

***A document to foster discussion about grade inflation in the School of Education  
Faculty Development Committee April 2012***

*The following are quotes taken from the survey sent to faculty, AIs, and adjuncts in Spring 2012  
supplemented with data where appropriate*

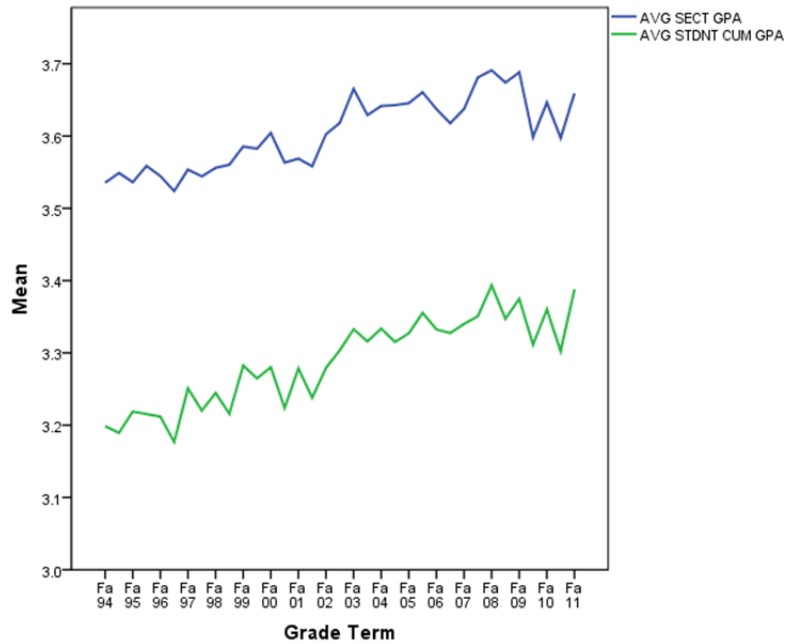
***What is grade inflation?***

- A lack of differentiation between acceptable work and exemplary work (both receive A's).
- An institutional culture in which students universally expect to receive high grades for "doing the assignments" or for meeting minimum standards. It is a cultural phenomena which makes it extremely difficult for an individual faculty member to resist inflating his/her grades without receiving high student evaluations.
- Assignments of grades above the meaning of the grade as communicated among the stakeholders. The principal stakeholders are the student and the instructor, but other stakeholders may be the department and school faculty, and possibly future employers, although I am not convinced that employers typically look at students' course-level grades.
- First, the meaning of "grades" are not based on criterion standards that can be judged by reasonable and relatively dispassionate third parties. Second, the traditional "high" grades are being assigned to students that would otherwise be judged by reasonable and relatively dispassionate third parties as deserving of lower grades.

***Is this problem endemic to just the School of Education?***

- Grade inflation to me basically means that everyone gets an A for meeting the basic requirements of the course. I think it occurs in the SoE, but I think it's a problem at other institutions as well, so if everyone's equal in that regard, it's less of a problem, in my opinion.

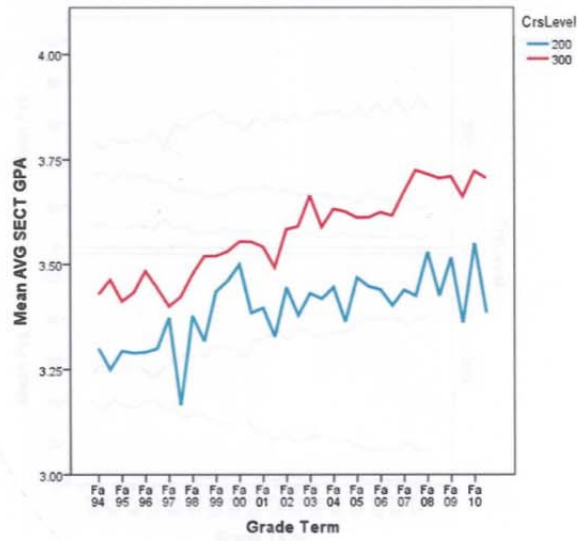
The blue line below shows an average of section GPAs for School of Education classes. For example, if everyone got an A in the class, the class section GPA would be a 4.0; if everyone got a B, it would be a 3.0 etc. The green line shows the GPA's that students have in our classes in that year (including the "one" they took from us).



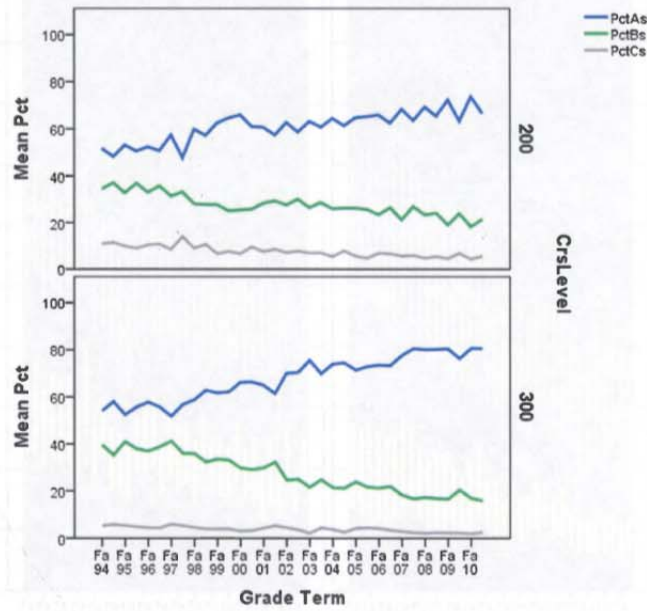
***Has grade inflation always been a problem?***

- Faculty quote: Grade inflation is a trend in which grades generally increase over time as higher grades become associated with lesser quality work.
- Has the problem increased over time? Is it centered in one particular level of class?

This is a plot of Mean GPAs for 200/300 level courses over time.



This plot and the one that follows begin to show where the changes in course GPA are coming from. While there's only small change in the % of Cs, The % of As/Bs seem to literally mirror one another with As taking the place of Bs for many students.



***Is there grade inflation because the School of Education uses different kinds of grading criteria?***

- **I grade based on effort and growth in understanding.** I do not believe in grade inflation. But if there is so called "grade inflation" in my class, it is because I give students opportunities to revise their assignments and I give them extra credit chances if they want. I do this because I believe learning is an ongoing process and students deserve a high grade if they put efforts into their work and want to learn well. The knowledge and understanding that the students gained through this learning process are more important than a grade.
- **I think curved tests are ludicrous.** I see that as a mythic concept based on an equally mythic notion that only one type of 'knowledge' is worth having and that kind of knowledge can be assessed through a test of facts. Human beings have a range of mental and physical and social abilities that must be nurtured if we want an educated, intelligent and wise populace. TESTS that result in a grade curve are ludicrous. As a teacher, I see my responsibility as finding what the student needs in order to be able to succeed and be interested in learning. It is not my job to pigeon-hole students on a sliding scale. Every student must be successful in order to leave my course with an A . . .but I work with the ones that lag behind until they get closer and closer to the A! Some may not reach the goal . . . but if they don't, it won't be because they were condemned by a curve.
- **I use mastery as my goal as a model for future teachers.** One thing to keep in mind is that in a School of Education, we approach assessment for the purpose of both assessing learner performance as well as to model quality (and variety) of assessment for future teachers / professionals. At times in my courses, I allow students to attempt an assessment more than one time in order to demonstrate mastery of content both because I want give more than one opportunity to show mastery as well as model this as an important instructional strategy.

***But, is there a way to stick to our mastery ideas but still allow students that move beyond mastery to be recognized?***

- **Reset mastery at a B.** Defining "mastery" as A or A- rather than B or B+ and setting the rest of the grades around this point leads to grade inflation. What if we set mastery at a B? What is the differentiation between basic and above and beyond expectations?
- **Focus on the fact that grades provide information about understanding.** Students think that they deserve an "A" for doing bare minimum things. They worry more about grades than the understanding of the material taught. This leads to instructors focusing more on grade-based evaluations rather than understanding-based evaluations.
- **A high grade means students are ready for the field. We have to keep that in mind. A low grade means we have to keep working with them until they are ready.** I have no interest in sending grade C students/pre-service teachers into the field. If a student is performing at a C level, I offer that student additional opportunities to improve their grade - working with them in their area of difficulty until the grade and their ability base are at a level where both of us are satisfied that the job was done well. In this way, grades are not used as fixed sources, but rather performance indicators. If a student is willing to do more work to raise an average grade to that of B or A, I will support them in that endeavor.

***How does grade inflation affect us?***

- **It changes the way I teach.** There is substantial pressure to inflate grade. Every semester, I feel that I must push the grades up, create ways to drop bad assignment or test grades, or "curve" grading. This is true also of reducing the amount of work and reading I require. Instead of a standard of weekly course work time or reading load; everyone avoids the questions.

- **It changes the quality of the work we expect from our students.** In all honestly, the fact that students have to get high grades impacts on the quality of the work. (It seems) that "excellence" is not really what we strive for. Not on an undergraduate level, but also not on a graduate level. It is an ethos I have difficulty identifying with. I think complacency is a problem.
- **It changes my grading.** I am reluctant to give C's because they put the student's average close to what counts as failing (C-) in the school of ed. I am also reluctant to piss students off, and I am probably concerned with how they will rate me on my evaluations, even though I hate to admit it. I also think it's generally a good idea to have students feel capable, and I think giving lots of C's might cause students to shut down. If everyone were giving C's for average work, this would not be an issue.
- **It changes the way faculty allocate their own time.** In addition to the merit-pay counter-incentive to accurate grading, many faculty are committed to giving all students A's either because a) they don't want to hurt anyone's feelings; b) they can't be bothered to spend time evaluating students' work.

### ***What should we do about grade inflation?***

- **Nothing.** The witch hunting of teachers clearly doesn't stop at the K-12 level, and now we have this. How about we go observe the teaching practices in the other divisions of the university and give them critical reviews and feedback? Lectures, note taking, rote memorization, writing papers that receive very little helpful feedback and only bad marks..... I'm quite positive the teaching styles and practices we would find are residuals from the 1950's, and that's why students fail.... But that's supposed to be "okay" because it's not "grade inflation". Absurd! If students are failing, that is a problem.... not a desirable outcome.
- **Together create high expectations.** I think it's essential that there be conversation and clarification from the SoE for students that high expectations and tremendous work are expected.
- **Eliminate extra credit.**
- **Involve students.** Many come into our classes with the mindset that if they show-up for each class and simply submit the work they should receive an "A". Now this might be the result of them experiencing "grade inflation" throughout their program, but it also might just be how they experience most of their learning K-12. Many teachers in K-12 are giving "extra" credit assignments that inflate students' grades but show no indication of improving their understanding of the material. I think the "grade inflation" issue is the result of a much bigger issue of students expecting high grades for little learning.
- **Rethink our merit system.** With grades tied to student evaluations, it is not surprising faculty don't want to receive low evaluations because the students are upset about low grades. Even our "award" system----merit pay + teaching awards---are based largely on student evaluation scores. This is not a fair or balanced system in my opinion.
- **I think anything will help** if we want our profession to be taken seriously at the university (and in the field). We need teachers that aren't so afraid of not being liked that they just give away A's.