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November 2011 | Volume 69 | Number 3  
**Effective Grading Practices** Pages 80-81

### Grade Inflation: Killing with Kindness? *Bryan Goodwin*

Students and their parents should expect high school grades to serve as reliable benchmarks by which to measure students' readiness for college.



In the 1880s, Harvard University adopted a new approach to evaluating student work that would sweep the United States and become as integral a part of the education landscape as blackboards, number 2 pencils, and yellow buses: the letter grade. Just one decade later, though, some Harvard professors were already grouching that "in the present practice Grades *A* and *B* are sometimes given too readily—Grade *A* for work of no very high merit, and Grade *B* for work not far above mediocrity" (Lewis, 2006, p. 115). They fretted that if the outside world knew what kind of "sham work" passed for high marks at the venerable institution, Harvard's degree would be "seriously cheapened" (p. 115).

Hand-wringing about grade inflation has continued ever since. The fact that so many people could worry about the same phenomenon for so long makes one wonder whether the concerns are grounded in reality or are merely generational grumblings about the declining standards of youth.

### Not Your Parents' *A*?

Recent data have a new generation of critics worrying that today's high school grades may not be what they once were:

- Between 1991 and 2003, the mathematics grades of high school students taking the ACT exam rose from a grade point average of 2.80 to 3.04, whereas their average scores on the math portion of the ACT rose only slightly, from 20.04 to 20.55 on a 36-point scale. Similarly, average English grades rose from a grade point average of 3.04 to 3.29, whereas ACT English scores nudged up from 20.22 to 20.44. ACT concluded that the higher GPAs reflected grade inflation rather than an increase in achievement (Woodruff & Ziomek, 2004).
- Nearly twice as many high school students reported earning an *A* or *A-* average in 2006 than in 1992 (32.8 percent versus 18.3 percent) (Twenge & Campell, in press).
- In 2007, two federal reports found that the performance of U.S. high school students on the reading portion of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) had declined between 1992 and 2005, even though students reported getting higher grades (GPAs rose from 2.68 in 1990 to 2.98 in 2005) and taking tougher classes (the percentage of students who said they took college-preparatory classes rose from 5 to 10 percent) (Schmidt, 2007).

### Are Concerns Overblown?

Some critics dismiss such data because the studies rely on students self-reporting their grades to test makers. As Alfie Kohn (2002) writes, "self-reports are notoriously unreliable" (p. B7). Translation: Higher grades might simply reflect students becoming more "truth challenged" than in the past. ACT, however, has compared self-reported grades with school transcripts and found the grades to be "sufficiently accurate" for use in research (Sawyer, Laing, & Houston, 1988).

Others argue, though, that our real concern shouldn't be whether today's grades are more lax (perhaps the grades of yesteryear unfairly discriminated against students), but whether they inaccurately assess student learning. In fact, there's some evidence that good marks in high school may not represent the imprimatur of college preparedness that we expect.

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In Oregon, trained reviewers analyzed the in-class work of 2,200 high school students against university professors' standards for college-entry work. Their analysis revealed that "only the students who were being awarded As in high school were likely to meet the standard, and even within this group, sizeable numbers of students...did not [demonstrate] the minimum level for [college] admission" (Conley, 2000, p. 19). The fact that most B students (and some A students) were not doing work on par with entry-level college standards prompted the researchers to conclude that grade inflation is "a real phenomenon" (p. 19).

## Why Does It Occur?

Many explanations have been offered for grade inflation, starting with teachers (one-half, in one study) basing grades on factors only indirectly related to student performance, including effort, ability, behavior, and attitude (Bursuck et al., 1996). Grading, especially in low-income schools, may reflect a hidden curriculum of compliance and control, in which teachers use grades as carrots and sticks to keep students in line. "In troubled schools," concluded one team of researchers, "good behavior may, in fact, replace achievement as the desired response of students" (Howley, Kusimo, & Parrott, 2000).

Turnbull (1985) observed that grade inflation began in earnest in the 1960s, as high schools scrambled to assimilate the swelling ranks of baby boom students while, at the same time, the college attendance rate doubled from 25 to 50 percent of students between 1952 and 1970. A large "group of students staying past the legal school-leaving age whose preparation was weak by historical standards," Turnbull conjectured, gave schools the choice of either inflating grades or flunking large numbers of students (pp. 8–9).

They might have opted for a third path, of course—keeping standards high while providing better instruction, a stronger curriculum, and help for struggling students. Instead, many schools appear to have taken the easy way out by inflating grades.

## Should We Care?

In light of the fact that extrinsic rewards, such as grades, may have weak or even negative effects on student motivation, how concerned should we be about grade inflation? After all, as Kohn (2002) and others have argued, tougher grades don't necessarily translate into better learning. Arguably, though, students and their parents should expect high school grades to at least serve as reliable benchmarks by which to measure students' readiness for college.

Nationwide, 30 percent of freshmen at U.S. four-year institutions drop out during or after their first year of college. These dropouts and their families incur enormous personal expenses and cost taxpayers more than \$9 billion in wasted state appropriations and student grants over a five-year period (Schneider, 2010). One wonders how many of these dropouts got good grades in high school, only to discover on entering college that their schools, by lavishing them with unrealistically high marks, may have actually been killing them with kindness.

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At my school I know several teachers inflate grades because if we have a certain level of low grades we are called in by the administration, raked over the coals, and it goes in our file. It doesn't matter if the student is an attendance issue, bahavior problem, or anything else. The entire responsibility for the student's success/failure is placed only on the teacher.

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