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Grade Inflation: It's Not Just an Issue for the Ivy League

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Abstract: An examination of grade inflation in the context of the larger issue of student engagement at colleges and universities.

Essay:

A while back, Randy Cohen's regular column, "The Ethicist" in The New York Times Magazine, focused on the evidence that "grade inflation" is a big-time issue. A professor had asked whether he should raise grades because those he was giving were below the departmental average. And last week, students and professors at the University of Oregon debated whether grade inflation exists on that campus in an article for the student newspaper, The Daily Emerald. Even in the UK, the Telegraph questioned whether the university degree in England was "losing its meaning" because of grade inflation.

I've interviewed a number of students on this issue. Here's what I found: Matt Mindrum of Indiana University says he studied a total of eight hours for his four semester exams, while Parvin Sathe of New York University says he studied for 20 hours. Marc Hubbard of Colgate reports putting in about 60 hours, but another Colgate student, Bonnie Vanzler, says she studied for just 12. All four made the Dean's List at their respective institutions.

These days it seems as if nearly everyone in college is receiving A's, making the Dean's List, or graduating with honors. What's more interesting is that college students in general are spending fewer hours studying, while taking more remedial courses and fewer courses in mathematics, history, English, and foreign languages. Students everywhere report that they average only 10-15 hours of academic work outside of class per week and are able to attain "B" or better grade-point averages.

In a study for the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, former Harvard Dean Henry Rosovosky found that in 1950 about 15 percent of Harvard students got a B+ or better. Today, it's nearly 70 percent. Last year 50 percent of the grades at Harvard were either A or A-, up from 22 percent in 1966, and 91 percent of seniors graduated with honors. Eighty percent of the grades at the University of Illinois are A's and B's, and 50 percent of Columbia students are on the Dean's List.

If today's college students were smarter or better prepared, that would explain the higher grades, but that doesn't seem to be the case. Over the last 30 years, SAT scores of entering students have declined, and fully one-third of entering freshmen are enrolled in at least one remedial reading, writing or mathematics course, the highest enrollment being in math. According to Lynn Steen, a mathematics professor at St. Olaf College, 80 percent of all student work in college math is remedial.

If they're not smarter or better prepared, perhaps they're working harder? This doesn't seem to be the case either. The assumption behind most college courses is that students will spend two hours studying for every hour they spend in class, but that is rarely the case. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) reveals that not even 15 percent of students come close to this ideal.

George Kuh at Indiana University Bloomington, who directs the NSSE, says that students get higher grades for less effort because of an unspoken agreement between professors and their students: "If you don't hassle me, I won't ask too much of you." Kuh is sympathetic to the plight of many college instructors, who often are responsible for teaching hundreds of students. "College teachers have too many students and not enough time, so it's easier to give good or at least pretty good grades rather than have to explain to an angry student how a grade was arrived at."

Someone ought to tell students how *unimportant* good grades are once they leave the campus. Grade-obsessed students probably assume that high grades lead to better jobs and more money, things they care about. In 1993, 57 percent of students said that the chief benefit of a college education is increased earning power, and that number has been going up. Thirty-seven percent of students say they would drop out of college if they didn't think they were helping their job chances.

What is correlated with success is what is called "engagement," genuine involvement in courses and campus activities. Engagement leads to what's called "deep learning," or learning for understanding. That's very different from just memorizing stuff for the exam and then forgetting it. As Russ Edgerton of the Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning notes, "What counts most is what students DO in college, not who they are, or where they go to college, or what their grades are."

Colleges shouldn't be let off the hook either. They should be focused on the "value added" of the student experience. In today's society, the need to educate for understanding—not just grades—has never been more important. It's just as critical in community college as in the Ivy League. What should students be learning, and what

kinds of learning matter most? What kinds of teaching and student engagement promote "deep learning"? Can that learning be measured? What is the evidence? As basic as it sounds, few institutions in America can answer these questions with any certainty, even though learning is ostensibly the core purpose of higher education.

Some in higher education are trying to get a handle on what really happens in the classroom. The aforementioned National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) looks at the classroom activity which we know enables significant learning, while the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) directly measures student learning and the "value added" of each campus. Both are challenging ranking systems like those in U.S. News and World Report as measures of college quality.

There is also the issue of educational purpose—whether or not students and faculty have common goals. In October 2002, a report, "Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College," asserted that every student, not just those attending elite institutions, should receive a liberal education, not liberal in a political sense but "liberating," i.e., opening the mind.

In short, rooting out grade inflation by publicly shaming easy graders would be a band-aid, and nothing more. The larger issue is the intellectual life of a campus. It appears that there is still much work to be done to reclaim the priority of undergraduate teaching and learning on our nation's campuses.

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