

STUDENT EXPECTATIONS OF GRADE INFLATION

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Student evaluation of teaching surveys were given to 278 students in five different courses in order to develop an evaluation instrument that would provide student-publishable results concerning faculty performance. Two questions on this survey asked students about their expected grade (A to F) and their assessment of their work in the class (distinguished, superior, average, below-average, and failure). These letter grades correspond to the university-sanctioned grade labels (e.g., A = distinguished work). When examined together, the results indicate a significant degree of expected grade inflation. That is, large proportions of students doing superior and average work expected As, and almost half the students in the sample reported doing average work yet expected to receive a B. These results are discussed in terms of faculty grading and the pressures to conform to these expectations.

Complaints by faculty and administrators about grade inflation seem to be rampant, even in the face of declining research and some evidence to suggest a leveling off of the rate of collegiate grade inflation (Mullen, 1995). However, recent evidence from the College Board (1997) strongly suggests grade inflation among college-bound high school graduates. From 1987 to 1997, the number of high school students receiving A+, A, or A- grades increased 2%, 4%, and 3%, respectively. During this same period, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores for both Verbal and Math fell for all three A-grade categories, hence providing some evidence for increasing high school grades in the face of declining SAT scores. Grade inflation is defined as "a progressive rise in GPA without a concurrent rise in student ability" (Hadley & Vitale, 1985, p. 4), or "when a grade is viewed as being less rigorous than it ought to be" (Mullen, 1995, p. 2).

When chronicling the history of grade inflation, some researchers note that the period of 1955-1965 was viewed as an era of grade deflation; students had higher and higher incoming SAT scores, yet universities were maintaining relatively constant grade distributions. What happened? The 1960s, the Vietnam War, and a number of social revolutions led to a relaxing of standards in society which carried over into the class-

room (Hadley & Vitale, 1985). During the 1970s, grade inflation was one of the most frequently discussed issues in higher education (Singleton, 1978). Coupled with the perceived relaxation of faculty expectations, the development of total quality management and student-as-consumer orientations in higher education have changed faculty-student roles. Trout (1997) writes that today's students expect some sort of consumer sovereignty status while attending classes, leading to the watering down of grades. Trout extends this argument further by suggesting that students are lead into the entitlement mindset where they should "get what they paid for." According to Trout (1997), faculty are fearful of the repercussions of poor student evaluations on faculty with rigorous standards, concluding that "course evaluations contribute significantly to grade inflation and a dumbed-down curriculum" (p. 51). On the other hand, Schuh (1983) argued that some grade inflation was justified given the frequent lack of reliability in a teacher-made test. When students evaluate faculty, there is the potential for manipulation and "gamesmanship" (e.g., Braskamp, Brandenburg, & Ory 1984 for a summary of how evaluations can be manipulated for better or worse).

The research in this area is unclear in its assessment of the current prevalence of grade inflation (Bearden, Wolfe, & Grosch, 1992). Weller (1984) concluded that the perceived role of faculty influences the degree of grade inflation observed. In other words, if a faculty member sees his or her role as facilitator, Weller found that they gave higher grades compared to faculty members who see themselves in the role of

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expert-authority. Singleton (1978) found that students were more satisfied with lower grades from professors perceived as a "very hard grader" compared to those perceived as a "very easy grader." Hadley and Vitale (1985) concluded that reliability of grades is related to the number of response categories available, and suggested that faculty use a 13-point system (+s and -s) rather than the 5-point system (A, B, C, D, F). Mullen (1995) found that although collegiate GPA was on the rise, so too was entry-level ACT/SAT scores. That is, the increase in GPA was not due necessarily to grade inflation by faculty, but by a true increase in talented students. Grades were not inflated, just commensurate. Beyer, Klamm, and Vollmer (1998) found that females in an introductory psychology course tended to overestimate their grades compared to males.

In the present study, an alternative approach to the study of grade inflation was taken. Rather than compare entering ACT scores with student performance, students were asked about their own performance in the class using both descriptive terms and grade categories. Both the descriptive terms and the grade categories were taken directly from the official university catalog. That is, students were asked if their work in the class had been distinguished, superior, average, etc., and also asked in a different question whether they expected to receive an A, B, C, etc. Thus, if students have an accurate gauge of their performance relative to the faculty member's assessment, a student reporting average work should report an expected grade of C; a student reporting superior work should report an expected grade of B, and so on.

With this approach, one could argue that if students with average performance expect an A or B, then perhaps this result is not due to grade inflation, but a misunderstanding of the grading scale. At this university, A = distinguished work, and B = superior work. It would not be too surprising if students were not aware of these exact labels, nor if they fail to understand the difference between the two. But what about C = average?

In one of my large introductory classes (a class similar to one of those surveyed in the main study), I asked students "In terms of grades, what does an A stand for? a B? C? D? F?" One hundred and eighty-four useable responses were collected. In examining student perceptions of what a C stands for, 82.0% (151/184) responded with "average." Twenty-one additional responses (11.4%) could also be considered as variations on average: fair (5), ok (10), satisfactory

(2), medium (1), and pass (3). Five students depicted a C as "less than average" (poor, below average, bad), while seven students depicted a C as "more than average" (above average, good, not bad). While the A and B letter-grade designations may be unclear, it seems clear that 93.4% of the students have an accurate understanding of what type of performance a C represents—average. Thus, the present student examined grade inflation by students reporting their expected grade and reporting their descriptive assessment of their work.

METHOD

Participants

Students at a large Western university were organizing a process where students evaluate faculty at the end of each semester and those evaluations are to be published for the aid of students in course selection. I was involved in the creation of an evaluation instrument that (a) would measure student opinion of instructor and course in a reliable and valid manner; (b) would be short enough so that instructors would agree to give it in their classes; (c) would contain enough questions so that the students could gain valuable information from the results, and (d) would be acceptable to various campus entities (e.g., Faculty Senate). This study reports the results of the project where 278 students from five different courses completed the end of the semester evaluation. The courses included one section of a lower division psychology course, one section of a lower division computer information systems course, and three sections of various upper division finance courses.

Materials

Ten questions were asked using a scanning/bubble sheet format. The first six questions were answered using a 5-point Strongly-Disagree to Strongly-Agree scale. Those questions asked about (a) methods used to evaluate performance, (b) syllabus clear about course expectations, (c) instructor demonstrating a thorough knowledge of the subject matter, (d) the instructor was sensitive to the viewpoints of others, (e) I would recommend this course to another student, and (f) the content of the course was appropriate. Four additional questions were asked using different response scales. Students were asked about their expected grade (A to F), their overall rating of the

course (Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor), their assessment of their own work in the class (Distinguished, Superior, Average, Below-Average, Failure), and their overall rating of the instructor (Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor). Interestingly, the values selected for the question about assessment of their own work correspond to the university-sanctioned terms of what an A represents (A = Distinguished work), what a B represents (B = Superior work), what a C represents (C = Average), etc. Thus, students reported about their own performance in the class and their expected grade in two separate questions.

Procedure

Faculty from across campus were invited to pilot the new evaluation form in their classes. Five classes were recruited, includes classed from psychology, finance, and information systems. Students filled out the evaluation form anonymously and faculty were not aware of the results of the evaluation until after the conclusion of the semester. This evaluation was completed at the same time the standard university evaluation was given. Students completing the end-of-semester evaluation typically needed 10 minutes or less to complete the evaluation. This was done in class. Students were urged to complete the evaluation as honestly as possible; students understood that in no way would their grade be influenced by the evaluation outcomes.

RESULTS

Do students self-report grade inflation? The answer is decidedly yes. At the university studied, the grade designations are A = Distinguished Work, B = Superior Work, C = Average Work, D = Below-Average Work, and F = Failure. Although it would not be unexpected that students would know the exact label for A and B, it appears to be generally understood that C means average (93.4% of students). Thus, if students are accurate about their own course performance and grade expectation, students reporting average work should also be expecting a C. This is not the case in the present study. As seen in Table 1, of the 159 students self-reporting average work, only 25.7% (41/159) expected to receive a C. From these self-report average students, 60.3% (96/159) expect a B, 11.9% (19/159) expect an A, and 1.9% (2/159) expect a D. A chi-square analysis of this data indicate a significant association between these variables, $X^2(9, N = 275) = 114.22, p < .05$. Thus, of students reporting

Table 1

Chi-square Results of Comparing Class Work Performance and Expected Grade

		Q7. I expect to receive the grade of			
		D	C	B	A
Q9. The Work I performed in this class was	Below-Average	2	2		
	Average	3	41	96	19
	Superior		5	55	41
	Distinguished			2	9

Note: $X^2(9, N=275) = 114.22, p < .001$.

average work, 72.2% expect a grade higher than a C.

In an analysis of the same issue from a different perspective, a paired *t* test was used to examine the variables grade expectation (A, B, etc.) and class work assessment (distinguished, superior, etc.). In theory, if students are accurate about their own work and understand the grading scale, there should be no difference between expected grade and the self-assessment. Significant differences would indicate the presence of the expectation of either grade inflation or grade deflation by students. This difference was statistically significant, $t(275) 14.16, p < .001$, with the average expected grade = 3.03 (standard deviation = .72), while the assessment of performance averaged 2.43 (standard deviation = .59). In other words, students evaluating their own work closer to average than superior expected a B (superior). This provides another indicator of the overinflation in expected grades.

DISCUSSION

Students performing average work, who acknowledge themselves that their work is average, expect a grade of B or A more than 70% of the time, even though they realize that the grade for average work is C. The various implications for this type of misunderstanding are discussed below.

As with any course evaluation instrument, these data are self-report data, so caution should be used in drawing conclusions from the results. Clearly, the cause-and-effect relationship is not well understood in the present study. One can only speculate as to why as student self-assessment in a class is average yet they expect a B or an A. It could be the pressures to earn high grades to sustain scholarships or for a competitive advantage for graduate school, or purely wishful thinking. It could also be do to the historical trend seen in high school graduates; the expectation of grade inflation continues through to college. It could also be that faculty members are not clear in describing what distinguished (A) work is, or have not been

Table 2
Intercorrelation Matrix for Evaluation Questions

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
1. The methods used to evaluate my performance in this course were appropriate.	1									
2. The syllabus was clear about course expectations.	.49**	1								
3. The instructor demanded a thorough knowledge of the subject matter	.43**	.52**	1							
4. The instructor was sensitive to the viewpoints of others.	.36**	.30**	.43**	1						
5. I would recommend this course to another BSU student	.46**	.44**	.57**	.47**	1					
6. The content of the course was appropriate	.50**	.52**	.52**	.44*	.65**	1				
7. I expect to receive the grade of	.23**	.19**	.14*	.20**	.18*	0.08	1			
8. Overall, I would rate this course as	.50**	.47**	.55**	.48**	.71**	.63**	.28**	1		
9. The work I performed in this class was	0.08	0.03	.13*	.17**	0.10	0.03	.47**	.18**	1	
10. Overall, I would rate this instructor as	.40**	.48**	.62**	.50**	.64**	.57**	.19**	.76**	.13*	1

Note: * $p < 0.5$; ** $p < 0.01$.

consistent across classes or across faculty in the expectations placed on students for grades, hence sending mixed signals to students.

While complaints about grade inflation have surfaced for years, the present study represents an extension of this work by assessing the magnitude of grade inflation from a new perspective—the college student. Faculty members would be well-advised to review, at the beginning of each course, what the grade designations and grades represent at their respective schools and how these grades are earned. If students have such high grade expectations AND the instructor enforces high standards of scholarship, faculty could be the brunt of ill-feelings in the end-of-semester course evaluation, when the student who normally expects an A or B for average work realizes that the instructor is actually going to give them a C (see Schuh, 1983). Evidence from the present study indicates that students do not discriminate well between evaluating the course, the instructor, and their own performance. These data are presented in Table 2. Of the 45 intercorrelations presented in the 10 x 10 matrix, all but five are significantly correlated. If they do well, one interpretation could be that students think that the course must be pretty good and the instructor must be pretty good. If they do poorly, then they might think that the course must not have been designed well, or it was a poor instructor, or the content was inappropriate. Ultimately, the perpetuation of inflated grades hurts those faculty teaching rigorous courses and giving fair grades when student evaluations are due, and

this in turn may result in students who are disenchanted with the professor and the university. By having high grading standards and adhering to them, universities can enhance their image and the perceptions held by current and prospective students.

What is the overall impact of grade inflation? Students expect better grades than they have earned, and faculty may feel the brunt of this expectation in classroom feedback and teaching evaluations. This puts pressure on faculty to conform to these student expectations, or face retribution. Mitchell (1998) recently spoke about the complexity of the issue when he said “defenders of the current state of grade inflation protest that students are actually stronger now; that lowering grades will hurt their chances for jobs or graduate school; that private universities owe high grades to high-paying consumers; or that elite institutions select only A students” (p. A72). Mitchell suggests that an even more insidious problem is grade variation within and among individual courses.

On a larger scale, when undergraduate students apply to graduate school from a school with rampant grade inflation, those students may have an undue advantage compared to students coming out of schools without such grade inflation (that is, the grade may be overrepresentative of their actual achievement). The impact of this practice was discussed by Mitchell (1998). Further study is needed to determine whether these levels of grade inflation are common at colleges and universities across the nation, or are localized at particular institutions. That study is now underway.

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