while their highly selective public counterparts average 3.22, as of 2006. Private schools with average selectivity had an average GPA of 3.11, while their public counterparts average 2.98.[17]

Valen E. Johnson: Understanding the Causes and Effects of Grade Inflation

> In many courses, faculty members are giving out relatively high grades for average or subpar work. While such inflation might look innocent, it has in fact grown into a significant problem, with no end in sight. By rewarding mediocrity we discourage excellence. Many students who work hard at the outset of their college careers, in pursuit of good grades and honors degrees, throw up their hands upon seeing their peers do equally well despite putting in far less effort. … [I]f after being admitted, a student sees that all that we demand for success is minimal effort, that's all we get.
>
> ~William Cole, instructor in Romance Languages and Literature, Harvard University[18]

Others beside Rojstaczer have been keen to the rise in grades for some time. In the same year as Rojstaczer's op-ed (2003), Texas A&M Professor Valen E. Johnson published a major work, *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in Higher Education*.[19] Johnson both corroborates the existence of grade inflation and discusses why professors and administrators have been largely unwilling to address the problem. Johnson's thesis is based on historical research as well an online course evaluation experiment ("Duke Undergraduates Evaluate Teaching" [DUET]) that he conducted while a faculty member at Duke during the 1998-1999 academic year. Supporting the assertion that grade inflation and resulting grade compression are not problems at Ivy League institutions alone, Johnson offers the observation that inflation-induced compression has forced many universities "to adopt a new grade to overcome the lack of an appropriate grade to indicate to indicate truly outstanding performance: the A+." But until the 1980s, an A+ was "a grade awarded in elementary schools" primarily, rather than at the secondary or postsecondary levels. Yet this measure, itself an effort to honor the truly outstanding student in an age of grade inflation, has, at Johnson's former school, Duke, also "been on the rise." In short, the upward pressure on grades appears well-nigh unstoppable, though ultimately unsustainable.[20]

Johnson is careful to introduce us to the academic mindset by which grade inflation is either dismissed or, if granted, justified. His efforts at Duke led to the rejoinder by several on the faculty that, after all, at Duke, the average entering SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores had also risen during the period of recorded grade inflation. "If student quality had improved, they argued, why shouldn't average grades also increase?" This justification took written form in a published work by Dartmouth professor, Noel Perrin, who argues, "No longer do most of us on the faculty just compare one Dartmouth student with another; we take into account the vast pool of college students nationwide. … [W]e imagine our students at a mythical Average U., and give the grades they would get there."[21]

This attempted rejoinder is roundly rebuffed by grade inflation's critics. Johnson cites Harvey Mansfield's response. Mansfield writes that, "if [some Harvard] students are in some measures better, the proper response is to raise our

standards and demand more of our students." He adds, "Cars are better-made now than they used to be. So when buying a car, would you be satisfied with one that was as good as they used to be?" To this Johnson adds that, on the basis of Perrin's reasoning, "[S]hould community colleges and lower-rung state schools [therefore] really be prevented from assigning A's?"[22] He goes on to review the work in this area of Rosovsky and Hartley,[23] who critique a different defense of grade inflation, which holds that "low grades discourage students and inhibit their progress," making it "defensible to give a student a higher grade than he or she deserves in order to motivate those who are anxious or poorly prepared by their earlier secondary school experiences." Grading, these inflation-defenders argue, "is a distorting, harsh, and punitive practice." Against this attempted justification Johnson cites Rosovsky and Hartley's reply that the "empirical evidence for the hypothesis that lowering the anxiety over grades leads to better learning is weak." Moreover, "grades certainly are not harsh for those who do well."[24]

But for grade inflation's critics, the powerful enemy they face—because it is in principle the most lethal assault on sound standards—is the postmodern view of grading. Johnson draws our attention to the fact that, for postmodernism, "science and the scientific method, observation of natural phenomena, and objective consideration of evidence are replaced by, or at least supplemented with, a critical assessment of the scientist and the inherent biases that accompany his membership in 'dominant groups.' An objective view of reality and search for truth is replaced by an emphasis on divergent [and equally valuable] representations of reality." Given postmodernists' professed certainty that the sole absolute or objective truth is that there is no absolute or objective truth, they are "much less likely to assign poor grades." Johnson's extended quotation of Diana Bilimoria's defense of grading from the postmodern perspective (which Johnson deems "bizarre") is as instructive as it is alarming to defenders of rigorous grading standards, and thus bears reprinting, in part, here. According to Bilimoria:

But for grade inflation's critics, the powerful enemy they face—because it is in principle the most lethal assault on sound standards—is the postmodern view of grading.

> Teachers' increasing awareness of the biases inherent in modern science is likely to affect their evaluations of students' acquisition of subject matter. … The global questioning of tenets once held to be singularly true allows a larger number of students to display with greater diversity a legitimate and appropriate grasp of a widened content. Consequently, grade distributions are higher than they were before the advent of postmodern challenges. … Failure [by students] to display reason, analysis, objective consideration of evidence, and distance is much less used [by postmodernist teachers] as an explanation for poor grades, as *these keystones of modern science are themselves shown to be biased in favor of certain, but not other, views, and are hence no more valid than any other method of arriving at conclusions.*[25]

As "bizarre" as Johnson finds the postmodern perspective on grading and teaching, he warns us that, "In practice, however, many professors are more comfortable with this perspective on grading—or less extreme versions of it—than they are with the traditional interpretation of grades."[26] For this writer, Bilimoria's attempt to justify the elevation of student grades through eradicating the very idea and authority of objectivity-seeking science itself helps to explain the basis for Allan Bloom's choice of title for his 1987 critique of the direction he saw higher education taking: *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*.[27]

How does the new reality on campus, described above, affect students? The most obvious result, according to Johnson, is "the inequitable assessment of students," which leads them to (1) "preferentially enroll in classes" with easier-grading professors, and (2) "provide more favorable course evaluations" to those who inflate grades. As a result, "stringent graders" find themselves with lower course enrollments and lower student evaluations, which impede their likelihood of receiving "tenure, salary increases, and promotions." Knowing this, professors follow the incentives provided them and, in turn, inflate grades. "Finally," and worst of all, "with traditional incentives for students to achieve eliminated, academic standards fall."[28]

Such is the state of real-life campuses as they increasingly mimic Garrison Keillor's fictional Lake Wobegon, "where all the children are above average."[29]

How did we get to this state? For Johnson, grade inflation has arisen and persists because we have accepted five myths:

1. Student grades do not bias student evaluations of teaching.
2. Student evaluations of teaching provide reliable measures of instructional effectiveness.
3. High course grades imply high levels of student achievement.
4. Student course selection decisions are unaffected by expected grading practices.
5. Grades assigned in unregulated academic environments have a consistent and objective meaning across classes, departments, and institutions.[30]

Johnson finds it "ironic" that the last myth is "often advocated most fervently" by those "who, in most other aspects of their professional lives, reject the notion of objective, quantifiable, and hierarchical measures of quality." To his description this writer would add that he finds this last myth to be just as self-defeating—because just as logically contradictory—as the postmodern proposition that the objective truth is that there is no objective truth.[31]

Johnson's response to the five myths listed above consists of the following: The sixty-plus studies done on the relationship between grades awarded, as well as the results of Duke's DUET experiment, "[provide] compelling evidence of a causal effect of student grade expectations on student evaluations of teaching. … Grading practices have a significant impact on the courses that students elect to take," which simultaneously calls into question our confidence in student evaluations as trustworthy indicators of teaching quality as well as our assumption that higher course grades correlate with higher levels of student achievement. So understood, there is no basis for the view that grading standards on today's campuses are uniform and objective across disciplines and schools. "Grading practices do differ … incontrovertibl[y] … by academic field, and, in concordance with commonly held perceptions, tend to be most lenient in the humanities and most stringent in the natural sciences, mathematical sciences, and economics."[32]

In sum, easier grading is shown to "lead to better course evaluations." For this reason, student evaluations of teachers are "not very good indicators" of student learning and "higher mean course grades" given by teachers "do not reflect higher levels" of student learning. Finally students "can (and probably do) manipulate their GPAs" through choosing easier-grading instructors.[33]

Before offering his proposals to remedy the dysfunctions he documents, Johnson observes that "no one outside of academia really questions the supposition that teachers who grade leniently are likely to receive higher student evaluations." However, "every one" of these apparently common-sense propositions regarding the reality, causes, and effects of grade inflation have been "challenged and dismissed by members of the academy." This aversion owes in part to the "general distaste" among professors, particularly in the humanities, for grading at all. Here he cites Bradford Wilson's assertion that "the humanities have become hostile to hierarchy, and grading is inherently hierarchical." Aside from philosophical differences regarding the scope and method of grading, Johnson also finds "faculty self-interest … plays a prominent role in this conflict," leading them to concoct "an almost unending sequence of fables to avoid dealing with the unpleasantries" of executing sound grading practices.[34]

To begin, rigorous grading "demands more effort than lenient grading." In addition, the humanities are deemed more "inherently subjective" than the natural sciences and mathematics. Yet this attempt to explain the differences in grading standards between the humanities and natural sciences-mathematics "fails" when it attempts to "justify higher grades for all. … The fact that an instructor is unable to distinguish between the quality of work from different students does not mean that students should receive equally high grades. *It only means that all students should*

receive equal grades" (emphasis supplied). Why? If, as the postmodernist Bilimoria avers, all students were able to "display with greater diversity a legitimate and appropriate grasp of a widened context," it follows that, "by definition, all students performed at the *average* level and so should all be given *average* grades" (emphasis in original).[35]

The genesis of the "academic myths" notwithstanding, Johnson's research calls them into question with these five conclusions drawn from his research:

1. Differences in grading practices between instructors cause biases in student evaluations of teaching.
2. Student evaluations of teaching are not reliable indicators of teaching effectiveness and account for only a small proportion of the variance in student learning from student to student and course to course.
3. Higher grade distributions cannot be associated with higher levels of student achievement.
4. Differences in grading practices have a substantial impact on student enrollments, and cause fewer students to enroll in those fields that grade more stringently.
5. Grading practices differ systematically between disciplines and instructors, and these disparities cause serious inequities in student assessment.[36]

On the subject of the relation between students' expectations of grades and their choices of which courses to enroll in, the Duke DUET experiment found students there "twice as likely to enroll in an elective course expected to be graded at an A- average." The implications of this finding Johnson deems "startling" from an "educational policy perspective." The differences in grading between academic fields results in American undergraduate students taking, "on average, about 50 percent fewer elective courses in the natural sciences and mathematics than they would if grading practices across disciplines were more equitable." Were this imbalance rectified, there would result "a substantial increase in the preparation of college graduates to participate in an increasingly technological society." Simply put, although the nation cries out for more STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) graduates, the higher grades awarded in non-STEM fields undermines this effort. This is but one more price, a substantial price, that society pays for a dysfunctional Academy in which "[k]nowing the grading practices of the instructor from whom students took courses is as important as knowing the grades they got."[37]

The Duke DUET experiment found students there "twice as likely to enroll in an elective course expected to be graded at an A- average."

To address the dysfunctionality described above, what is to be done? Johnson begins with four recommendations that emerge from Rosovsky and Hartley's 2002 study of grade inflation. First, "encourage[ing] institutional dialogue" is required due to the fact that at most schools it is the faculty that decides on grading policies. Second, because many professors know little of the comparative grading practices of their colleagues, they should be provided with "more information about their university's grading practices." Third, institutions could take measures to "constrain course grade distributions," a practice that is "fairly common in graduate and professional schools." However, such efforts can "create their own inequities." For example, the use of median grade constraints at Duke law school has led to some professors gaming the system through awarding roughly 51 percent "of their grades exactly at or just below the upper limit on the median grade," while awarding "their remaining grades at arbitrarily high levels."[38]

These difficulties point to the need for a "more successful strategy for imposing constraints on grade distributions." To this end, Johnson proposes a regime by which the mean grade for each class would fall within a predetermined interval of points (e.g. +/- .05) above and below a weighted average of (1) a "target" course average (e.g. 3.0) and (2) the actual cumulative grade point average of students in the class (or an adjusted cumulative grade point average). For large introductory classes, the target grade would be weighted more heavily than the cumulative grade point average due to the smaller variance of abilities within a larger group.[39]

The fourth of Rosovsky and Hartley's recommendations to arrest grade inflation is for universities to "include information about course grading practices on student transcripts, a practice followed now by Columbia, Dartmouth, Indiana, and Eastern Kentucky.[40] Recall that Dartmouth's effort on this front, begun in 1994, did not result in arresting grade inflation.[41] For his part, Johnson deems "carefully designed constraints on mean course grades" to be the "most comprehensive solution to problems associated with disparities in grading practices." Such constraints nullify "incentives for students to take courses" from easier-grading professors and therewith reduce "biases to student evaluations" that spring from "differential grading practices." Also, wedding "grade constraints to mean performance levels of students registered for a class" both eliminates the incentives for students to enroll in classes "populated by below-average students" and removes the "disincentives" for students to take classes "populated by above-average students."[42]

Johnson is far from Pollyannaish about faculties' response to his proposal: "constraining mean grades in classes has not proven palatable" to professors in "most major universities." His recognition of the practical limitations of reform at this point leads him to offer three additional possibilities that might have a better chance of seeing the light of day. First, Johnson proposes that students be allowed to "optionally report adjusted GPAs on their transcripts." He owns that the short-term effect of this policy would be a "spike in inflationary grading trends." Why? Students would naturally opt to disclose "the more favorable summary" of their grades. But his longer-term hope is that the availability of this option might incline "some students to pressure leniently grading faculty to be more discerning in their grade assignments." In addition, job recruiters might well come to "begin requesting adjusted GPAs," which would have a downward force on grades.

Second, Johnson recommends that adjusted grades and grade point averages be used to establish honors distinctions. While a key benefit of adjusted grades is that they do not force on faculty "explicit changes" in their grading practices, adjusted grades nevertheless would compel professors to differentiate honors-deserving students from those not meriting honors. This policy would have this effect because, under Johnson's "achievement index method for adjusting grades," even professors who give out all A's do not "affect the adjusted GPA of any of their students." Therefore, professors intent on affecting the honors process "would have to more carefully dispense with their highest marks." Moreover, through incentivizing faculty to limit the highest grades for top students, "this practice would help re-establish the A as a grade reserved for truly outstanding performance."[43]

Third and last, Johnson recommends a policy of "selectively exclud[ing] student evaluations of teaching from instructor summaries," in order to alleviate the currently grade-inflation-incentivizing effect of student evaluations on faculty promotion, tenure, and salary reviews. Under his proposal, "some proportion of an instructor's student evaluations might be ignored," depending on the grades the instructor assigned. For tougher graders, some percentage of the lowest student evaluations would be ignored. For easier graders, a percentage of their best students evaluations would not be considered in computing his overall evaluation.[44]

These last three recommendations Johnson deems, on the one hand, to "have the advantage of being minimally invasive," while, on the other, "each represents a concrete first step down the road to grading reform."[45] I address the issue of the likelihood of grading-standards reform below.[46]

Subsequent work on grade inflation

One year after Valen Johnson published *Grade Inflation* and Stuart Rojstaczer published his *Washington Post* op ed, Brian Manhire, a professor of electrical engineering at Ohio University, presented "Grade Inflation, Ethics and Engineering Education," at the 2004 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference and Exposition. Manhire corroborates Rojstaczer and Johnson's conclusion that "grade inflation is ubiquitous in American higher education."[47] Manhire is unequivocal in his critique, finding the American professoriate "overgrades … students as unconsciously as a parent might spoil his children."[48] Moreover, "Grade inflation subverts the primary function of grades" and is in this respect "unethical."[49] He also agrees with Johnson's conclusions regarding the role of student course evaluations in grade inflation.[50]

The same year, Professor Thomas C. Reeves, of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute, presented "The Tyranny of Classroom Popularity" at The National Association of Scholars (NAS) Online Forum. Writes Reeves: "Grade inflation in higher education is so severe these days that the faculty at Princeton University has voted to require each academic department to limit its number of A's to 35 percent for undergraduates and 55 percent for junior and senior independent work. Almost half of Princeton undergraduates now receive the top grade."[51]

Also in 2004, Jay A. Halfond, then-dean of Boston University's Metropolitan College, argued that "the insidious aspect of grade inflation is the perception among faculty and others that this is a victimless crime. After all, no students ever complain that their grades are too high. … But the truly outstanding and industrious student is wronged. … Nobody's achievements should be cheapened by a leveling of grades."[52]

Recent Public Attention to Grade Inflation

> 'I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone.' That is, I [the professor] won't make you [the student] work too hard (read a lot, write a lot) so that I won't have to grade as many papers or explain why you are not performing well. The existence of this bargain is suggested by the fact that at a relatively low level of effort, many students get decent grades—B's and sometimes better. There seems to be a breakdown of shared responsibility for learning—on the part of faculty members who allow students to get by with far less than maximum effort, and on the part of students who are not taking full advantage of the resources institutions provide.
>
> ~George D. Kuh on the "disengagement compact" struck between today's students and professors[53]

The growing number of studies documenting grade inflation continued to gain greater national recognition over the course of the past decade. Six years after Rojstaczer's *Washington Post* piece and Valen Johnson's book on grade inflation, *Inside Higher Ed* followed up with a major piece, specifically citing Rojstaczer's earlier sounding of the alarm. In March 2009, in "Grade Inflation Seen Rising," *Inside Higher Ed's* Scott Jaschik called attention to the fact that Rojstaczer had just "released his largest analysis to date—and it suggests that grade inflation continues to be a broad problem across much of higher education. The figures may embarrass some colleges and renew a debate over whether students experience enough rigor."[54]

According to the article, Rojstaczer's updated, 2009 analysis finds that "the average grade-point average at private colleges rose from 3.09 in 1991 to 3.30 in 2006. At public colleges and universities, the increase was from 2.85 to 3.01 over the same time period." Moreover, Rojstaczer's updated work "also examines—and seeks to refute—the idea that students are earning better grades simply because they are better prepared.[55]

Rojstaczer's 2009 study "expanded the numbers of institutions examined, and the time frame. It finds that the greatest increases in grades appear to be coming at flagship public universities in the South and at selective liberal arts colleges." In addition, Rojstaczer argues that his updated study demonstrates that it is possible to tame grade inflation. He asserts that Princeton University has largely done so, through formally raising the issue of grade inflation and encouraging professors to award a broader distribution of grades.[56] Further, he finds that there is one sector that has in fact held the line against inflated grades: community colleges. Jaschik goes on to cite studies finding "correlations between being an easy grader and earning good ratings at RateMyProfessors.com."[57]

Amidst the bad news Rojstaczer's work discloses regarding four-year institutions and traditional college-age students, there is also some good. His 2009 data suggest that in fact community college professors have been acting on their own to arrest grade inflation at their two-year institutions in recent years. Analyzing data from every school in the California Community Colleges system (the nation's largest), as well as from other community colleges, Rojstaczer's 2009 report presents a far more encouraging picture than he finds in four-year institutions.[58]

To find out why, *Inside Higher Ed* interviewed Michael R. Chipps, president of Mid-Plains Community College, in Nebraska, who reports that "his institution and other community colleges take grades seriously" for the following reasons. First, "community colleges use grades to track how their students do when they transfer to four-year institutions (and he noted that many community college graduates perform better than students who started at four-year institutions)." Second, due to the fact that community colleges "admit students with a range of academic backgrounds, accurate assessment is seen as important to help students enter the best possible programs and to track their progress." Adds President Chipps, "Community colleges want the rigor to be sufficient, so that our students can not only prosper in the world of work, but seriously compete with students at the senior level institutions." Also interviewed was Kay McClenney, who directs the Community College Survey of Student Engagement, located at the University of Texas at Austin. She finds that the "close student-faculty interaction at community colleges encourages frank evaluations. … Teaching and learning is what community college faculty do." Sandie McGill Barnhouse chairs the Two-Year College English Association and is an instructor at Rowan Cabarrus Community College. She attributes the fact that community colleges do a better job combating grade inflation to the distinctive approach of community college professors, who "see it as part of their mission to teach students of a 'diversity of entering skills,' so there is no assumption that everyone in the class will do well."[59]

The Current Conflict

> Students who do exceptional work are lumped together with those who have merely done good work, and in some cases with those who have done merely adequate work.
>
> ~David Mayhew, chair, Yale Course of Study Committee, writing to Yale's faculty[60]

> We rely on grades not only to distinguish among our students but also to motivate them and the Educational Policy Committee worries that by narrowing the grade differential between superior and routine work, grade inflation works against the pedagogical mission of the Faculty. … While accepting the fact that the quality our students has improved over time, pressure to conform to the grading practices of one's peers, fears of being singled out or rendered unpopular as a "tough grader," and pressures from students were all regarded as contributory factors. …
>
> ~Susan Pedersen, Harvard dean of undergraduate education, addressing the faculty[61]

In 2013, the issue of grade inflation returned to the national spotlight, and with a vengeance. First, *USA Today* took on the subject. Next, the *Harvard Crimson* dropped a bomb with its report on grading at Harvard. The *USA Today* article, penned by Cara Newlon, carried the provocative title, "College grade inflation: Does 'A' stand for 'average'?"[62] Its subhead explains its concern: "*At some colleges over 50 percent of the grades given are A's. And while students may be happy, it begs the question: What does an A grade mean?*" The piece shows the staying power of Rojstaczer's efforts, as it relies on his research first and foremost in conveying its thesis. Gone, argues Newlon, is the "time when a C meant average. The average GPA at four-year colleges and universities has risen from 2.52 in the 1950s to 3.11 in 2006." It cites Rojstaczer's findings that college grades "only keep rising." As a result, concludes Rojstaczer, grade inflation "lowers the intensity and intellectual level in many classes. … It's top-down driven, because universities are more concerned than in the past about enrollments in particular classes. Departments whose budgets depend on enrollment want to make sure that their classes are full." The article cites Rojstaczer's co-investigator, Christopher Healy, professor of computer science at Furman University: "Students don't know what an A means anymore. It has no particular significance except everybody agrees that it's a really good grade … It's an unsustainable trend."

Healy notes that grade inflation is far from uniform across disciplines. "For fun, I took the most recent data I could from quite a few colleges across the country. The toughest subject was math. At the opposite extreme is education." Other disciplines found by Healy to have more rigorous grading standards were biology, chemistry, mathematics and economics. "For education, 71 percent of the grades were A's; in music, it was 67 percent A's. Contrast that with mathematics, where it's only 29 percent."[63]

Worse, Healy's research leads him to conclude that the trend of inflating grades will continue for some time to come. "To a great extent, the status quo is working. Students are succeeding. The problem is that time goes on, year after year, the grade distributions are becoming less and less realistic."[64]

A mere two weeks after the publication of the *USA Today* piece, the *Harvard Crimson* rocked the academic world with a report revealing that the most commonly awarded grade at Harvard is an A, while the median grade is an A-.[65] These revelations were announced by Jay M. Harris, dean of undergraduate education at Harvard. Harris is reported to have provided this information when responding to a question from Harvey C. Mansfield, a Harvard professor of government, at a meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. Said Mansfield: "A little bird has told me that the most frequently given grade at Harvard College right now is an A-. If this is true or nearly true, it represents a failure on the part of this faculty and its leadership to maintain our academic standards." Responded Dean Harris: "I can answer the question, if you want me to. The median grade in Harvard College is indeed an A-. The most frequently awarded grade in Harvard College is actually a straight A." Mansfield, a distinguished academic, later wrote that he was "not surprised but rather further depressed" by the information Harris provided. "Nor was I surprised at the embarrassed silence in the whole room and especially at the polished table (as I call it)," Mansfield wrote, referring to the table at the front of the room where Harvard's senior leadership sits. "The present grading practice is indefensible."[66]

The revelation was hardly new, writes the *Crimson*. In 2001, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences' Educational Policy Committee "labeled grade inflation 'a serious problem' at the College after a report in the *Boston Globe* labeled the College's grading practices 'the laughing stock of the Ivy League.'" The response at the time was to move "the College from a 15-point grading system to a more conventional 4.0 scale grading system," as well as to cap "the number of honors graduates at 60 percent of the class. The *Globe* had reported that in 2001, 91 percent of Harvard students graduated with honors, and that about half of all awarded grades were in the A-range."[67] The *Crimson* report was picked up immediately by *The Atlantic*, which asked rhetorically, "[W]hat is the point of having a range of grades if half of them are A- or higher?[68] But perhaps most damning of all was the 2011 observation of former Harvard President, Larry Summers, who, after leaving the presidency, said, "Ninety percent of Harvard graduates graduated with honors when I started. The *most unique honor* you could graduate with was *none*."[69]

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This flurry of alarming accounts and accusations led to an unusual "confession" by Allison Shrager regarding her time as a Teaching Assistant of Economics at Columbia University.[70] In "Confession of an Ivy League teaching assistant: Here's why I inflated grades," which appeared in Quartz.com, Shrager dispenses with the usual explanations for grade inflation: "Some speculated high grades reflect intelligence. Others say professors just want their students to get jobs, or, selfishly, they want favorable teaching evaluations . As a teaching assistant in the economics department at Columbia, I too inflated student grades, but for none of those reasons. … I just didn't want to deal with all the complaining."

Shrager admits that she, like the rest of the faculty, assigned grades along a "very narrow" distribution. "Great work got an A, pretty good to average got an A-, slightly below average was a B+, not great was a B, very bad was a B-. Anything below was akin to failure and required showing zero effort or even hostility to the class." Why such a narrow range grades, and these mostly at the top? "Anything less than an A- would result in endless emails, crying during office hours, or calls from parents. One student once cornered me and said: "I hope you're happy you've destroyed my chance at Goldman and ruined my life." Such confrontations, Shrager reports, "take time," of which she had precious little as a Ph.D. student working on her "own research." Teaching evaluations, *contra* Valen Johnson and Stuart Rojstaczer, were "not really" her "concern," because they were not as important as "publishing papers in a top journal."[71]

By Shrager's lights, "grade inflation is a collective action problem. If the standard is an A- average, it's impossible to give average work a lower grade." Having done her undergraduate work in Britain, she had not encountered grade

inflation, American-style. How does Britain avoid this problem? The majority of a student's grade there is based on a single end-of-term essay, which is "double marked, by your professor and one at another university, to ensure uniform national standards. That not only kept grade inflation in check, but the culture of complaining too." Why could not U.S. higher education adopt this method of grading? The British system of grading is "very time intensive and universities there are more teaching and less research oriented."[72]

For these reasons, Shrager worries that "grade inflation discourages students from learning subjects which don't pump up grades as much, like science." In addition, her experience in the classroom persuades her that grade inflation "robs students of an important life skill: We learn the most from failure, which happens even when we try hard, and our ability to overcome it. That kind of resilience will be rewarded more in the increasingly competitive labor market—and is worth a lot more than straight A's."[73]

The Emperor's Clothiers Strike Back, Part I

> When college students perceive that the average grade in a class will be an A, they do not try to excel. It is likely that the decline in student study hours, student engagement, and literacy are partly the result of diminished academic expectations.
>
> ~Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy

As is clear from the above discussion, the findings and conclusions above are not without their critics. The *Inside Higher Ed* report cited earlier[75] rehearses the arguments of one of the leading critics of the view that grade inflation has been occurring over the last 50 years. Clifford Adelman is a senior analyst at the Institute for Higher Education Policy. His study of college grading drives him to the conclusion that grade inflation is "marginal—and that the issue receives far too much attention. … If grade inflation is so rampant, how come at least a third of kids who start in four-year colleges don't graduate?" he asks rhetorically. According to him, grade inflation "cannot be proved." He regards as more important the fact that "a significant proportion of grades that are not really grades" are awarded as students and professor engage in "alternative signs of student academic behavior" in a way that "devalues grading." Adelman views "grade devaluation as a more serious problem for a variety of reasons that Stuart [Rojstaczer] would never consider, but that academic administrators and enrollment managers everywhere instantly understand when the trend is pointed out."[76] Adelman's earlier examination of national data led him to deny that grades are rising nationally, a conclusion by which he still stands.[77]

For his part, Rojstaczer has not sat idly by in the face of the criticism of his work. Instead, he has created a website, GradeInflation.com, both to defend his findings and to update his work regularly. There, he addresses the assertion that attributes "much of the increase in GPA since the mid-1980s to improvements in student quality."[78] Those advancing this claim rely on the predictive ability of SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores. But such efforts "are of dubious worth because even the organization that administers the SAT, the College Board, is unable to show that SAT scores are a good predictor of college GPA." He cites a study by the University of California System, which finds that "SAT scores explained less than 14 percent of the variance in GPA." Another study, by Bowen and Bok, examined five highly selective schools, where "SAT scores explained only 20 percent of the variance in class ranking. Bowen and Bok's[79] analysis also indicates that a 100 point increase in SAT was responsible for, at most, a 5.9 percent increase in class rank which corresponds to roughly a 0.10 increase in GPA." These results are supported by Vars and Bowen's[80] examination of the "relationship between SAT and GPA for 11 selective institutions." Finally, McSpirit and Jones's 1999 study of grades at a "public open-admissions university" found a "coefficient of 0.14 for the relationship between a 100 point increase in SAT and GPA."[81]

In Rojstaczer's *2010 Teachers College Record*, he finds results supportive of the above research using data "from over 160 institutions with a student population of over two million."[82] Rojstaczer's concludes thus: "The above mentioned studies indicate that student quality increases cannot account for the magnitude of grade inflation observed. The bulk of grade inflation at these institutions is due to other factors." To be sure, he does not deny that enhanced

student quality could account for a portion of the grade inflation at particular schools; nevertheless, "the national trend cannot be explained by this influence. There is no evidence that students have improved in quality nationwide since the mid-1980s."[83]

Granting that there "are many factors" accounting for grade inflation, Rojstaczer addresses two alleged causes: (1) the Vietnam War (during which it is argued that professors gave higher grades to keep their students from being vulnerable to the military draft), and (2) the effect of affirmative action on university admissions. He denies any force to the latter. "The influence of affirmative action is sometimes used to explain grade inflation. However, much of the rise in minority enrollments occurred during a time, the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, when grade inflation waned. As a result, it is unlikely that affirmative action has had a significant influence."[84]

Regarding the resurgence of grade inflation in the 1980s, Rojstaczer fingers what he labels "the emergence of a consumer-based culture in higher education. Students are paying more for a product every year, and increasingly they want and get the reward of a good grade for their purchase. In this culture, professors are not only compelled to grade easier, but also to water down course content. Both intellectual rigor and grading standards have weakened"—as attested to by studies demonstrating flagging student engagement,[85] declining study time,[86] and falling literacy.[87] "Yet grades continue to rise."[88]

Rojstaczer takes issue explicitly with a number of his critics in his blog, "Forty Questions." He blames the press for its "he said, she said" reportage of the issue: "Journalists if they want can probably find someone who will deny that this rise exists."[89] He cites Alfie Kohn's "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation,"[90] as well as the earlier-mentioned Clifford Adelman. Kohn's and Adelman's claims that "grades have not been rising," argues Rojstaczer, "ignore data and are without merit."[91] He also takes issue with professor Harry Brighouse, who does not deny the reality of grade inflation, but argues that "grades have limited utility." Rojstaczer's rejoinder is pointed:

> If somehow someone can show me that students: 1) were static in quality from the 1930s to the 1960s; 2) suddenly got better during the Vietnam era; 3) then plateaued in quality from the 1970s to the mid-1980s; and 4) in a grande finale display of intelligence and aptitude, got better and better from the 1980s to the present while studying less, suffering from declining literacy and producing at best static SAT scores, I'll gladly accept the thesis that grade inflation isn't real. … Grade inflation is a cut and dried issue. Grade are going up. Workloads are going down. … Professors are giving A's instead of B's, and have largely given up on C's, D's, and F's altogether. Many professors won't admit that they have lowered their standards, but the data show otherwise.[92]

Rojstaczer fingers what he labels "the emergence of a consumer-based culture in higher education. Students are paying more for a product every year, and increasingly they want and get the reward of a good grade for their purchase."

Regarding his critics, Rojstaczer reserves his most potent firepower for Adelman and Brighouse. Initially intrigued by Adelman's counterintuitive thesis, Rojstaczer's subsequent examination of the data led him to the conclusion that Adelman's "results were not counterintuitive, but just plain wrong." Adelman charges that "less than thirty" of the institutions represented in Rojstaczer's 2005 database offer information from an "unassailable source." Rojstaczer rejoins that his "criteria of yearly data 10 years or longer in length" includes the following schools: Alabama, Auburn, UC-Irvine, CSU-East Bay, CSU-Sacramento, CSU-San Bernadino, Carleton, Dixie State, Duke, Florida, Georgia Tech, Hampden Sydney, Harvard, Harvey Mudd, Kent State, Kenyon, LSU, Minnesota, Montana State, University of Nebraska - Kearney, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, Northern Iowa, Northern Michigan, Pomona, Princeton, Purdue, Southern Illinois, Stanford, Texas, Utah, University of Wisconsin-Lacrosse, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh, Washington, Western Washington, Wheaton, Williams, and Winthrop. Adding "more widely spaced data," Rojstaczer's database includes Colby, Miami, University of North Carolina-Greensboro, Northwestern, and Rice. Rojstaczer has since added still more data.[93]

Moreover, asserts Rojstaczer, "No one can reproduce Adelman's work. To try to justify his idiosyncratic results, Adelman has to make claims that he is the only one who possesses valid data worthy of analysis. The act has gotten old, so old that it simply isn't believable."[94]

Brighouse's work on grade inflation, argues Rojstaczer, "invokes the legacy admission of George W. Bush in his [Brighouse's] skepticism about grade inflation being real." For Brighouse, "rising grades may simply reflect increasing student talent and it would be 'hard to imagine' legacy students as weak as George W. Bush being admitted today in elite colleges." However, the effect of legacy admissions on university grade point averages, "is tiny," counters Rojstaczer, who owns that "Bush-like legacies are still present at elite colleges." However, "Bush's gentleman's C is now a gentleman's (and gentle lady's) B+"[95]

In the final count, even Brighouse confesses that grades have risen nationally over time, offering this attempt at a justification: "In an environment where you believe students are awarded higher grades than they should be, it can be morally appropriate to do the same oneself. …"[96] Brighouse does not go into detail to explain why it is "morally appropriate" to do so, nor does he examine the deeper question of what the moral status is of grade inflation itself.

The Emperor's Clothiers Strike Back, Part II: Socrates' Children Protest Pastry-Rationing

> SOCRATES: … Now, seeing that when I speak my words are not uttered with any view of gaining favor, and that I look to what is best and not to what is most pleasant, … I shall be tried just as a physician would be tried in a court of little boys at the indictment of the pastry chef. What would he [the doctor] reply under such circumstances, if someone [a pastry chef] were to accuse him, saying, 'O my boys, many evil things has this man done to you: he is the death of you, especially of the younger ones among you, cutting and burning and starving and suffocating you, until you know not what to do; he gives you the bitterest potions, and compels you to hunger and thirst. How unlike the variety of meats and sweets on which I [the pastry chef] feasted you!' What do you suppose that the doctor would be able to reply when he found himself in such a predicament? If he told the truth he could only say, 'All these evil things, my boys, I did for your health,' and then would there not just be a clamor among a jury like that? How they would cry out!
>
> CALLICLES: I dare say. ~Plato, *Gorgias*[97]

If the argument is all but settled among academic researchers regarding the reality as well as the ravages of grade inflation, apparently some college students are not going along. An April 2013 article in the *Yale Daily News*, "Defining the Yale College 'A,'" tells the story of an unusual protest by students outside a recent Yale College faculty meeting. The objects of their derision included proposals calling for "the adoption of a 100-point grading scale and a recommended rubric of grade distributions." The recommended reforms came after "decades of steadily rising average GPAs across Yale College: the gentleman's C, it seemed, had become the gentleman's B. And after 62 percent of the grades awarded last spring were in the A-range, many professors have acknowledged that grading in Yale College is headed in a dangerous direction."[98]

Apparently the protest had its intended effect: In a move some critics find reminiscent of college-administration surrenders in the 1960s, the student protests succeeded in forcing the faculty to postpone its consideration of the proposed changes to Yale's grading system. In declining to vote out the measure, the faculty instead opted to send back the grading-system proposals "for further review by the Yale College ad-hoc committee on grading"—despite the fact that the committee had already "spent the past year studying grading trends." The committee on grading analyzed roughly 50 years of grading data to present an initial report at the February 2013 Yale College faculty meeting. Its findings "confirmed suspicions about rising grading trends, though the degree to which grades have changed over the years came as a shock to many professors." According to Yale's Office of Institutional Research, "the percentage of A-range grades awarded remained relatively constant at about 10 percent until 1963, when the average grade began moving upward in a linear fashion, stabilizing temporarily around 40 percent in the 1970s. In 1983, grades continued their upward trajectory and reached a new summit at 62 percent in spring 2012."[99]

The rise in grade point averages has not been consistent across departments. "STEM departments had significantly lower percentages than social science and humanities departments, according to the report." It was also found that, "[f]or many departments now, there are in effect only three grades used: A, A-, and B+." "For the less generous departments, B is added to this group. *Yale is approaching the point, at least in some departments, in which the only grades are A and A-, which is close to having no grading.*"[100]

"Without students earning a wide spread of grades," said Yale College Dean Mary Miller, "grades themselves may be becoming ineffective." Worse, the "available statistics suggest that grades will continue to follow their upward trajectory—if the high number of grades at the top of the spectrum remains unaddressed."

The *Yale Daily News* report goes on to cite a survey sent to roughly a third of Yale students. The survey finds that "57 percent of 573 respondents said they think grade inflation exists at Yale." It cites philosophy professor, Shelly Kagan, "whose course evaluations place him among Yale's toughest graders," causing him to feel that his standards are "out of whack" with many of his colleagues. Although Kagan holds that his grading standards are not "unreasonable," he confesses that "he sometimes gives grades that many of his students might never have seen before." A number of Kagan's colleagues reported observing that "students expect to receive certain grades when they come to college," which they said "puts implicit pressure on professors to grade more generously." Economics professor Timothy Guinnane adds that students tend to regard "anything other than an A as an 'insult,' adding that he has had students who vehemently protest any grade lower than an A." Said Guinnane, "I love my students but there has never been a year where I felt 60 percent of them deserved an A." English professor David Bromwich attributes "some of Yale's grade compression to 'intellectual handholding.' Bromwich said many professors allow students to revise their work or consult with them numerous times before a final draft is submitted." He explains the lower grades given in STEM course as in part due to the fact that "professors have less direct contact with students and can grade more objectively as a result."[101]

However, a number of the interviewed Yale professors "do not feel that grade compression necessarily signifies grade inflation, instead attributing the upward trend to factors such as changing student demographics and increased selectivity of the admissions process, which make today's classes more competitive than previous ones." The evidence for Yale's increasing selectivity is supplied by data showing that, "for the class of 2017, Yale received a record-high 29,610 applications, and the admission rate dropped to 6.72 percent, the lowest level in Yale's history." English professor Leslie Brisman attributes higher grades over time to the fact that his "students are better. When I started teaching here there really was a cadre of C students, who didn't take their work that seriously and didn't do well, so we gave them C's and they deserved them. Yale isn't admitting C students these days." Religious Studies professor Steven Fraade concurs, adding that he "does not think he himself would have been admitted to Yale by today's standards. With decreased emphasis on factors such as legacy in college admissions, Fraade said he finds it plausible that the current student body is more diligent and hardworking than its predecessors."[102]

We have seen that Rojstaczer scoffs at the idea that increased student quality provides the full explanation for Yale's grade inflation. "Elite universities have always been able to draw the best students," Rojstaczer said when interviewed for the article, adding that today's students have more extracurricular distractions from their schoolwork than their counterparts did 30 years ago. Moreover, rejoins Rojstaczer, "the grading data from Yale is consistent with the upward trajectory of grades nationwide, which took off in the 1980s, as rising tuition fees changed how students approach college, creating what he labels a "consumer mentality" that "boosted student expectations for tangible rewards from their education." As proof of his contention, he cites the data showing that "average SAT scores now are not actually that different than from the early 1960s." Thus, while he owns that "there have been small improvements in the class in the last 30 years," this is "nowhere near the improvement you'd need to explain the dramatic rise in A's."[103]

When crafting its grading-policy reforms, Yale consulted the experience of Princeton in its efforts to curtail grade inflation.[104] In 2004, the Princeton administration announced a new goal—placing "A's and A-minuses at 35 percent for all undergraduate courses and 55 percent for junior projects and senior theses." These efforts were spawned by a report showing that 46 percent of Princeton grades in 2003 were within the A-range. Then-dean of Princeton

College, Nancy Malkiel, reports the new "policy has succeeded in restoring the power of grades to convey information and in reducing discrepancies across departments." Yale's recommended changes in grading policy, unlike Princeton's 2004 reforms, would not impose but rather "recommend" a "grade distribution across Yale College." It also would shift letter grades to a numerical basis.[105]

Changing grades from a letter to a numerical basis is applauded by Yale political science professor, John Bullock, who finds that "the current grading system does not allow professors to distinguish between slight differences in quality among their students' work." In addition, he argues, "numerical grades would enable him to convey more precise and accurate information to students about their academic performance." He adds that his "very good students deserve an A," but grade inflation and compression deny him "a way to recognize students that are superior."[106]

If a growing number of professors working in the academic trenches welcome efforts to cut back on grade inflation, an overwhelming majority of students apparently does not.

If a growing number of professors working in the academic trenches welcome efforts to cut back on grade inflation, an overwhelming majority of students apparently does not. Instead, some students fear that the proposed grading policy will have a detrimental effect on "student life." Of 1,760 students who responded to a Yale College Council survey, "79 percent said they were opposed to the proposed changes, and the same percent said they think the same proposal would have a negative impact on the student body. Additionally, approximately 1,300 students signed an independent petition before the faculty meeting protesting the proposals." Students interviewed by the *Yale Daily News* report that "they are most concerned about the impact a change in grading policy would have on Yale's 'collaborative' atmosphere." Moving from a letter to a numerical system, said some students, would make them "more acutely aware of grades and make the University environment more cutthroat and competitive." As one undergraduate put it, "A test should always measure whether an individual student knows the material, not how much they know in comparison to other people."[107]

As for the Yale grading committee's ostensible role model in all this—the Princeton grading reforms of 2004—these too are under attack, as we shall see next.

Grading at Princeton

> I went to Princeton. … And while I did find most of my classmates to be "excellent"—that is: smart, compassionate, well-read, curious—a lot of us weren't especially hard-working. A lot of us had pushed ourselves hard in high school to get in to a great school and saw our time at Princeton as a reward, not an opportunity to push ourselves again, even harder. The university's relatively lax grading policies only encouraged that mentality.
>
> Midway through my time at Princeton, though, the school adopted new grading standards. Starting my junior fall, professors could give out only a limited number of A-range grades. The change prompted lots of anxiety and indignation from the student body—and now, nine years later, it may be rolled back. But for me, "grade deflation" was a much-needed kick in the pants. I started reading more carefully, taking more diligent notes, developing relationships with my professors and their teaching assistants. I ended up learning a lot more and enjoying my classes in a much deeper way. Yes, hard-working students should be rewarded with good grades. But a very good way to inspire students to work hard in the first place is to make good grades worth something. ~Eleanor Barkhorn, in *The Atlantic*[108]

According to the university's website, Princeton has since 2004 implemented a grading policy that establishes "a common grading standard for the University, 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. Our goal with this policy is to provide fair and consistent standards across the University." The Princeton administration goes out of its way to stress that the new policy is not meant in any way to prohibit or deter any student "who does A-range work" from "receiv[ing] an A-range grade," adding that "faculty members who cite the grading policy as a reason for not awarding an A grade are misrepresenting the policy."[109]

These qualifications and assurances notwithstanding, the Princeton administration felt compelled in 2013 to announce the formation of a new faculty committee, The Ad Hoc Committee to Review Policies Regarding Assessment and Grading, charged with examining "whether the University's assessment guidelines remain effective and appropriate." The move led to an article by Eric Levenson, the title of which conveys its thesis: "The End of Princeton's Grade Deflation Experiment?" The announcement of the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee leads Levenson to argue that "now Princeton appears to be backtracking" on efforts to restore standards to its grading policy. The move to reexamine its 10-year old policy was announced by new Princeton President, Chris Eisgruber. On the one hand, President Eisgruber's statement announcing the new committee praises the current policy for bringing stability to grading standards. On the other hand, he acknowledges that "concerns persist that the grading policy may have had unintended impacts upon the undergraduate academic experience that are not consistent with our broader educational goals." Eisgruber also questions whether the 10-year-old policy's "numerical targets" are in fact required as a means to satisfy the end of arresting grade inflation. In addition, he questions some of the central ideas of the policy, such as whether "numerical targets" are necessary to achieving better feedback on student work.

Levenson finds a number of elements at play that explain the apparent "backtracking." No longer in positions of authority are the policy's key drivers, retired former president Shirley Tilghman and former dean Nancy Malkiel. Although in 2004 the Princeton community envisioned that its efforts to arrest grade inflation would establish it as a "trendsetter in the grade deflation issue," no other Ivy League schools have followed its example.[110] In addition, more than a few Princeton undergraduate students continue to view the policy askance. Levenson cites the chief reason that students continue to reject the 2004 move: "The lower GPAs [grade point averages] resulting from the grade deflation policy have had a slightly negative impact on job and graduate school prospects."[111] In an attempt to combat this, Princeton began in 2009 to include on official transcripts a note explaining its policy to arrest grade inflation, which Levenson finds to have had "little impact." Why? A 2013 study titled, "Inflated Applicants: Attribution Errors in Performance Evaluation by Professionals," finds that prospective employers as well as college-admissions staff generally "take high nominal performance [here, grade point averages] as evidence of high ability and do not discount it by the ease with which it was achieved [here, grade inflation]."

In sum, says the study—as a contemporaneous *Boston Globe* article states it—"Grade inflation … works. … Easy A's do really open doors, suggests a new study."[112] Author Keith O'Brien relates, "If you're a high school senior applying to college this fall … [y]our parents and guidance counselors will most likely tell you … to select a school that will prepare you for future greatness by pushing you to study, to learn, to grow. But if you're really interested in success, a new study suggests something more cynical: Go for the school that pumps up your grades." According to the "Inflated Applicants" study cited above, "it's just as advantageous to come from a college with lenient grading practices—and, therefore, high average grades—as it is to be above average." Why? According to the study, admissions staff at graduate schools are more prone to "accept an average candidate from an institution with a culture of grade inflation … than they are a comparable student who just happened to attend a school where professors made a habit of handing out low grades."[113]

Worse, it is not graduate schools alone that fall prey to this bias. The study also shows that "employers are more likely to overvalue the worker handling an easy task compared to a colleague working hard to tackle something difficult." On this basis, "even a frustrating practice like grade grubbing actually begins to make strategic sense," because even dubious A's may provide more opportunities for graduates than what they actually learned while in college. On this reasoning, students are not wrong for "whining" and "cajoling" for a higher grade.[114] As one of the researches in the study puts it, "It's really hard for people to look away from that glaring high number or that glaring low number of raw performance. … You see a high GPA, you can't help but want to accept it—even if you know that's the function of a really favorable situation."[115]

Remedies?

How might we remedy this state of affairs? Interviewed by *The Globe*, the PLOS ONE study's authors urge the "need to start making clear each student's class rank… [T]hese percentiles should appear on college transcripts, broken down by major and perhaps even by each individual class." While we wait for that to happen, they advise that students with lower grade point averages due to "more rigorous grading" take pains to demonstrate to prospective employers or graduate schools admissions committees "just how they stack up against their peers." The article cites an immediate solution offered by Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavioral science at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business. Epley argues that admissions committees, having now woken up to the fact that they are unduly rewarding grade-inflated students, could immediately change course. "An admissions committee could solve this problem in less than a minute," says Epley, through applying a formula that adjusts its measurement of each applicant's performance in light of its relation to the school's average performance.

The Experience of Schools Implementing Anti-Grade Inflation Measures

In an effort to arrest grade inflation, a number of colleges and universities have adopted assorted versions of "honest transcripts" on their own. Their experience helps to shed light on the promise and perils of future, kindred efforts.

Dartmouth

In 1994, the Dartmouth faculty approved a measure by which "transcripts and student grade reports should indicate, along with the grade earned, the median grade given in the class as well as the class enrollment."[117] The faculty simultaneously allowed departments to recommend, "with approval of the Committee on Instruction, that certain courses (e.g., honors classes, independent study) be exempted from this provision." The provision also exempted classes in which the enrollment was below 10 students. Beginning with the class of 1998, the bottom of each Dartmouth student transcript carried "a summary statement of the following type: Exceeded the median grade in 13 courses; equaled the median grade in 7 courses; below the median grade in 13 courses; 33 courses taken eligible for this comparison." Additionally, the new policy requires that "median grades and course enrollments of non-exempt courses should be made publicly available."[118]

Did Dartmouth's new policy realize its intended end, namely, arresting grade inflation? Sadly, it did not. The title of Charles Gardner's 2002 report in *The Dartmouth* tells the story: "Unique median-grade policy does not stop inflation." Four years after its first-of-its-kind innovation, instead of thwarting grade inflation, "students are receiving more A's than ever before, while some are concerned that the system unfairly penalizes students and promotes competition." At the time the new policy was launched, the overall GPA stood at 3.25. "Last year, that figure hit 3.33, the highest level ever."[119]

The report quotes a student who has been participating in the debate over the issue of grade inflation in the Dartmouth Student Assembly. "Median grades don't reduce grade inflation, they expose grade inflation," he argues, adding that he finds the new policy "breeds an unhealthy competitiveness" unbefitting of Dartmouth. According to the report, a majority of Dartmouth students favor jettisoning the policy. A poll conducted by the Student Assembly a year earlier found "nearly 60 percent of students voted in favor of removing median grades from transcripts." The lone dissenters, according to Mike Perry the Students Assembly's Chair of Academic Affairs, "were generally science majors, whereas those in the humanities tended to oppose it."[120]

Columbia University

Likely no other Ivy League institution has acted as decisively as Dartmouth to require the publication of median grades on student transcripts. Columbia, however, has implemented a similar policy with the view to arresting grade inflation. There, student transcripts reveal the percentage of the class that earned the same grade that the individual student received. Columbia transcripts do not, however, publish median grades. Moreover, Columbia has raised the minimum grade point average needed to qualify for the Dean's List—from 3.30 to 3.60. As detailed in Ian

Blecher's *New York Observer* report, the effect of this measure is to reduce the number of students who make the Dean's List from approximately half of the class to approximately one-third.[121]

The *Observer's* account of the Columbia decision calls it "a new tough-love effort to tackle a long-brewing yet largely unresolved issue at many colleges and universities: grade inflation. For years, academics as well as some students have complained that the value of high grades has been diminished as teachers have shown a reluctance to give low marks to inferior performances." In 2000, Columbia's Committee on Instruction "noticed that more than half of the school's undergraduates were making Dean's List, a citation that's supposed to be reserved for distinguished academic performance." The article finds that "the change has irked students at the university." It quotes undergraduate Peter Mondelli, who reports, "A lot of upperclassmen are sort of angry." Another student complained to the Observer that the new policy might cause prospective employers to "look askance at students who fell off the Dean's List, even if they kept up the same level of grades." Such a student "will be torn between listing or not listing his impressive feat of making the Dean's List at Columbia. If he does include his Dean's List accolades on his résumé, then job recruiters who don't look at his transcripts will peruse said résumé and ask themselves, 'What kind of slacker-deadbeat makes the Dean's List his first four semesters and not his last four?' Arby's won't trust him to shave slices of roast beef."[122]

Such complaints notwithstanding, the *Observer* found a good number of students "acknowledged that, truth be told, it has usually been pretty easy for students to make Columbia's Dean's List." Said one student, "I hardly know anybody who hasn't made the Dean's List in the past couple of times." The student added, "I don't know that many people with a GPA below 3.0, except jocks."

However, it remains a question whether the Columbia administration's effort has had any effect at accomplishing its objective of arresting grade inflation. A 2011 piece in *The Huffington Post*, "Columbia Students Rack Up Straight A's," reports on the content of a document "leaked to the *Columbia Daily Spectator*," according to which "at least eight percent" of Columbia's undergraduate students scored a grade point average "of 4.0 or above last semester." The document was obtained when a Columbia "dean accidentally sent students a spreadsheet noting 482 students who earned an A or above."

Yet, if some at Columbia were shocked at the revelations of still-escalating grade inflation, others responded with a justification already discussed and debunked. Jack Snyder, director of undergraduate studies in Columbia's department of political science, told the *Columbia Daily Spectator*, "Columbia and the other Ivies are like Lake Wobegon, where all the students are indeed above average in their basic capacities, so why shouldn't many of them do well and get good grades?" That said, Snyder did allow that a "grade spread was necessary to reward excellent students."[123] He did not explain how his two positions on the subject—ubiquitous "good grades" versus "a grade spread"—could be reconciled.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The latest school to adopt a policy to arrest grade inflation is the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. According to a recent report, the process began in 2008, when a committee of professors at the school "was astounded to discover that the average grade of a Carolina student was 3.213—well over a B average."[124] This led to a survey of how and whether other universities were tackling grade inflation. As a result, the university opted on what is labeled as "contextual grading." Under contextual grading, student transcripts now will contain "not just what the individual student earned in a course, but also what the class average was, thereby providing the 'context' for the grade." This policy tells prospective employers more than conventional transcripts alone provide. "Getting an A in a class where almost everyone gets an A is not so much of an accomplishment as getting an A when most of the other students earned B's and C's."

The move is not expected to eliminate but, rather, to reduce grade inflation through removing to some extent the current incentives influencing students to take easier courses. In adopting contextualized grading, UNC at Chapel Hill decided against following Princeton's policy of requiring A grades to constitute no more than 35 percent of the grades awarded in an undergraduate class, because such a regime assumes *a priori* that "grading should be the same

across all disciplines." In 2009, a team of Chapel Hill professors began vetting other universities' anti-grade inflation policies. One member of the team, sociology professor, Andrew Perrin, a Swarthmore alumnus, favored "his alma mater's approach for its honors students, where a committee of faculty reviews each student's grades every semester." However, this was rejected as unfeasible, because, said Perrin, "the expense involved in bringing in external examiners to examine a class of thousands of people [is] just prohibitively expensive."[127]

The policy ultimately recommended by the Educational Policy Committee, contextual grading, has the advantage of alerting graduate schools and prospective employers who inspect transcripts to how each student's grade "compares with other grades given in that class. In addition, professors and teaching assistants can see whether the grade distributions in their classes are similar to those of others teaching a different section."[128]

Contextual grading has the advantage of alerting graduate schools and prospective employers who inspect transcripts to how each student's grade compares with other grades given in that class.

As we have seen has been the case with anti-grade inflation policies at other schools, UNC-Chapel Hill's new contextualized grading policy was met with dissatisfaction by students there. "Many thought it would hinder their ability to get into graduate school or make it more difficult to find a job, since it would reveal the relative value of their UNC grades, while transcripts from most other schools do not." Nor was the faculty certain that such a measure was needed. Employing a justification that we have examined previously, "Vice chancellor and provost Bruce Carney told the *Daily Tar Heel,* 'Yes, we give high grades at Carolina, but I've heard faculty argue that we have better students than at other places.'" But early indications are that there is coming to be growing acceptance of the policy by students and faculty as they come to "have more information about it." Professor Perrin responds that undergraduates "can and should recognize that it's not a zero-sum game. Having Carolina known for quality education and rigorous grading is good for students once they're out on the job market and competing for graduate schools and so on." Contextualized grading is, he argues, "a win-win approach."[129]

Perrin adds that "the university has contacted multiple graduate schools and big-name companies to ensure that this policy does not hurt Carolina graduates. The responses received from various institutions have ranged from "not particularly interested" to very positive, and no one has been against the new policy," he told the North Carolina-based think tank, the Pope Center.[130] Moreover, there is the hope and expectation among some in the faculty that the new policy will spur students to enroll in more rigorous classes rather than before. Perrin "believes that some students avoid math and science courses because they are more harshly graded. But now their transcript will actually show the meaning of their work in those sections."[131] Another hoped-for effect of the new policy is that it will "prevent students from feeling entitled to a certain grade in a seemingly trivial course." Still in its embryonic stages, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's new policy will be "analyzed after a five-year trial period." For their part, Perrin and his fellow members of the Education Policy Committee fear that "this policy may not go far enough."[132] The results of a comparable policy at Dartmouth lend credence to their concerns.[133]

The University of California at Berkeley

The University of California at Berkeley could be the next major school to adopt a policy to arrest rampant grade inflation. A 2013 report reveals that the school is looking at a measure that would "add contextual information to transcripts."[134]

Currently under discussion is a proposal to "add information such as a student's percentile rank and average course grade to students' transcripts." At the same time, the data reveal that UC Berkeley has historically awarded lower grades than peer institutions, which has raised fears of "potentially placing graduates at a disadvantage when finding a job or getting into graduate school." For example, for the 2005 academic year, UC Berkeley's average grade awarded was 3.24, whereas students at peer Stanford University averaged 3.55. This has led some to wonder whether the new policy now envisioned might "increase pressure for grades on students and hinder collaboration in smaller classroom settings." This is denied by Bob Jacobsen, former chair of the UC Berkeley Division of the Academic Senate and current associate dean for the College of Letters and Science, who argues that "a more nuanced approach to

selecting what types of information to place on a transcript may help to resolve this problem. … In my discussion of this across campus, most of the objections are about very special cases. How do you handle specific senior seminars where everyone is a specialist? I would phrase it as, what's the right context to put on the transcript?"[135]

According to the report, UC-Berkeley expects to craft a concrete proposal in no more than two years. A major obstacle to implementation, at least at this point, is said to be the campus's "technological limitations." The reason for this delay, according to Jacobsen, is that the current student computer systems and programs are "outdated and ill-equipped for change." "The reality is that our computers just can't do this right now," Jacobsen said. "We won't be able to implement the policy until new student systems arrive."[136]

Texas' Efforts to Restore Transparency to Grading Standards

> Making sure that all gifted students hit their own personal walls is crucial for developing their empathy with the rest of the world. When they see their less lucky peers struggle academically, they need to be able to say "I know how it feels"—and be telling the truth. … But empathy is not the chief reason that gifted students need to hit the wall. It is even more important that they achieve humility. A wonderful maxim is attributed to George Christian, one of Lyndon Johnson's press secretaries: "No one should be allowed to work in the West Wing of the White House who has not suffered a major disappointment in life." The responsibility of working there was too great, Christian thought, to be entrusted to people who weren't painfully aware how badly things can go wrong. The same principle applies to those who will become members of America's elite. No one among the gifted should be allowed to rise to a position of influence without knowing what it feels like to fail. ~Charles Murray, "Educating the Gifted," in *Real Education*[137]

In the spring of 2013, the 83rd Texas Legislature attempted to lasso grade inflation in the state's public universities. The Texas House of Representatives voted virtually unanimously to implement the "Honest Transcript" bill (House Bill 3498).[138] In a time when 1,000+ page pieces of legislation are virtually normal, the Honest College Transcript bill was a model of brevity, filling but a few paragraphs. Yet its sponsors hope that it will bolster standards in higher education in the state and—with the eyes of America upon Texas—beyond.[139] The bill passed with but two Nay votes in the 150-member House of Representatives, but was not heard by the Senate. Its champions have pledged publicly to resubmit the bill when the 84th Texas legislative session convenes in January of 2015.

The Honest Transcript bill would require all public colleges and universities to include on student transcripts—next to the individual grade the student received for each class—the average grade given by the professor for the entire class. As we saw earlier, the argument for such a move is that it would help potential employers and graduate admissions committees to learn whether a given high grade-point average signifies superlative talent or merely that the student completed what this writer's generation called "gut-," and today's students label "Mick-," for "Mickey Mouse" courses.[140]

Supporters of the Honest Transcript bill argue that such a transparency requirement would raise public awareness of the fact that grade inflation has dangerously degraded undergraduate degrees.[141] "As monetary inflation devalues the dollar, so grade inflation debases the currency of higher education. Students and parents, argue the bill's defenders, deserve to know that they are getting what they pay for in higher education, and what they're getting all too often is shortchanged."[142] To be precise, the analogy between monetary inflation and grade inflation is imperfect, but its imperfection only worsens matters for grade inflation: Monetary inflation can, theoretically, proceed infinitely. But grade inflation arrives quickly at the ceiling of A's or A+'s, beyond which it cannot go, absent the creation of an entirely new grade. This is what accounts for the "compression" at the A-grade level in American higher education documented earlier.

Moreover, this writer has called attention previously to the 2011 landmark national study, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa.[143] *Academically Adrift's* study of 2,300 college students from 2005 to 2009 finds that these high-grade-point-average students far too often learn much too little. Thirty-six percent of the students it surveyed demonstrate little to no increase in fundamental academic skills—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and clear writing—after four years invested in college. Small wonder that employers turn lukewarm inspecting the annual HR parade of fulsome transcripts hiding often less-than-stellar accomplishments.[144]

This is the academic reality whose veil Texas' Honest Transcript Bill hoped to lift—too many students learn too little, yet their grades continue to rise higher and higher.

This writer also has argued that, employer complaints notwithstanding, our universities have a far higher calling than simply preparing future employees. Virtually all proclaim, rightly, in their mission statements to seek to enhance their students' capacities for independent thought, for which critical thinking, complex reasoning, and writing skills are indispensable. But in this, their highest calling—which harkens back to Socrates' declaration that "the unexamined life is not worth living"—grade inflation is no less, likely more, malignant: It eats away at the essence and morale of an institution.[145] For Rojstaczer and Healy, "When college students perceive that the average grade in a class will be an A, they do not try to excel. It is likely that the decline in student study hours, student engagement, and literacy are partly the result of diminished academic expectations."[146]

This, then, is the academic reality whose veil Texas' Honest Transcript Bill hoped to lift—too many students learn too little, yet their grades continue to rise higher and higher.

During the legislative discussion of the bill in the spring of 2013, Texas universities did not publicly oppose transcript transparency. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a principled basis for such resistance. Universities are, after all, defined by the pursuit of truth and its diffusion to students and society as a whole. Transparency is what they are all about. But legislative staffers reported to this writer that, behind closed doors, some public university representatives cautioned that the Honest Transcript bill would impose an undue burden on university Registrars.

This objection comes a decade too late. Over roughly the last 10 years, through services such as MyEdu.com and internal school sites, students can now inspect the grading history of each instructor by type of class. From where comes this information on the grades given out by professors? From the universities themselves, through their Registrars. MyEdu.com's website advertises that it "works directly with universities to post their official grade records, including *average* GPA and drop rates. Yes, really—these are the *official* grade records straight from your university."

MyEdu.com boasts a membership of over 800 schools and universities and five million-plus students. Its reach in Texas extends to nearly every public college and university. In an article on MyEdu.com in the *Austin American-Statesman*, Gene Powell, then-Chairman of the Board of Regents of the University of Texas (UT) System, is quoted as saying, "This [MyEdu.com] is a product we are going to make available for free to students on 15 campuses. … We wanted to do it as quickly as possible" in order to hike graduation rates.

Powell's concern with graduation rates is well-founded. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the 2011 graduation rate for full-time, first-time undergraduates who begin at a four-year institution and complete their degrees after six years is but 59 percent. The longer time span for completing a degree increases its cost for students, parents, and taxpayers. Those students who fail to graduate at all often acquire student-loan debt, which, lacking a college degree, they find harder to repay. National student-loan debt stands now at $1.2 trillion. For the first time in American history, student-loan debt exceeds national credit-card debt.

Texas' focus on graduation rates is less a mover and more a mirror of the national scene. Sixteen states have adopted or are considering "outcomes-based funding," through which a part of state higher-education appropriations is awarded according to each school's reaching certain metrics, primary among which are improved graduation and completion rates.

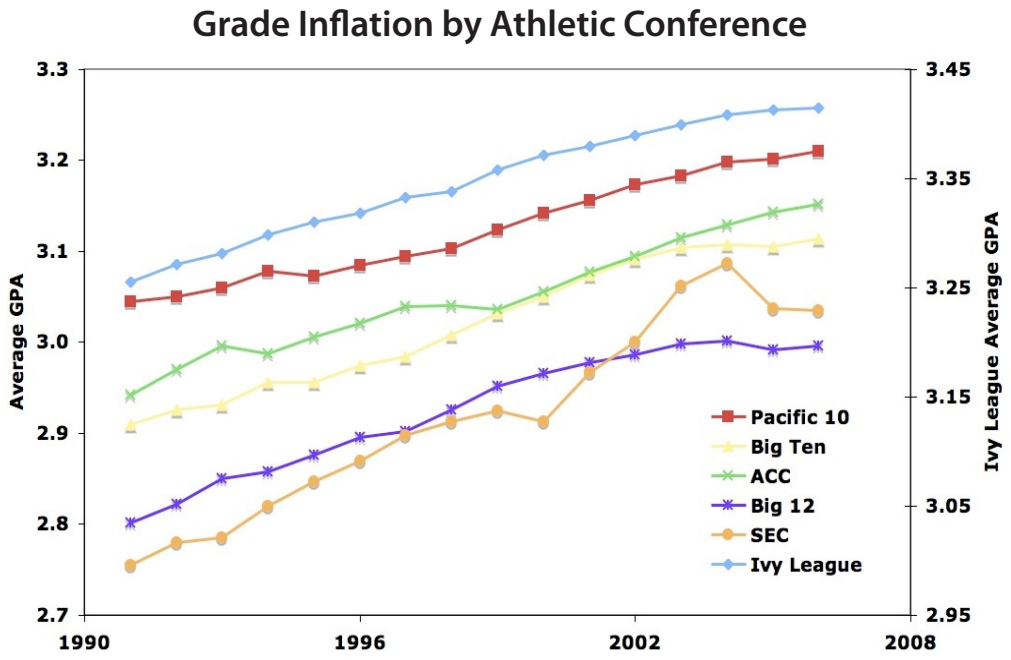
Although sites like MyEdu.com offer high-tech support for academic advising and degree completion, they have attracted criticism over a possible unintended consequence of transparency, namely, that it enables a "grade-shop-'til-you-drop ethos."[147] The *Austin American-Statesman* article notes that some critics dismiss the site "for pandering to students interested primarily in using it to identify faculty members who inflate grades. A University of Texas-Austin student survey conducted last year confirmed that most students used the site to check professors' grade distributions." The piece includes a University of Texas administrator's lament: "As an educator, I'm not sure that's what we want students to focus on."

However, blaming grade inflation on such sites ignores the fact that grades have been ascending since the early '60s, while MyEdu is relatively new to the scene. Declining university standards and low-tech student word-of-mouth have proven quite effective at inflating grades. As for transparency's role in all this, blaming it for grade inflation is like blaming a blemish on the mirror that reveals it.

If critics are correct that grading-history sites like MyEdu.com will unintentionally streamline easy-grades shopping, the Honest Transcript bill hopes to combat this through balancing the grading-history transparency already available to students with equal access on the part of parents and employers. The result, they hope, will be the unmasking of higher education's decline. While he was Harvard president, Derek Bok's standard rejoinder to complaints over skyrocketing tuitions was, "If you think education is expensive, try ignorance." The Honest Transcript bill's defenders respond that it, along with *Academically Adrift*, exposes Bok's false dichotomy: Higher education has been growing ever-more expensive, in exchange for which we get ever-more intellectually impoverished graduates flashing easy A's.

Another virtue of the move to require the Honest Transcript is its eschewal of the legislative micromanagement against which universities rightly protest. Instead, the bill's sponsors hope its transparency will stir prospective students and parents to vote with their feet and flee majors with lax standards. This hope requires that the multitude of everyday citizens, which seeks to be educated, first educate the educators about standards. To do so, students and parents must first refuse to dance any longer to the siren song of easy A's.[148] This prospect has its doubters, even among otherwise like-minded critics of grade inflation, such as *Academically Adrift* authors Arum and Roksa. They fear that, instead of focusing on academic standards, "other features," such as "student residential and social life," will likely drive decisions, "as well as the ability with relatively modest investments of effort to earn a credential" for a job. Recall also that Valen Johnson points to Dartmouth's efforts as a cautionary tale. Dartmouth adopted its own Honest Transcript in the 1990s, but grades have continued to rise there. Honest Transcript's defenders hope that their effort, which affects all public-university students in the nation's second-largest state, will have a greater impact than that of a single college at alerting the populace to the crisis in higher-education standards—and that it could bolster support for stronger measures, key among which would be Johnson's proposal for "carefully designed constraints on mean course grades."[149] ✯

Appendix A: GradeInflation.com's Sweet Sixteen of Tough Graders
(from gradeinflation.com)



"A" The Hard Way, 2010: GradeInflation.com's Sweet Sixteen of Tough Graders

March Madness is upon us. Last year at this time, GradeInflation.com came up with a Sweet Sixteen of grade inflaters. As the graph above shows, grade inflation is pervasive in academia. It's present at almost every school that's part of a major athletic conference.

We could have made a new Sweet Sixteen of inflaters this year. Some university administrators were worried that we would. One provost actually sent us data a couple weeks before this year's NCAA tournament began in a pre-emptive effort to show that his school wasn't much of an inflater and lobbied to stay off this year's Grade Inflation Sweet Sixteen. We didn't know we had that kind of clout!

But this year finds us in a very good mood. We've decided that it's both just too easy and mean to out schools for being slacker havens. We thought it would be much better to look at the other end of the spectrum: the schools that defy the trend of the easy A. These are rare schools, but if you look long and hard, you can find them.

Just like tough D wins basketball games, tough A's help to create an environment for a rigorous education. Here are 16 schools where getting an A is significantly harder than at your average college or university. Not all of them have particularly low GPAs compared to national averages, but there are schools where the talent level is so high that one should expect A's to be more prevalent. We've taken talent level into account in the creation of this Sweet Sixteen.

The East

1. **Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.** Engineering and science based schools dominate the Sweet Sixteen of Tough A's.

Their workloads are higher and their grades are lower than national averages. Rensselaer fits right in with a high quality student body and an average GPA about 0.25 below typical private schools of its caliber.

2. **Princeton University.** The Tigers are a newcomer to the tough A. Leadership here has worked hard over the last few years to make sure that excellence is accorded only to those that truly deserve it. Princeton may be new to reversing grade inflation, but in this year's tourney, they may go all the way.

3. **Boston University.** BU's student body complains mightily about grades and how hard it is to get an A. At a lot of schools such complaints defy reality. But at BU, getting a B average puts you right in the middle of pack. Graduating with a 3.5 makes you a star.

4. **MIT.** The Beavers likely deserve a higher seed, but their leadership is very, very tight lipped about their grades. When MIT last slipped and published some data several years ago, the average GPA was less than 3.2. At schools with comparable talent like Harvard and Yale, GPA's are 0.2 to 0.4 higher.

The South

1. **Virginia Commonwealth University.** Public schools in urban settings can be very tough places to earn an A. At VCU, even getting a B can be an achievement. Its average GPA is 2.6, far below national averages.

2. **Hampden-Sydney College.** H-SC is a very small school tucked away in the South. It's had modest problems with grade inflation over the last decade, but H-SC's grades are still so low relative to other liberal arts colleges that it fully merits a number two seed in the very tough Southern region.

3. **Roanoke College.** Liberal arts colleges tend to be easy A heaven. That's not so at Roanoke where B is still the most common grade and A's are earned less than 30 percent of the time.

4. **Auburn University.** Another Tiger in this year's Sweet Sixteen. Eat your hearts out 'Bama; Auburn is just a tougher place to earn an A.

The Midwest

1. **Purdue University.** Getting an A is hard for the Boilermakers with an average GPA that has hovered around 2.8 for over 30 years. Purdue doesn't even seem to know that grade inflation exists in America. In that regard, ignorance is bliss.

2. **University of Houston.** The Midwest is our weakest division and to make up for it, we've shipped some schools from the South to here. Like VCU, Houston is a tough urban public school to earn an A with a GPA that has held at a steady 2.6 for 15 years.

3. **Southern Polytechnic State.** Another hard-nosed science and engineering school. Its state rival Georgia Tech is no piece of cake either, but SPSU gets the nod for a Sweet Sixteen seed this year.

4. **Florida International University.** A's are far harder to come by at FIU than they are at Florida's flagship school in Gainesville. Earn a 3.4 GPA at FIU and you're well ahead of the pack. Maybe next year the Midwest will toughen up and be able to compete with the Southern schools that we've shipped into the land of the wind chill factor.

The West

1. **Reed College.** If you go to Reed, you know in advance that A's are earned. There's a reason why this school places so many students in Ph.D. programs and medical schools.

2. **CSU-Fullerton.** Resources are tight in the CSU system and Fullerton has its share of real problems. But grade inflation is not an issue here. Grades are about the same as they were in 1978 and the average GPA is 2.7.

3. **Harvey Mudd College.** This small science and engineering school outside of LA has, to our mind, one of the funniest names for a school in America (OK, Chico State is even funnier). But the name is where all jokes end. Harvey

Mudd's average GPA is in the 3.2 range, which might seem high at face value. But these students are some of the best in the country. If they took classes with their liberal arts college neighbors across the way (Harvey Mudd is part of a consortium of colleges), they'd be getting A's 10 to 30 percent more frequently.

4. **Simon Fraser University.** Unlike the NCAA, GradeInflation.com is not restricted to seeding only American schools. Just across the Washington state border in beautiful British Columbia, SFU has avoided grade inflation as successfully as Celine Dion has avoided Tim Hortons (you might have to be Canadian to get that one). They are stingy with their A's, giving them only about 25 percent of the time.

That's it for our Sweet Sixteen this year. If you feel your school has been slighted by omission, send us a verifiable record of their grading history. They just might make the Sweet Sixteen in 2011!

Appendix B: Additional Information on the Rojstaczer-Adelman Debate over Grade Inflation (Reprinted from FortyQuestions.blogspot.com)

Apples and Oranges, Wednesday, February 04, 2009

By Stuart Rojstaczer

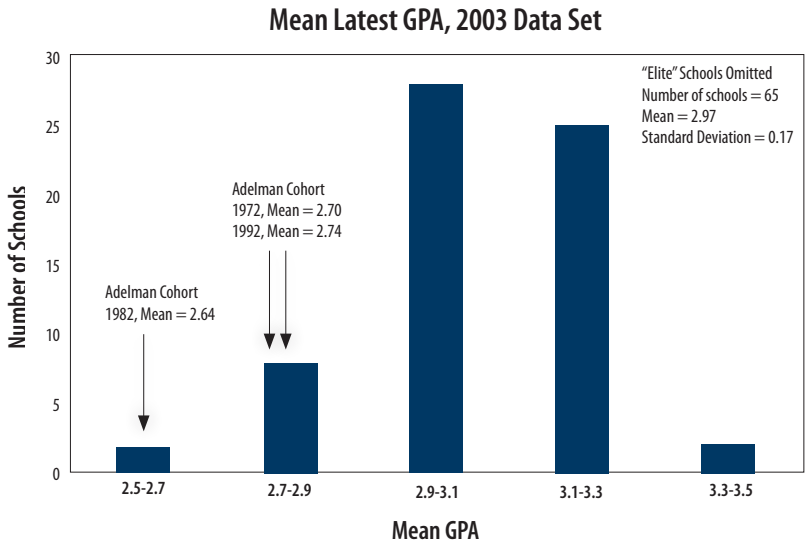
For over 10 years, Clifford Adelman has made claims based on a longitudinal study of the college transcripts of tens of thousands of those who were high school twelfth graders as of 1972, 1982 and 1992 that grade inflation doesn't exist (or it exists only at elite schools) and that A's are not that easy to get in college. For the last several years, the GPAs from Adelman's work that keep being quoted to prove this are the average GPAs for the 1972, 1982, and 1992 cohorts, 2.70, 2.66, and 2.74, respectively. Those numbers are low. The trend in those numbers is essentially nonexistent. If you believe those numbers, you would indeed believe that C grades are very common and grade inflation doesn't exist. But, in fact, those numbers are unbelievable.

I decided to do a first order check on differences between my analysis (which more or less lines up with other people's analyses) of grade changes over time and Adelman's analysis (which doesn't line up with anyone else). By first order, I mean comparing averages of the populations of grades in the two data sets.

In my work, I've randomly sampled American colleges and universities with the significant qualifiers that I've certainly oversampled elite schools and my sample is weighted to other schools that have online data on grades. In contrast, only three percent of Adelman's schools are highly selective, so in order to make a better comparison with Adelman, I'm going to throw out all but one (which I've picked at random) selective college from my database. Here is my sample of schools to determine a mean equivalent GPA to compare with Adelman's transcript data: Alabama, Arizona, Auburn, Central Michigan, Clarion, Colby, Colorado, Colorado State, CSU-East Bay, CSU-Sacto, CSU-SB, Dixie State, Eastern Oregon, Florida, Georgia Tech, Hampden-Sydney, Houston, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, James Madison, Kent State, Kenyon, Lehigh, LSU, Miami, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana State, Nebraska-Kearney, Norfolk State, Northern Iowa, Northern Michigan, Ohio State, Old Dominion, Pacific Lutheran, Purdue, Sam Houston, Southern Cal, Southern Illinois, Southwest Missouri, Stetson, SUNY-Geneseo, SUNY-Oswego, Texas, UC Berkeley, UC Irvine, UC Riverside, UC SB, UNC Chapel Hill, UNC Greensboro, Utah, UW Green Bay, UW LaCrosse, UW Madison, UW Oshkosh, Virginia, Washington, Washington State, Western Michigan, Western Washington, Westmont, Wheaton, William & Mary, and Winthrop. To my mind, that's a nice wide swath of American colleges and universities, 65 total, representing an enrollment of about one million students.

On the following page, I show the distribution of the "latest" mean GPAs for these schools in my 2003 dataset. By "latest," I simply mean the most current data point reported for each school (almost always based on percent grade awarded data, which is essentially a huge transcript for each school), typically between 1998 and 2002. The mean is well off Adel-

man's means, more than one standard deviation off. There are only 10 schools that fall within the type of GPAs Adelman's transcripts are showing.



The bottom line is that if the means for Adelman's GPAs have low variance (and they do) there is no equivalency. Either the reported means are in error or Adelman isn't sampling anything close to the population I've sampled (or anyone else has sampled for that matter). It's a world of students with a lot of low GPAs that I'm rarely finding on a school level (and I'd love to find them). About 25 percent of all of Adelman's data come from community colleges, and my focus is on four year schools. But this difference at face value seems unlikely to create the dramatic difference in populations. Adelman's GPAs for community colleges are only about 0.1 less than his average GPAs. Perhaps, because he is looking at individual transcripts and many students do drop out, he is significantly oversampling data from first year students, who typically have GPAs a few tenths lower than seniors.

In my database, the average grade nationwide was 3.0 in about the year 2000 regardless as to whether I include or exclude elite private schools. If I limit the 2003 database only to schools with extensive data from 1991-2001, the number goes higher, up to 3.1 (which is the number shown on gradeinflation.com's last full update). Given the numbers of students represented in my dataset, I can say with complete certainty that whatever the numbers 2.70, 2.66, and 2.74 represent, they bear no relation to average GPAs of students at American colleges and universities. Instead about 1/3 of all grades are A's and about 3/4 of all grades are B- or better. Grading is easy in America.

I'm going to make another big assumption and look at the Adelman numbers again, this time for evidence of grade inflation. I'm going to assume that the numbers are off by a lot, but they are all off by the same amount, somewhere about 0.23. This yields GPAs of 2.93, 2.89 and 2.97 for the 1972, 1982, and 1992 high school graduates of Adelman's study, respectively. The first two numbers are actually believable. The first group of students would be sophomores and juniors at around 1975 and the second group at around 1985, a time period when GPAs were on average flat across America. So one half of the time period covered by Adelman's study happens to coincide with a time when grade inflation wasn't happening. On that Adelman and I can both agree. But then the agreement mostly ends. The 1992 data show a rise of 0.08, which is off by a factor of roughly two. Again, I don't know what the numbers 2.70, 2.66, and 2.74 represent, but they bear little relation to changing grading patterns in American colleges and universities from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s.*

Adelman has made the claim that grade inflation is an elite school phenomenon and because those schools get so much attention in the media, it creates the illusion that grade inflation is widespread. This claim is not true. Here are some schools where GPAs rose significantly over the time period of Adelman's study and beyond that are not Harvard, Princeton, et al.:

Adelphi	1995-2004	3.05-3.22
Alabama	1991-2006	2.59-2.90
Central Florida	1984-2007	2.61-2.99
Central Michigan	1977-2006	2.77-2.94
CSU-San Bernardino	1975-2001	2.73-3.00
Florida	1989-2006	2.88-3.29
Furman	1984-2007	2.68-3.22
Georgia	1974-2004	2.74-3.24
Georgia Tech	1972-2007	2.45-2.93
Hampden-Sydney	1988-2007	2.52-2.71
Hope College	1975-2006	2.86-3.38
Houston	1989-2007	2.49-2.64
Kansas	1984-2004	2.94-3.16
Lehigh	1972-2003	2.60-3.04
Messiah	1990-2006	2.90-3.26
Missouri State	1997-2006	2.90-3.02
North Carolina-Chapel Hill	1975-2006	2.82-3.16
North Carolina-Greensboro	1988-2008	2.71-2.90
Northern Iowa	1985-1999	2.69-2.96
Ohio State	1980-2007	2.65-2.99
Ohio University	1986-1998	2.66-2.89
Penn State	1975-2006	2.86-3.07
Purdue University	1986-2006	2.66-2.81
Southern Illinois	1991-2001	2.88-3.08
Southwest Missouri	1979-2001	2.94-3.16
Texas	1986-2006	2.60-3.12
Texas A&M	1985-2008	2.70-2.98
UC-Berkeley	1986-2005	2.95-3.25
UC-Santa Barbara	1994-2006	2.84-3.02
Utah	1975-2007	2.65-3.07
Valdosta State	1994-2004	2.69-2.87
Westmont	1991-1999	3.04-3.24
William and Mary	1986-2005	2.86-3.23
Winthrop	1987-2005	2.49-2.93
Wisconsin-La Crosse	1977-2001	2.85-3.19
Wisconsin-Madison	1974-2007	2.90-3.20

The above schools, randomly found (except for curiosity about places like Madison, where I'm an alumnus, and Chapel Hill, where I lived), represent over 600,000 college students. It's true that rising grades cannot be found at all colleges and universities over the last 20 years. You can find schools that have held the line, but they are rare:

Auburn	1976-2006	2.71-2.73**
Nebraska-Kearney	1990-2008	2.88-2.89

These schools, randomly found, represent about 25,000 college students.

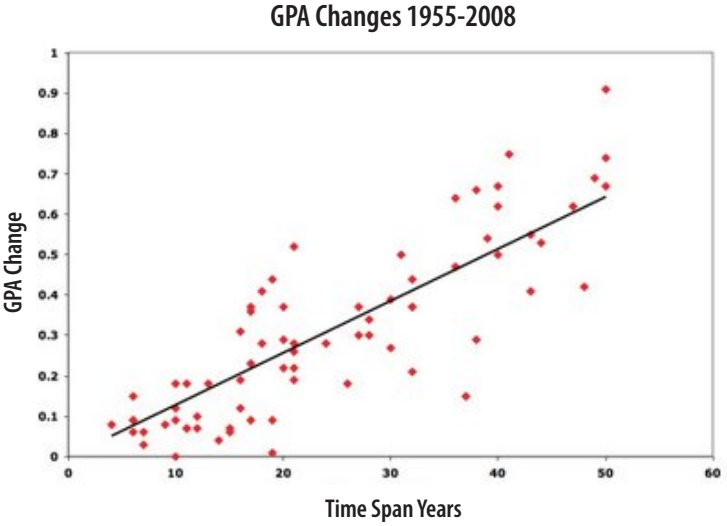
Here's the reality. Grades are up virtually everywhere. If I have a long record of data, on the order of 50 years, GPAs will be up about 0.7. If I have a short record, on the order of 10 years, GPAs will be up about 0.1. Below is a summary plot of all the data I have so far for my next update of gradeinflation.com. Over 70 schools are represented.*** Each data point is one school. The picture tells it all. The next person who tries to tell me that grade inflation is a myth has to be smoking something.

There is some good news, actually. Some colleges and universities have seen their rate of GPA increase significantly slow down or plateau over the last few years (as I'll talk about in my next full update of gradeinflation.com). At a few places that have seriously tried to curtail grade inflation, GPAs have actually dropped; but in the absence of those efforts, rising grades are the rule not the exception.

Grade inflation is so pervasive that in some ways—like with any epidemic—it's more interesting to examine those schools that seem to be immune rather than those that have been susceptible.

Getting back to apples and oranges, perception is the same as reality in the case of grading in America. The reason that there is a perception that grade inflation is widespread is that it is, in fact, widespread. Adelman has spent well over a decade promoting the idea that grade inflation is a myth. He has promoted that idea because that's what his database tells him. But if that is the case, his database bears no relation to the real world. He has warned people about this data that "in discussions of grades and grading in higher education, we ignore them at our own peril." My oh my. Now I'm really scared.

I am reminded of an old friend who absolutely can't find things. One day, he asked his wife as he was prowling around in the kitchen, "Honey, where do we keep the ice?" Adelman has been unable to find evidence of grade inflation, but it's so obvious where that evidence is—readily available in the online databases of university institutional research offices—that it's mind boggling that he hasn't found it yet.



You simply have to make the effort to go online, open some virtual doors and look at real data. It is common practice for scientists to make sure in advance of publication that results based on ensembles of indirect data—such as a database consisting of tens of thousands of individual college transcripts—can match real observations. With regard to the analyses performed by Adelman and his colleagues, that checking apparently was not done. The result has been the prominent display of misinformation and false assessment on the state of grading in American colleges and universities for over a decade.

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*It may be worth noting that Adelman's GPAs for college graduates are much higher and are believable. They are 2.94, 2.88 and 3.04 for 1972, 1982, and 1992 respectively. They are low, but not ridiculously low (college graduates should have GPAs higher than equivalent GPAs based on percent grade awarded data because the latter include grades from poor performing drop outs). They, in fact, suggest that beginning in the early to mid-1980s grade inflation took off after a 10-year flat period. Why Adelman chooses not to emphasize this is anyone's guess. That said, Adelman's database time intervals do not line up well with the dominant time periods of grade inflation, the 1960s, and the mid-1980s to present. The absence of data in critical years, as a result, makes the database a suboptimal tool for identifying grade inflation.

**Addendum: You can add University of Wyoming and CSU-Fullerton to the list of grade inflation resistant schools. If you go back to the 1970s and include that data, you can move Purdue from the very modest inflaters to the grade resistant. You can add UCLA and Appalachian State to the list of grade inflaters.

***Below are all the schools for which I have current data that I'm going to post in my next full update of gradeinflation.com. I'm essentially done with data collection for the update, but if someone who reads this has more data, send it my way. I'd especially love to find someone, anyone, who can find schools where grades have been stable. They are, as I noted above, rare. And I do like rare things.

Adelphi	CSU-Sacramento	Illinois	Ohio State	UCLA
Alabama	CSU-San Bernardino	Indiana	Oregon	UC-Santa Barbara
Appalachian State	Dartmouth	Iowa State	Oshkosh	UNC-Chapel Hill
Auburn	Florida	Kansas	Penn State	UNC-Greensboro
Boston U	Furman	Kenyon	Pomona	UNC-Wilmington
Brown	George Washington	Lehigh	Princeton	Utah
Carleton	Georgetown	Messiah	Sam Houston	UW-La Crosse
Central Florida	Georgia	Middlebury	SE LA	Valdosta State
Central Michigan	Georgia Tech	Minot State	South FL	Washington & Lee
Colorado	Grinnell	Missouri S&T	Southern CT	Western Washington
Colorado State	Hampden-Sydney	Missouri State	Southern Illinois	Wheaton
Columbia	Harvard	Nebraska-Kearney	Stanford	William & Mary
Columbia (Chicago)	Harvey Mudd	Northern Michigan	Texas	Winthrop
Cornell	Hope	North Dakota	Texas A&M	Wisconsin
CSU-Fullerton	Houston	Northern Iowa	UC-Berkeley	Wyoming

Appendix C: Grading at Princeton
(Princeton University website)

Since the fall term of 2004, Princeton's grading policy has set a common grading standard for the University, under which As (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. Our goal with this policy is to provide fair and consistent standards across the University.

Please note that we are not saying that 35 percent is a hard cut-off or that only 35 percent of students in each course will receive a grade in the A-range. Rather, we expect that if faculty members make rigorous evaluative judgments about the quality of student work, then over time, on average, across the University, about 35 percent of undergraduate students will be doing course work of the highest quality, and 55 percent will be doing independent work of the highest quality.

We want to emphasize that any student who does A-range work should receive an A-range grade. Under no circumstances should any faculty member fail to give an A to a student who deserves it. Consequently, faculty members who cite the grading policy as a reason for not awarding an A grade are misrepresenting the policy.

The Faculty Committee on Grading monitors the distribution of grades and reports results to departments and programs each fall. The committee asks that chairs review the grading distributions in their departments or programs and use the data as the basis for meaningful discussions of grading practices. In addition, the committee works with the McGraw Center for Teaching and Learning and other colleagues to assist faculty and to foster broader conversations about the evaluation of student work.

In October 2013, President Eisgruber charged a new faculty committee with reviewing the University's policies for how student work is evaluated. The Ad Hoc Committee to Review Policies Regarding Assessment and Grading will explore whether the University's assessment guidelines remain effective and appropriate.

Appendix D: Text of Texas' Honest Transcript Bill
(House Bill 3498, 2013, 83rd Legislature)

83R9026 KEL-F

By: Turner of Collin, Fletcher, Toth, Strama, Murphy, et al. H.B. No. 3498

A BILL TO BE ENTITLED
AN ACT

relating to a requirement that a student's postsecondary transcript include the average or median grade awarded in each class.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF TEXAS:

SECTION 1. Subchapter Z, Chapter 51, Education Code, is amended by adding Section 51.979 to read as follows:

Sec. 51.979. TRANSPARENCY IN STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS. (a) In this section, "general academic teaching institution" has the meaning assigned by Section 61.003.

(b) Each general academic teaching institution shall include on a student's transcript, for each class attempted by the student, the average grade that was awarded to all students in the class. For a class for which letter grades are awarded, the institution shall include on the transcript the median grade that was awarded to all students in the class. The institution shall place the average or median grade, as applicable, immediately to the right of the student's individual grade.

(c) Subsection (b) does not apply to a class:

(1) offered to students solely on a pass-fail basis or for independent study credit; or

(2) in which grades are reported for 10 students or fewer.

(d) The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shall adopt rules to administer this section.

SECTION 2. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board shall adopt the rules required by Section 51.979, Education Code, as added by this Act, as soon as practicable after this Act takes effect. For that purpose, the coordinating board may adopt the initial rules in the manner provided by law for emergency rules.

SECTION 3. The change in law made by this Act applies beginning with the 2013 fall semester.

SECTION 4. This Act takes effect immediately if it receives a vote of two-thirds of all the members elected to each house, as provided by Section 39, Article III, Texas Constitution. If this Act does not receive the vote necessary for immediate effect, this Act takes effect September 1, 2013.

Appendix E: PolitiFact Exposé on Claims of Grade Inflation
(Published in the Austin American-Statesman, January 31, 2013)

"Thomas Lindsay says 43 percent of college grades are A's, up 28 percentage points from 1960"

More than 4 in 10 college grades are A's and that's way up from 50 years ago, Thomas K. Lindsay of the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation recently wrote.

In a Jan. 12, 2013, opinion column in the *Austin American-Statesman*, Lindsay prefaced his claim by saying students study less than they once did.

"Worse, grades during this period have, paradoxically, increased. Approximately 43 percent of all college grades today are A's, an increase of 28 percentage points since 1960," Lindsay said.

We're not delving into how much students study. But a reader urged us to check on A's over the decades.

Lindsay, director of the foundation's Center for Higher Education, soon pointed us to a July 14, 2011, *New York Times* blog post summarizing a study of grades awarded at colleges and universities over the past several decades.

"Most recently, about 43 percent of all letter grades given were A's, an increase of 28 percentage points since 1960 and 12 percentage points since 1988," the blog post says. "The distribution of B's has stayed relatively constant; the growing share of A's instead comes at the expense of a shrinking share of C's, D's and F's. In fact, only about 10 percent of grades awarded are D's and F's."

According to the post, "private colleges and universities are by far the biggest offenders on grade inflation," with A's and B's representing 73 percent of all grades awarded at public schools by the end of last decade, and 86 percent of all grades awarded at private schools.

The cited study was conducted by Stuart Rojstaczer, a former Duke University geophysics professor, and Christopher Healy, an associate professor of computer science at Furman University in South Carolina.

To our inquiry, Rojstaczer guided us to an online copy of the study, which said that grades in recent years were compiled from web searches, other studies and information from 135 colleges and universities, including "mostly continuous data" from 14 schools covering the 1960s or earlier to the 2000s.

For the early 1960s, 11 to 13 schools were "represented by our national averages," the study says.

In 1960, the study says, C was the most common grade nationwide and D's and F's accounted for more grades, combined, than A's. By 1965, though, "B had supplanted C as the most common grade, and D's and F's were becoming increasingly less common."

"From the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, grades rose rapidly across the nation, and A became the second most common grade awarded," the study says. After a dip in A's in the 1970s into the early 1980s, the study says, from 1984 to the mid-2000s, the proportion of A's increased by a factor of 1.5. "By 2008, A's were nearly three times more common than they were in 1960," the study says.

"For the 135 schools in our database with contemporary data, A's are handed out 43% of the time on average," the study says.

We sought more information on the A's from 1960.

By email, Healy told us the data referring to 1960 may have included information from the years 1959 and 1961 since for a given college, the researchers could have had data for one year but not the next. As of late January 2013, he said, he had grade information for that period from 16 institutions, up from 14 or so when the study was published. He emailed us a list indicating the institutions providing grades from around 1960 include Penn State University; the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Minnesota; the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; the University of Wisconsin; and Rice University.

Both researchers said it's reasonable to compare course grades at 14 schools or so in 1960 to course grades gleaned from 135 institutions in recent years.

Healy said the mix of circa-1960 schools, which included private institutions such as Pomona College and Furman, represents more selective institutions compared with the bigger present-day sample, which includes more less-selective colleges. "So, if anything, if there had been no grade inflation, one would expect the sample of today's colleges

to show slightly lower grades than in our 1960 sample," Healy said.

He elaborated by phone: "A less-selective school would award fewer As, hence there would be less of gap." For a long time, he said, more-selective schools have tended to award more generous grades. "They also tend to have the best students," he said.

In Texas, Texas A&M University and Texas State University have provided grades to the researches. At A&M in 1985, the researchers say, 26 percent of grades given in undergraduate courses were A's compared with 39 percent in 2011. At Texas State in 1960, 14 percent of grades were A's; the tally in 2007 was 34 percent, the researchers say. Healy said that at both institutions, the prevalence of A's slightly trailed national averages.

For outside perspective, we asked Shouping Hu, a Florida State University professor of higher education, to evaluate the 2011 study.

Hu, who edited a 2005 book on changes in student grades, said by email that there has been an upward trend in college grades, though it may not be accurate to attribute that to "grade inflation."

We weren't sure how to interpret that; Hu did not elaborate.

By phone, Rojstaczer commented by saying that at some schools, the quality of students has increased. "You can attribute up to 30 percent of the rise in grades at some institutions to students being demonstrably better than they once were," he said. Still, he said, it's not plausible that 43 percent of students, on average, are doing excellent class work, which means there has been grade inflation.

Next, we asked Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and former president of Teachers College at Columbia University, for thoughts on the 2011 study. Levine said by phone that while grades from 14 colleges represent a small sample, that's not problematic if researchers also check course grades at the institutions in subsequent years—which Rojstaczer and Healy did. If so, Levine said, "they're comparing apples to apples."

Levine has incorporated surveys of students about their GPAs into his own work. In 1969, he said, 7 percent of surveyed students at two- and four-year colleges said their GPA was A-minus or higher. In 2009, he said, 41 percent of students reported as much.

Broadly, Levine said, grade inflation started when professors took it easier on male students to spare them from being sent to Vietnam.

The 2011 study says that after the Vietnam era, a decline in A's lasted roughly a decade, but the share of A's began to rise again in the mid-1980s. Healy told us that he believes factors behind the renewed upward sweep include professors being more mindful of student evaluations and feeling pressure to award high grades so that students can advance to law or medical school.

Our ruling

Lindsay wrote that about 43 percent of all college grades today are A's, an increase of 28 percentage points from 1960.

That's supported by a 2011 study covering grades from 1960 into the 2000s, making this claim **True.**

Appendix F: A College Student's Report on a Possible Consequence of Grade Inflation
(Published in SeeThruEdu.com, October 26, 2013)

Why College Binge Drinking? Easy A's

For college students across the country, the weekend does not begin at 5 p.m. on Friday. Thursday afternoon marks the start of a three-day binge drinking marathon that has left alumni wondering where Friday classes have gone.

According to the National Survey of Student Engagement, the average full-time student spends 15 hours a week outside of class studying. Lax academic standards at American universities encourage a culture where binge drinking on weeknights is not only acceptable, but manageable.

Students taking the typical 15-hour course load have strategically planned their schedules around "Thirsty Thursday," as described by a Texas Tech student. Faculty—recognizing poor attendance during Friday morning classes—cut back on the number of hours offered on the unofficial, weekly campus holiday.

In an effort to combat problematic weeknight drinking, Washington State University President, Elson S. Floyd, encouraged professors to hold "routine scheduling of Friday classes with substantive academic activities occurring during Friday classes, e.g., exams or quizzes scheduled, exam review sessions, and project due dates on Fridays." Apparently at Washington State University, nothing academically substantive happens on a Friday.

But nothing academically substantive happens on a Friday at Harvard College, either. Asked if many students had classes on Friday, a recent engineering graduate replied, "No, almost no one. Except the math and science kids."

Students at schools ranging from Clemson to the University of Texas expressed similar schedules, while a recent Greek graduate of Dartmouth College described popular student social drinking nights as "Monday, Wednesday, and Friday." Binge drinking at Dartmouth College was recently put in the national spotlight by a *New York Times* article, describing the Animal House alma mater's attempts to reign in its party reputation.

A national normalization of binge drinking explains only part of this campus problem: If more was demanded of students in the classroom, they would be forced to reconsider that third, fourth, or fifth beer.

The landmark, 2011 study of college learning, *Academically Adrift*, administered the Collegiate Learning Assessment to measure how much students increase their fundamental academic skills—critical thinking, complex reasoning, and clear writing—during their four years invested in college. Shockingly, it found that 36 percent of students "did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning" during their time in college, and 50 percent reported they did not have a course requiring 20 pages total of writing the previous semester. When schools are ranked according to incoming freshman profiles and money spent on "LEED-certified" buildings ("Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design"), rather than academic rigor and learning outcomes, universities are incentivized to pay less attention to the latter.

With grade inflation rampant—an A is now the most common grade given in college (43% nationwide)—it is no surprise that three-day weekends are the norm.

An increase in "substantive academic activities" on Friday could lead to a decrease in "substantive alcohol activities" on Thursday night, and maybe, just maybe, more learning.

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(Editor's Note: SeeThruEdu.com has confirmed that the anonymous author of this piece is a student at a Texas university.)

Endnotes

[1] Cited in "Forty Questions: They Know, They Know."
[2] Valen E. Johnson, *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in College Education* (Springer-Verlag, New York, New York, 2003), p. 246.
[3] Harvey C. Mansfield, "Grade Inflation: It's Time to Face the Facts," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, p. B24, April 6, 2001.
[4] Bradford P. Wilson, "The Phenomenon of Grade Inflation in Higher Education, " National Forum, 79: 38-49, 1999.
[5] Mansfield, "Grade Inflation."
[6] Rojstaczer, "Where All Grades Are Above Average," *The Washington Post* (2003).
[7] GradeInflation.com.
[8] Having been either a college student, professor, or administrator over the past 30 years, this writer was not surprised by Rojstaczer's findings. Nor, I suspect, is anyone else in the Academy. Nor are those who work in the hiring trenches, who complain to this author that grade inflation renders it exceedingly difficult to rank job applicants accurately—because 73 percent of all grades on transcripts today are A's or B's.
[9] Valerie Straus, "Why grade inflation (even at Harvard) is a big problem," *The Washington Post* (20 Dec. 2013).
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] GradeInflation.com
[13] This graph in GradeInflation.com includes the following explanatory note:
"The figure above shows the average undergraduate GPAs for American colleges and universities from 1991-2006 based on data from: Alabama, Appalachian State, Auburn, Brown, Bucknell, Carleton, Central Florida, Central Michigan, Centre, Colorado, Colorado State, Columbia, Cornell, CSU-Fullerton, CSU-Sacramento, CSU-San Bernardino, Dartmouth, Duke, Elon, Florida, Furman, Georgia Tech, Georgetown, Georgia, Hampden-Sydney, Harvard, Harvey Mudd, Hope, Houston, Indiana, Kansas, Kent State, Kenyon, Knox, Messiah, Michigan, Middlebury, Nebraska-Kearney, North Carolina State, North Carolina-Asheville, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina-Greensboro, Northern Iowa, Northern Michigan, Ohio State, Penn State, Pomona, Princeton, Purdue, Roanoke, Rutgers, Southern Illinois, Texas, Texas A&M, Texas State, UC-Berkeley, UC-Irvine, UCLA, UC-Santa Barbara, Utah, UW-Oshkosh, Virginia, Washington State, Washington-Seattle, Western Washington, Wheaton (IL), William & Mary, Winthrop, Wisconsin-La Crosse, and Wisconsin-Madison. Note that inclusion in the average does not imply that an institution has significant inflation. Data on the GPAs for each institution can be found at the bottom of this web page. Institutions comprising this average were chosen strictly because they have either published their data or have sent their data to the author on GPA trends over the last 11-16 years."
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] *See the sections*, "The Emperor's Clothiers Strike Back" (Parts I and II), below.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Cited in Valen E. Johnson, *Grade Inflation*, pp. 3-4.
[19] Valen E. Johnson, *Grade Inflation.* Johnson's data was collected while he was a professor of Statistics and Decision Sciences at Duke University, and published while he was a professor of Biostatistics at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He currently is a professor of Statistics at Texas A&M University in Bryan-College Station, Texas.
[20] Ibid., 4.
[21] Ibid., 5-6.
[22] Ibid. 7.
[23] H. Rosovksy and M. Hartley, "Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?" *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 136 Irving Street, Cambridge, MA 02138-1996 (2002).
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 7-8. Emphasis mine.
[26] Johnson, *Grade Inflation*, 8.
[27] Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (Simon and Schuster, New York, New York, 2003). Agreeing with Valen Johnson's critique of the postmodern perspective on higher education, this writer argues the following in a 2012 piece Bloom's Closing with Arum and Roksa's *Academically Adrift*:

… Today, argues Bloom, the American mind is closing to . . . the most deeply human questions and concerns. Socrates' knowledge of ignorance has been replaced by the assumed certainty that all moral principles, all visions of the good life, are merely rationally groundless preferences, or "values." The replacement of "principles" by "values" is intentional and momentous. Values is a term from modern economics, which teaches that the value of a good is not intrinsic but dependent on demand. As such, all values are relative. Quite so, but renaming principles "values" seeks to close argument—without ever having the argument—over whether all principles are merely values. Bloom is said to have jested, "When I hear someone start to talk about good values, I reach for my Sears catalogue."

Relativism saps the soul's longing for wisdom, a longing that fuels the ascent from the cave. If students already "know" that no way of life and no culture are better or worse than any other, why agonize over a lengthy, difficult text like, say, Plato's *Republic*, which purports to know something authoritative about "values"? The discovery that different societies honor different, at times contradictory, visions of the good is at least as old as Herodotus. But this diversity was viewed until the 20th century as an invitation to further study with a view to ascending from opinion to knowledge, from convention to nature. Today, the mere fact that there are diverse opinions apparently settles the case against the possibility of an objective moral order (*Closing*, 39ff.).

Yet the moral cosmos has not exited the stage entirely under relativism. On the one hand, as Bloom demonstrates, relativism's epistemological difficulties are not difficult to convey. How many of us are really persuaded by the line, "We have our values; Hitler had his. Who's to say which is bet-

ter?" On the other hand, this weakness has not undermined its popular power, for relativism has become for us a moral postulate: It is deemed the precondition of the tolerant society (*Closing*, 26ff). Hitler opined that there were better and worse ways of life, higher and lower cultures. If no one makes this mistake again, intolerant projects such as his surely will wither. The substantial if not insuperable obstacle relativists leave unaddressed is that logical consistency requires them to be equally open to intolerance as tolerance, because both are values, which, they assert, cannot be ranked by reason. Hence, they find themselves in a self-defeating position—they must condemn and must not condemn Hitler and Hitlerism.

Just as relativism stunts the capacity for an education aimed at intellectual liberty, it likewise deprives American democracy of a foundation on which to defend political liberty. Unique among polities in its dependence on reason as the source of its governing legitimacy, America loses confidence in its experiment in self-government to the extent that it loses confidence in reason. For us, argues Bloom, democracy and liberal education stand or fall together (*Closing*, 27ff.).

Accordingly, Bloom would be less than surprised at Jencks and Riesman's above-quoted observation that American educators and administrators have grown "less certain than they once were as to what students ought to be or become, and are reluctant to go to the mat with the young for principles in which they themselves only half believe." The only "ought" enforced by education over the last 50 years, says Bloom, is "openness," to which relativism serves as means to end. The purpose of education is no longer to make students "scholars but to provide them with a moral virtue—openness" (*Closing*, 26).

Yet openness grounded in relativism cannot but lead to indifference. "Relativism has extinguished the real motive of education, the search for a good life." As a result, "what is advertised as a great opening is a great closing. No longer is there a hope that there are great wise men in other places and times who can reveal the truth about life…" (Closing, 34). Relativism thus destroys real openness, "which used to be the virtue that permitted us to seek the good by using reason. It now means accepting everything and denying reason's power." There is no longer any possibility of liberating oneself from one's particular culture through liberal education. "Culture, hence closedness, reigns supreme." Today, "openness to closedness is what we teach" (38-39).

One of the primary purposes of education always has been to help us avoid bringing only our "prejudices to the judgment of alien peoples." But "trying to prevent it by removing the authority of men's reason is to render ineffective the instrument that can correct their prejudices." Genuine openness is "the accompaniment of the desire to know. … Historical and cultural relativism actually are a means to avoid testing our own prejudices…" (*Closing*, 40). For students, intellectual ennui is but the natural concomitant to this state of affairs; such a mindset is not the stuff of which *Adrift's* "critical thinking" and "analytical reasoning" are made.

Bloom concludes his discussion by contrasting further the two kinds of openness. The first, the "openness of indifference," seeks both to humble our "intellectual pride" through imposing pseudo-Socratic awareness of ignorance and to allow us "to be whatever we want to be, just as long as we don't want to be knowers" (*Closing*, 41). This alleged dependence of freedom on nothingness may be foreshadowed in a statement quoted in *Adrift* by former UC-Berkley chancellor, Clark Kerr, who sums up nicely—albeit unawares—the crisis Bloom finds in our universities. Says Kerr of today's universities: "there is less sense of purpose" but "there are more ways to excel. There are also more refuges for anonymity—both for the creative person and the drifter" (*Adrift*, 13). In this ostensibly celebratory account, barrenness nurses excellence: the abyss never lacks lebensraum. For Bloom, it is this precisely this loss of an authoritative conception of what an educated person looks like that constitutes the collapse of higher education.

To resurrect higher learning requires that we restore the second kind of openness, that which "invites us to the quest for knowledge and certitude, for which history and the various cultures provide a brilliant array of examples for examination" (*Closing*, 41). This second kind of openness fuels the desire to know what is good and conducive to happiness. The first "stunts that desire." One cannot but wonder whether a stunted desire can ever prove vital enough to resist academic drift, can ever strive for more than lazy, limited learning. -Thomas K. Lindsay, "The Likelihood of Higher-Education Reform," in *Society* (June 2013) Vol. 50, 3.

[28] Ibid., 9.
[29] Garrison Keillor, "A Prairie Home Companion."
[30] Johnson, *Grade Inflation*, 9.
[31] *See* my exposition of Bloom's thesis at endnote 26, above.
[32] Johnson, *Grade Inflation*, 9-12.
[33] Ibid., 12.
[34] Ibid., 234-36.
[35] Ibid., 236.
[36] Ibid., 236-37.
[37] Ibid., 238-39.
[38] Ibid., 241-42.
[39] Ibid., 242-43.
[40] In 2013, the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill approved a similar move, under the description of "contextualized grading."
[41] I deal with "contextualized grading" further in my description of the 2013 Texas "Honest Transcript" bill (HR 3498) later in this study.
[42] Johnson, *Grade Inflation*, 243-44.
[43] Ibid., 245.
[44] Ibid., 245-46.
[45] Ibid., 246.
[46] Transcript transparency is the first step toward alerting the public to the scandal of grade inflation. No reform of an institution of practice is possible in a democratic republic if the general public is not aware of and properly indignant over the institution or practice in need of reform. Therefore, as I shall argue in the concluding section of this study, it is not a question of transcript transparency or "constraints on mean course grades," but, rather, of the logical and chronological relation between the two.
[47] Brian Manhire, "Grade Inflation, Ethics and Engineering Education," at the 2004 American Society for Engineering Education Annual Conference and Exposition, 1.

[48] Ibid., 5.
[49] Ibid., 10-12.
[50] Ibid., p. 6.
[51] Thomas C. Reeves, "The Tyranny of Classroom Popularity," at The National Association of Scholars (NAS) Online Forum, May 14, 2004.
[52] Jay A. Halfond, "Grade Inflation is Not a Victimless Crime," *Christian Science Monitor* (3 May 2004).
[53] George D. Kuh, "What We Are Learning About Student Engagement," *Change* Vol. 35 (2003): 28.
[54] Scott Jaschik, "Grade Inflation Seen Rising," *Inside Higher Ed* (12 Mar. 2009).
[55] Ibid.
[56] I address the Princeton project to arrest grade inflation in the section titled, "The Experience of Schools Implementing Anti-Grade Inflation Measures" (below).
[57] Recall that above we saw that Valen Johnson's *Grade Inflation* already establishes the correlation between grade inflation and student evaluations in 2003.
[58] Jaschik, "Grade Inflation Seen Rising."
[59] Jaschik.
[60] Cited in GradeInflation.com.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Cara Newlon, "College grade inflation: Does 'A' stand for 'average'?" *USA Today* (21 Nov. 2013).
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Matthew Q. Clarida and Nicholas P. Fandos, "Substantiating Fears of Grade Inflation, Dean Says Median Grade at Harvard College Is A-, Most Common Grade Is A," *Harvard Crimson* (3 Dec. 2013).
[66] Ibid.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Roberto A. Ferdman, "The Most Commonly Awarded Grade at Harvard Is an A: Harvard students are enjoying some extreme grade inflation." The *Atlantic* (4 Dec. 2013).
[69] Emphasis supplied.
[70] Allison Schrager, "Confession of an Ivy League teaching assistant: Here's why I inflated grades," Quartz.com (13 Dec. 2013).
[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Cited in Catherine Rampell, "A History of College Grade Inflation," *New York Times* (14 July 2011).
[75] Jaschik, "Grade Inflation Seen Rising."
[76] Nowhere in his account does Adelman explain the difference between grade "inflation," which he denies, and grade "devaluation," which he espouses. In the monetary realm, inflation versus devaluation is a distinction without a difference.
[77] Ibid.
[78] www.GradeInflation.com.
[79] Study cited in GradeInflation.com.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Study cited in GradeInflation.com. *See also* 2010 Teachers College Record.
[82] 2010 Teachers College Record.
[83] GradeInflation.com.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Victor B. Saenz and Douglas S. Barrera, "Findings from the 2005 College Student Survey (CSS): National Aggregates," CSS Report, 2005.
[86] Philip Babcock, University of California, Santa Barbara, and Mindy Marks, University of California, Riverside, "Leisure College, USA," May 2010.
[87] Mark Kutner, Elizabeth Greenberg, and Justin Baer, National Center for Education Statistics, "A First Look at the Literacy of America's Adults in the 21st Century. NCES 2006-470."
[88] GradeInflation.com. At the same time, although Rojstaczer's analysis reveals that "grade inflation is pervasive at America's four year colleges and universities, it isn't everywhere." At community colleges, at least in the state of California, "grade inflation does not seem to be common and grades have actually dropped."
[89] Stuart Rojstaczer, "The Press and Grade Inflation," *Forty Questions (*May 2009).
[90] Alfie Kohn, "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (8 Nov. 2002) Vol. 49, no. 11, B7.
[91] Rojstaczer's full treatment of the Adelman thesis can be found in Appendix B.
[92] Rojstaczer, *Forty Questions*.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid. Rojstaczer's source for the Adelman and Brighouse quotes is *Grade Inflation: Academic Standards in Higher Education*, Lester H. Hunt, Editor. State University of New York Press: 2008.
[97] Plato, Gorgias, Benjamin Jowett, trans. (with my revisions).
[98] Jane Darby Menton, "UP CLOSE: Defining the Yale College 'A,'" *Yale Daily News* (11 Apr. 2013).

[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid. Emphasis supplied.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Princeton's project to curb grade inflation is dealt with immediately below.
[105] Jane Darby Menton, "Defining the Yale College 'A.'"
[106] Ibid.
[107] Ibid.
[108] Eleanor Barkhorn, "So What If Everyone at Harvard Gets an A?: Princeton creative writing professor Joyce Carol Oates makes a misguided defense of Ivy League grade inflation," *TheAtlantic.com* (5 Dec. 2013).
[109] *See* Appendix C, below, for the full statement of Princeton's policy on grading.
[110] Eric Levenson, "The End of Princeton's Grade Deflation Experiment?" *TheWire.com.*
[111] This alleged deleterious effect on Princeton graduates is contested by Richard Kamber, a philosophy professor at the College of New Jersey, who has researched the issue of grade inflation. "There's no evidence to indicate that Princeton graduates are less successful in getting into graduate schools, professional schools or getting hired." Princeton's new policy is "not exactly draconian," says Kamber. "It was an act of leadership on their part. They were actually suggesting that other institutions should consider doing the same thing."
[112] Keith O'Brien, "The Trouble with Grade Inflation: It Works," *Boston Globe* (31 Aug. 2013).
[113] Ibid.
[114] The study revealing this bias was published in 2013 in the academic journal, *PLOS ONE* by the Public Library of Science. Further details on the study are provided in O'Brien's summary, below:

> "The lead author on the new study … is a behavioral psychologist named Sam Swift. Now a postdoctoral scholar at the Haas School of Business at the University of California Berkeley, Swift began this research nearly a decade ago as an undergraduate student at Carnegie Mellon University. At the time, he had a vested interest in the subject matter. As a college senior looking for work, he said, he wondered how his GPA would be received given that Carnegie Mellon professors, by and large, resisted grade inflation. "'That,'" Swift said, "'was not a policy that I felt like was working in my favor.'"
>
> "He and his coauthors set out to determine whether there was any merit to these concerns. To do so, they created a two-tier experiment that harnessed both laboratory experiments and real-world data to shed light on the problem.
>
> "First, they ran a lab experiment involving 23 admissions officers at a selective US college. The officers were told they were selecting students for an MBA program and given not only the applicants' GPAs, but how their performance compared to their peers. Were they above or below average? And by how much? They were then asked to rate the candidates and admit roughly half of them.
>
> "The results: Candidates from schools with lower (that is, tougher) grading norms were admitted just 12 percent of the time, while those from grade-inflated schools were admitted 72 percent of the time. Below-average students were almost doomed to fail—at least at the schools with median and low grading norms—getting accepted respectively 4 percent of the time and not at all.
>
> "Grade inflation, however, lifted all boats. The above-average students at these schools got in 96 percent of the time; average students were accepted at a 91 percent rate. Even the below-average students were winners. They had a 30 percent chance of being accepted, faring better than even above-average students at schools with rigorous grading. And this happened even though the participants were experts—real college admissions officials—with detailed information about the applicants' situations.
>
> "The school, the situation—that has a big effect on your probability of being accepted. And it's a dramatic difference,'" said Zachariah Sharek, a coauthor on the study. "These are huge jumps." Second, to prove that these findings weren't just theoretical, the researchers analyzed real-world admissions data. In looking at more than 30,000 applications to four selective MBA programs, they found that depending on whether students attended a grade-inflated school, a median one, or one with low grading norms, their respective GPAs averaged 3.57, 3.25, and 2.93. Average students at those three types of institutions—after controlling for demographic and school quality differences—got in at respective rates of 32 percent, 22 percent, and just 15 percent. Grade inflation, clearly, was making a big difference in these students' futures.
>
> "It threatens the meritocracy of our society," Swift said. "In the admissions context, we feel like it's important that the best students get the most opportunities and can move up and contribute to our world. Our data shows that doesn't happen, to the extent that some great people end up in disadvantageous situations."

[115] Ibid.
[116] I address the 2013 anti-grade inflation efforts of the 83rd Texas legislature (via House Bill 3498) in detail in the next section, "Texas' Efforts to Restore Transparency to Grading Standards" (below).
[117] From the Dartmouth web site: "Median Grades for Undergraduate Courses."
[118] Ibid.
[119] Charles Gardner, "Unique median-grade policy does not stop inflation," *The Dartmouth* (27 Feb. 2002).
[120] Ibid.
[121] Ian Blecher, "Ever Heard of Grade Deflation? Columbia Dean's List Takes 3.6," *New York Observer* (26 Nov. 2001).
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

[124] Lea Palmer, "Offsetting Grade Inflation: UNC-Chapel Hill tries contextual grading," Pope Center (15 Aug. 2013).
[125] "Contextual grading" is roughly equivalent to the "Honest Transcript" bill introduced in the Texas House of Representatives in 2013.
[126] Lea Palmer, "Offsetting Grade Inflation."
[127] Ibid.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] Ibid.
[131] As we saw when examining the research of Valen E. Johnson (above), there is proof that Perrin's "belief" is correct: Grade inflation incentivizes students to avoid mathematics and sciences courses, which are more rigorously graded.
[132] Lea Perrin, "Offsetting Grade Inflation."
[133] *See* the discussion of Dartmouth's efforts to curb grade inflation (above).
[134] Mia Shaw, "UC Berkeley may combat grade inflation through new system," *The Daily Californian* (11 Mar. 2013).
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Charles Murray, *Real Education: Four Simple Truths for Bringing America's Schools Back to Reality*. New York, New York: Crown Forum, Random House (2008), 132.
[138] The full text of the bill can be found in Appendix D.
[139] See Thomas K. Lindsay, "Higher Education Revalued: Texas Considers a Proposal to Reverse Grade Inflation," *National Review (22* Apr. 2013).
[140] Ibid.
[141] The current lack of public knowledge about the existence and effects of grade inflation—and thus the need to make grading standards more apparent—is evidenced by the fact that this writer's recitation of the statistics making the case (specifically, the shift from 15 percent A's in the early 1960s to 43 percent A's today) so shocked the *Austin American-Statesman's* readership that it was compelled to conduct a lengthy vetting of my claim in a follow-up PolitiFact exposé. Due to the exhaustiveness of PolitiFact's investigation, it is reprinted for the reader at Appendix E.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
[144] Thomas K. Lindsay, "Higher Education Revalued."
[145] Ibid.
[146] Cited in Catherine Rampell, "A History of College Grade Inflation," *New York Times* (14 July 2011).
[147] See Appendix F, "A College Student's Report on a Possible Consequence of Grade Inflation."
[148] Lindsay, "Higher Education Revalued."
[149] *See* the earlier discussion of Valen E. Johnson's work, above.

About the Author

Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D., is director of the Foundation's Center for Higher Education. He has more than two decades' experience in education management and instruction, including service as a dean, provost, and college president.

In 2006, Lindsay joined the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) staff as director of the agency's signature initiative, We the People, which supports teaching and scholarship in American history and culture. He was named Deputy Chairman and Chief Operating Officer of the NEH in 2007.

Lindsay received his B.A., *summa cum laude*, in Political Science, and went on to earn his M.A. and Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Chicago. Oxford University Press published Lindsay's American Government college textbook, *Investigating American Democracy* (with Gary Glenn). He has published numerous articles on the subject of democratic education, many of which have appeared in the world's most prestigious academic journals, including *American Political Science Review*, *Journal of Politics*, and *American Journal of Political Science*.

Lindsay has published articles on higher-education reform in *Real Clear Policy, Los Angeles Times, National Review, Inside Higher Ed, Washington Examiner, Knight-Ridder Syndicate, Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle, American Spectator*, and *Austin American-Statesman*, among others. He has just accepted an offer to become a contributor to *Forbes*.

In recognition of his scholarship on democratic education, Lindsay was made the 1992-93 Bradley Resident Scholar at the Heritage Foundation in Washington, D.C.

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