Stop Giving In To Higher Grades:
Ten suggestions On How to Fight Grade Inflation

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Published: September 15, 2014

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"I need to have A's in all of my classes to feel good about myself." "If I make a B in any class, I feel like I'm a big failure." "I got a B in your class this semester and I lost my scholarship. Now I can't go to college anymore." All of these statements have been heard over and over by university professors (Blake, 2001). In this entitlement generation, students often believe they have an inalienable right to an A grade. Carter (2008), in his article speaking about today's millennial learners, talks about the entitlement generation who believes they are entitled to all good things in life. Students today expect to be catered to, demanding their rights for higher grades Iris-Franz, 2010).

Grade inflation is a norm today in America's public schools. In fact, the subject now is hardly ever brought up as a current issue in education, much less a controversial subject. Students and parents expect higher grades. Principals expect higher grades. Thus teachers now give higher grades than several decades ago. Grade inflation is a national trend and is out of control (Franklin, 1991).

It is time to bring this issue to the forefront and confront the grade inflation. Grades are supposed to be an accurate end product of the assessment process. Grades should be indicative of learner outcomes (Pathwise Observations System, 2002). Yet, the question arises: Are teachers really assessing learner outcomes or inflating grades?

When comparing grades today to grades given forty years ago, students today get higher grades. On the average, scores are up. Students have learned to expect higher grades.

Students often demand higher grades. More students are going to college today and higher grades are required to get into graduate schools. Higher grades are required to get into the more prestigious universities. The Bell Curve is taking a different shape now (Trice, 2000; Ediger, 2001).

Some higher institutions of learning are now examining the effects of grade inflation (Hu, 2005; Walsh, 2010). University presidents and officials are asking different departments to examine why current grades are gradually increasing. While there have been no mandates on ceasing grade inflation, some university deans and heads of departments are required to defend why the average grade points of their college students are rising higher than in previous years. Some university officials have been required to show the evidence why grades are rising (Birnbaum, 1977: Breland, 1976). Bejar and Blew (1982) make an important point. These university professors must be able to show that more achievement has occurred to defend reported the higher grades.

Financial pressure on students and institutions of higher education often leads to grade inflation. Colleges and universities are enrollment driven. Students need higher grades in order to receive scholarships that require a higher cumulative grade point average. Students often deliberately impose pressure on professors for higher grades so they will not lose financial funding. Due to the growing budgets of universities, professors often feel pressured to inflate grades accordingly, awarding higher grades than students actually earn (Stone, 1995).

Not only do students pressure professors for higher grades, higher education officials feel the financial strain in a different way (Levin, A. 8 Cureton, J. 1998). If students do not earn high grades at their universities, students will transfer to universities that will give them higher grades. Universities are a business. Universities feel the pressure to respond to the consumer-

based mentality that implies that *we are here to serve and please students.* The reality is, universities are competing for the same students. Students know this fact well and use all sorts of strategies to get higher grades. And for the universities that are about to go under financially, the pressure for higher grades often overrides assessing for real learner outcomes and more accurate grades (Barndt, 2004).

An interesting point is has to do with students choosing a major in quest for higher grades. Sometimes students don not look clearly at the long-term results in a major; students see college as a necessary gate to get through in order to obtain a higher paying job. Thus, when some students choose a more difficult major with tougher grading standards, students often jump ship and choose what they see as *an easier major* where perhaps grading standards are not as rigorous (Prather, Smith, and Kodras, 1979).

Juola (1976) believed that educators should ask the following questions about their assessment procedures:

1) What are we gaining and what are we losing if grade inflation occurs?
2) What is happening and why?
3) What is the best way to have grades serve the primary function of higher education within our unique unit?
4) If there are differences in perspective within the unit, how can these be resolved without destroying elements in the programs of others which they regard as precious?

Juola (1976) advocated that no matter what grade system are implemented at universities; reducing grade inflation must be strictly followed by all faculty members. If not followed, the final product is meaningless. There is a place for academic freedom, yet not with the grading system. Deviation by just one faculty member destroys the meaning of the scale for all faculty

members. Consistency in grading is essential if others continue to be more permissive. The goal is to evaluate factors in the unit that have contributed to grade inflation and then adjust grading procedures accordingly.

Regardless of the seemingly endless reasons for grade inflation, it is vital that educators, when constructing assessments, understand fully what assessment is. Trice (2000) believed that any valid assessment is formal and documented. The purpose is to find out learner outcomes. The Pathwise Classroom Observation System Orientation Guide (2002) requires all newly licensed teachers to write clearly, observable behavior objectives for learners. The objective should measure precisely a *behavior*. The behavior is an action that can be documented. The document (quantitative or qualitative) is evidence of learner outcomes. This document can be turned into a grade.

The Writer's Thoughts on Grade Inflation

The writer of this article is concerned with teachers across all levels bumping up grades with faulty assessments that are often not aligned with the objective/s of the lesson. A valid concern arises from many ways teachers inflate grades, consciously and sub-consciously.

With this all said, the writer, a university associate professor, former elementary school teacher, is concerned about rising grades that are not earned and indicative of an authentic and accurate re evidence of student learning. University students should work hard to earn high grades and professors should *cautiously* and *consistently* guard against superficially and arbitrary assessments that inflate grades. In many cases, assessments are not really assessments at all. The writer recommends that all teachers/professors re-evaluate what formal assessment is and the purposes of assessment.

In the process of identifying what teachers and professors do to inflate grades, the writer has come up with ten suggestions to fight inflation. Most likely, grade inflation will never end, yet it can be fought with with a commitment to the cause and fight this practice out of control. The following ten suggestions are:

1) *Stop giving students extra credit.* Extra credit might be good for the student, yet it should not be used as an assessment. All extra credit does is raise the grade. Sometimes extra credit motivates the student to try harder; some students need more repetition learning a concept (i.e. adding, subtracting, and writing topical paragraphs). However, extra credit does not always show evidence of what a formal assessment will indicate. The question is: Did the student learn what was supposed to be learned? One example is the writer's son. He earned lots of extra credit in high school and consistently made B grades in mathematics. Now in college, he has taken college math two times and has not passed either time. Although his high school teachers were well-intentioned, extra credit turned out to be a detriment in his case. With extra credit assignments, he always found a way to get the answers without understanding the content. My son's inflated grade did not reflect his learning.
2) *Stop dropping the lowest test score in the course.* All students like this option. The assumption is the student might have a *bad testing day* for any number of reasons. Yes, all students have bad testing days. However, on the flip-side, some students do not study enough or at all. Those students use this option as a *bet* to keep their grades intact. Students who generally make highly grades may opt opt *to not take the last exam*. Taking the last exam would be pointless to them; another high grade would make no difference. The most erroneous factor in allowing students to drop the lowest score is professors implicitly stating that all of the course

objectives are not important to know and do not need to be assessed. Taking each exam shows that every course content objective is important.

3) *Stop giving bonus points at the end of exams.* Bonus points often bolster student rapport especially when these test items correlate closely to the content on the exam. However, bonus points, in reality, are extra credit points. They are a built-in guard for one or two faulty tests items. Professors should give valid and reliable tests that do not need bonus points to cover a lack of reliability. When exams are given repeatedly and items are examined carefully with subsequent re-writing of faulty items, tests become more reliable. No test is completely reliable, yet they can become more reliable. Bonus points are no longer necessary; they lead to more inflated grades.
4) *Stop curving test scores to raise students' grades.* Once again, when a test is reliable, curving the test serves no purpose but to make students who scored low feel better about their scores. Students with higher scores generally dislike curving; they often feel good about what they have learned evidenced by their test scores and often resent the practice of curving. The F, D, and C students gain in higher scores; higher scoring students gain very little, if nothing. The purpose of exams is to assess learner outcomes. Curving does not assess learner outcomes.
5) *Stop raising the student's final grade due to the student's positive attitude/disposition and behavior in class.* All of these factors are an expectation for university students. University students *are adults* and should learn to be responsible adults as they seek their higher education degrees. Of course, all students in college do not act like adults; however, giving extra points and raising grades for positive character traits does not assess learner outcomes, although these traits usually lead toward higher learner outcomes.

6) *Stop allowing students to re-submit assignments with the main purpose of making a higher grade.* Students submit lower than satisfactory papers to professors quite often. They sometimes fail to listen carefully in class or re-check detailed assignment pages before writing their papers. Thus, they turn in a poorly constructed product. Once these papers are returned to them and they see a lower grade, they often fly to the professor's office asking to re-write the paper for a higher grade. In my earlier days teaching at the university level, I would often let students re-submit products for a higher grade. Another professor told me that by allowing students to re-submit these products, I was enabling them to be weak and not turn in a quality product the first time. Also, all of the re-grading of products began to suck the life out of me. I decided to terminate this practice. Students now know that they will not have the chance to revise any product. Student products are now better, because the *first submission is the last submission.*

7) *Stop giving students an assignment where there is lack of rigor (where all students can make the top score). Stop giving students an alternate assignment.*

   Occasionally in education classes, professors use multiple kinds of assessments in addition to the often-used objective tests. Yet, in doing so, professors at times give assignments where there are minimal stringent requirements. Thus, this type of assessment actually is more of an activity than a valid assessment. Therefore, most students, if not all students, make an A on this *activity* which was meant to be an *assessment*. There is no clear distinction for basic, proficient, and highly proficient scores. These assignments could be more suited for in-class activities; it is difficult to accurately measure learner outcomes with them.

8) *Stop raising grades for excellent attendance.* Excellent attendance, like working on the work force, is an expectation in college. Students have voluntarily enrolled in college. When

students enroll, they essentially agree to be a class every day they possibly can. Students should save up their absences and use them when only necessary. Professors should expect regular attendance and tell students that in many jobs in life, they will not get paid for days they miss. Thus, the attendance policy should be firm with a certain amount of excused days, and then grades should be lowered on some type of scale when students miss classes. Students need to know that all concepts in classes cannot be assessed; only a sampling of representative items will be assessed. Much valuable content is learned by the sense of hearing and osmosis. In face-to-face classes, just *being there in the classroom* is vital to learning. Learning takes place in a community of learners; students' grades should be dropped for excessive lack of attendance.

9) *Stop giving higher final grades to students who have many personal crises, emergencies, family problems, personal baggage, and work/family obligations.* Here, the writer is not talking about students who have shown a good track record and occasionally have some unforeseen problems in their lives. The writer is talking about a much different kind of students. For some reasons, some students have acquired a pattern of disaster following them. They are always in some kind of dilemma, either by accident, mistake, self-fulfilling prophesy, or self-induced. They always have some kind of story to tell and use it as an excuse to be late with work products, missing class excessively, and in class being a non-participant. Therefore, it is very easy for professors to get pulled up in the whirlwind of drama, becoming overly sympathetic and empathic with these type of students. The professor then realizes that this scenario is continuing pattern. These students want to make their problems the professor's problems. The professor often takes on these problems resulting in constantly caving into to extremely later deadlines, alternate assignments, and often easier grading. This is all an attempt to just get these

students through the course. In the process, the grades tend to be highly inflated. The next semester, the same professor finds that he/she is in the *same dilemma* with the *same student*. Unfortunately, , these students has been given more slack and privileges than the other students in the same class. The expectation for these troubled students and learning is based on a different yardstick. This situation is not good for the professor, class, and ultimately for these poorer performing students. The professor ultimately becomes one more person to enable the student to be weak. Many a professor later regrets giving these students higher grades.

10) *Stop allowing students to negotiate their final grades.* Simply put, documented assessments determine final grades; they are not negotiable. Yet, today, students think they have a right to bargain for higher grades. The bottom line is: Assessments are the evidence of learning. Students often come to professor's offices asking how to get higher grades. Students often tell professors they must have higher grades to prove that they are worthy people. Students have all sorts of reasons why they *need higher grades* and many are shameless in asking for higher grades. With these student demands constantly flying thoughts professors' heads, professors often feel the pressure to score subjective products higher. Professors should be firm and assertive telling students from the onset that grades are earned and grades are never negotiable!

Concluding Thoughts

It is time for higher education to become more rigorous. It is time to set a new standard. It is time to establish and maintain high expectations for student achievement. Students need to adopt the old-fashioned mindset that people deserve nothing in life until earning it. Yet, this foundational belief has to begin in the home setting and in private and public schools.

Although a university education should be worthwhile and enjoyable, students should make the life-changing experience a priority in life and earn every grade they get. What good

is an A when it has not been earned? Where is the feeling of working hard and getting a good grade?

It is time that all educators take another serious view at their assessment practices and consider the suggestions in this article. Teachers should adjust their teaching and assessments accordingly. There is not better feeling than *earning a high grade!*

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