



On Transcript Context and Transparency

Testimony supporting SB 2079

by Thomas K. Lindsay, Ph.D.

Dear Members of the Committee:

I am here today to testify in favor of SB 2079. In what follows, I will attempt to answer the questions about, and objections to, the proposed legislation.

1. Q. What would this bill do?

It is simply a transparency measure. It calls for adding the average grade given to the entire class for each of the courses on a student's transcript. Here is an example of what it would look like:

"Advanced Microbiology: Individual Student's Grade: A (Average grade for the class: C+)"

This bill is scrupulous to avoid any legislative micromanagement of our public universities. It doesn't ask universities to do anything differently from what they are now doing. It only asks them to make transparent for students, parents, and taxpayers what they are doing.

2. Q. Aside from increasing transparency, does the bill offer other benefits to Texas students, parents, and taxpayers?

Yes, because, at bottom, this is a jobs bill: The chief purpose and benefit of the proposed legislation would be to enhance the workforce competitiveness of Texas public university students.

3. Q. What is the attitude of the Texas business community on this issue?

Businesses have been complaining for some time that grade inflation has rendered transcripts less than helpful as a means of appraising college graduates' job applications. Why? The National Association of Colleges and Employers reported in 2013 that "66 percent of employers screen candidates by grade point average (GPA)." But [national data demonstrate](#) that, today, an A is the most common grade given in college ([45 percent](#)); nearly 75 percent of all college grades are either A's or B's. In contrast, the percentage of A's given in colleges nationwide was 15 percent in the early 1960s.

This decline in meaningful standards of comparison hinders the hiring process and thereby undermines the competitiveness of our workforce. For the same reason, it also hinders the ability of graduate school admissions boards to differentiate meaningfully among student transcripts.

4. Q. Does the Texas business community support this bill?

It does. When identical legislation was introduced in 2013, the Texas Association of Business and the Austin Chamber of Commerce supported it. They are expected to do so again.

5. Q. Would Texas students with contextualized transcripts benefit when they compete for jobs with students from other schools that don't have such transcripts?

They would. Employers, as well as graduate admissions committees, would welcome the greater information that comes with contextualization. In fact, this bill could revolutionize transcripts across the nation. Texas would be the first entire state to join Dartmouth, Columbia University, and the University of Indiana as places where transcripts mean something once again. The "Texas Transcript" would shortly come to be known by employers as the gold standard. Our recent graduates would be taken more seriously because of it.

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6. Q. I see that this bill carries no fiscal note. Would it impose a burden on the university registrar offices?

It would not. A number of Texas public colleges and universities already provide their professors' grading histories, e.g., [UTLife](#). So, the task required by this bill is negligible.

7. Q. What is the effect of grade inflation?

Just as monetary inflation devalues the dollar, grade inflation devalues the currency of higher education—student grades.

8. Q. How do we know for sure that grade inflation has happened?

There are a number of academic studies that have been done. The leading study is by Rojstaczer (**pronounced: Roj-stay-ger**) and Healy, two university professors who have studied grades given over the last 50 years. They update their findings yearly in the Teachers College Record. "For the 135 schools in its database with contemporary data, A's are handed out 43% of the time on average," the study says. The percentage of A's has been updated by Rojstaczer and Healy recently to 45%.

Also, Arthur Levine, president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and former president of the Teachers College at Columbia University, has looked at grade inflation. He finds that, in 1969, 7 percent of surveyed students at two- and four-year colleges reported their GPA was A-minus or higher. In 2009, 41 percent of students reported as much. His sample consisted of over 4,900 students.

9. Q. Wasn't the question of whether the 2013 grade inflation statistics (43 percent A's at that time) are accurate the subject of a PolitiFact probe in the *Austin-American Statesman*, published on Jan. 31st of 2013?

Yes. PolitiFact went all over the country, consulting six leading education scholars. It concluded that the claim that 43 percent of all grades in 2013 are A's is, in [PolitiFact's words](#), "100% True."

10. Q. Are any other schools doing anything like this?

A study conducted by the Samford University Office of Institutional Research finds that "Columbia, Dartmouth, Indiana, and Eastern Kentucky are examples of schools that provide the number of students in each class and the average grade of the class on the students' transcripts." At Indiana University, for example, they put the grade distribution for each course, the class GPA, and average student GPA in the course.

11. Q. Isn't it possible that the increase in A's is the product of the fact that brighter students are now in college?

Rojstaczer addressed this in his study, 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 added, it's not plausible that 43 percent of students, on average, are doing excellent class work, which means there has been grade inflation.

His co-author of the 50-year study, Professor Healy, adds that the mix of 1960 schools, which included private institutions such as Pomona College and Furman, represents more selective institutions compared with the bigger 135-school present-day sample, which includes more colleges that are less selective in their admission standards. "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](#). Why? Because "a less-selective school would award fewer A's; hence there would be less of a gap." ★

