

Taking a Look at Grade Inflation and Academic Standards

A group of faculty discussed these articles at a November, 2009 Center for Teaching Excellence workshop, Duquesne University.

Co-sponsored by the Faculty Senate and the Academic Learning Outcomes Assessment Committee, Duquesne University

Readings for the discussion

Participants read the materials and engaged in a discussion of how these readings pertain to potential grade inflation at Duquesne University.

Grade Inflation Article (Minnesota State University, Manketo, Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning): <http://www.mnsu.edu/cetl/teachingresources/articles/gradeinflation.html>. This article provides a very brief overview of the issues.

Freese, J., Artis, J. E., & Powell, B. (1999). "Now I know my ABC's: Demythologizing grade inflation." In B.A. Pescosolido & R. Aminzade (Eds.), *The social worlds of higher education: Handbook for teaching in a new century*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge. Also a very brief overview of factors that need to be considered in a discussion of grade inflation. Available at Tomorrow's Professor, <http://cgi.stanford.edu/~dept-ctl/tomprof/posting.php?ID=377>, posting #377.

Hu, Shouping. (2006). Beyond grade inflation: Grading problems in higher education. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 30 (6), pp. 29-61. Overview of the empirical evidence for grade increase, inflation, compression and disparity and of the causes. This is denser reading, but important for getting a larger picture of the research that has been conducted. Book available for loan from CTE/Gumberg special collection LB2368 .H8 2005. Contact cte@duq.edu.

Marsh, H. W. (2007). Students' evaluations of university teaching: dimensionality, reliability, validity, potential biases, and usefulness. In R. P. Perry & J. C. Smart (Eds.), *The scholarship of teaching and learning in higher education: an evidence-based perspective*. New York: Springer. (pp. 319-383). See pages 352-58 and email correspondence with Michael Theall. These pages are available from the Center for Teaching Excellence (cte@duq.edu).

Additional readings

Rosovsky, H. & Hartley, M. (2002). *Evaluation and the academy: Are we doing the right thing? Grade inflation and letters of recommendation*. American Academy of Arts & Sciences. http://www.amacad.org/publications/monographs/Evaluation_and_the_Academy.pdf

Hunt, L. H. (2008). *Grade inflation: Academic standards in higher education*. State University of New York. Contact cte@duq.edu to borrow the book.

Themes from the faculty discussion – these are informal notes

Students concerned because they earned a “B”. Oversensitive about what grades they should have earned. Assume they’re getting an “A” and did something wrong to deserve a B. Faculty from many schools mentioned this.

1. Students say “this is the same work (or same way) I have always done, why is it earning me bad grades now?” - why different standards from professors to professors, schools to schools, etc.
 - Students are taking college classes during high school – does that affect their perspectives of the rigorous work colleges expect from them?
2. Who are we (i.e., faculty) accountable to when we grade? How can we start discussions about grading accountability?
3. Students as consumers and the myth of correlations between teaching evaluations and expected grades/rigor of course. The big picture of research shows that this is a myth.
4. Hu’s Outline Notes
 - a. *Grade increase* – confirmed in research (except Adelman research 1995); does not take into consideration any other factors. Confirmed in these contexts:
 - i. Certain Ivy league schools
 - ii. In many schools during Vietnam Era – to help people avoid the draft
 - iii. Higher grades noted in certain populations of students: nontraditional students, immigrants, women
 - b. *Grade inflation* – trend/mixed evidence – pockets of time and place; defined as grades rising and quality/quantity of work not rising; OR grades staying same and quality/quantity of work decreasing
 - c. *Grade compression* – scale shortened to be A,B,C in many contexts (e.g., because of requirements of 3.0 to stay in a major; graduate grading scale). So “A” includes broad range of quality.
 - d. *Grade disparity* – patterns across individual faculty and courses; also patterns across disciplines, and shift in enrollment from traditionally harder disciplines to fields where grades have traditionally tended to be higher.

Possible next steps: Professors can:

1. Document evidence of methods you have used to help struggling students. For example, if a student earns a grade in your course that jeopardizes a scholarship or financial aid package, and you decide to assist the student (e.g., opportunities to resubmit work), document that you have done so.
2. Develop clear rubrics (grading guides). Review and teach your rubrics to your students. Give students clear expectations before they do the assignment. Decide if your rubric should be global or detailed; be sure to give yourself some “wiggle room.”

3. Consider sharing your students' grades on Promotion and Tenure (or annual review) documents. If you had poor evaluations (i.e., SES) due to circumstances related to your professional integrity (e.g., addressing academic integrity violations), tell your story. Use the average SES scores from the University, your school, or your department to give the reviewers some context.

Average SES scores are very high at DU – school means range between 4.8 and 5.2 on 6 point scale.

The University report of the Student Evaluation Survey is available at
DORI > INDEX (icon in top right corner) > Academic Affairs

4. Universities can change grading transcript to reflect median or mean grade and number of students in the course. (e.g., A-/B/20; student's grade/median grade/# students in course)

Questions remaining

1. What are the differences among professional schools, Bayer, McAnulty in terms of average grades and grading practices?
2. What is the rationale for some DU schools not using plus/minus system? Might this be changed so that finer tuned grading could happen through plusses and minuses?
3. What is the grade inflation and increase situation at Duquesne?
4. Are students more prepared than in past or underprepared for college life? The literature seems mixed on this – may be a demographic question.
5. What is the admission process like at Duquesne? Specifically, how are high school grades and standardized test scores weighted? How do these correlate with with success and retention at DU?

Other resources participants mentioned

1. Decoding the disciplines – encouraging faculty/experts to decode the steps to succeeding in their fields and helping students take these steps. This project is very developed in history department at Indiana University, and is spreading. It enables us to keep expectations very high and promote success. *Decoding the disciplines : helping students learn disciplinary ways of thinking* edited by David Pace, available in CTE/Gumberg. <http://www.iub.edu/~hlp/decodingDisciplinesModel.html>
2. *The Feel-Good Curriculum: The Dumbing down of America's Kids in the Name of Self-Esteem*. By Maureen Stout. 2000.