

Is Grade Inflation Even the Question?



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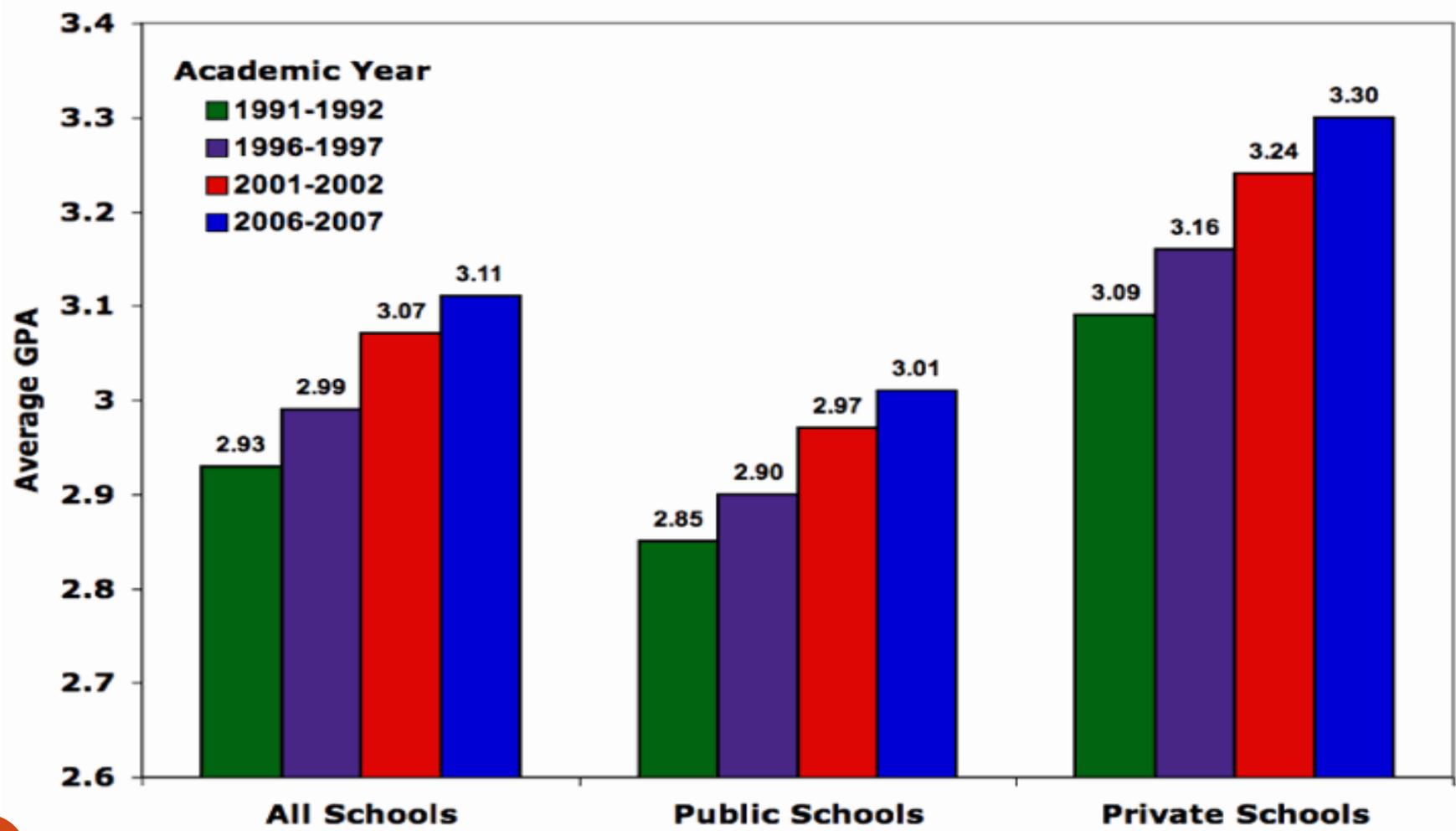
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Is Grade Inflation a Problem?





The Media on Grade Inflation

Article :

“Grade Inflation Seen Rising”

- By Scott Jaschik
- March 12, 2009
- <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2009/03/12/grades>

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Is Grade Inflation a Problem?

	1991	2006
Private Colleges	3.09	3.30
Public Universities	2.85	3.01

- Example of the problem:
 - Brown University: over 50% of undergrad grades are A's (up from 42.5% a decade ago)

Why Is Grade Inflation a Problem?



“The alternative is a student body that frequently misses class, never prepares in advance, studies about 11 hours a week if they are 'full time' students, and drinks itself into a constant stupor out of boredom. That's not an acceptable alternative anywhere.”

- Stuart Rojstaczer, retired Duke University professor, created GradeInflation.com

Not all schools have grade inflation



- Examples of combating grade inflation:
 - Princeton University
 - Set out to reverse grade inflation
 - Community Colleges
 - See next slide

Why Community Colleges Don't Have Grade Inflation



- Haven't abandoned the "C" grade.
- Want sufficient rigor to ensure their students' success after transferring to four-year colleges.
- Use grades to predict and track their students' progress in four-year colleges after leaving the community college.
- Enable close faculty–student and faculty–faculty interaction that encourage frank and more consistent evaluations.
- No assumption that everyone will do well.
- CC students were not used to getting (and demanding) A's in everything in high school.
- Students want honest grading to grow professionally and gain new skills they can use.

Possible Reasons for Grade Inflation



Higher grades may...

- Avoid scaring away students (from the university, the adult program, the major, the specific course, the specific professor).
- Avoid faculty getting punished in course evaluations and RateMyProfessors.com.
- Avoid angry students and parents and colleagues on the appeals committee.
- Avoid students dropping out of courses and majors competing for enrollment numbers.
- Indicate an emphasis on mastery learning.

Bloggers conjecture reasons for grade inflation



1. Consumerism: I paid good money for this degree.
2. Retention pressures
3. Special needs students
4. Sports eligibility
5. Faculty raises based on course evaluations
6. Adjuncts are the problem.
7. Adjuncts are the solution.
8. Adjunct faculty have no other job security and feel the need to entertain and be nice to get rehired.

Bloggers conjecture reasons for grade inflation



9. Faculty have many other things to worry about
10. Sense of entitlement among students
11. Students (and their parents) are undisciplined nowadays—poor study habits, litigious
12. College isn't valuable: boring classes, no guarantee of a good job, why try?
13. The system is broken. Profs give A's just for showing up and not hassling the professor.
14. Most students shouldn't be in college.

Some Evidence That Grade Inflation *Isn't* a Problem



- **Clifford Adelman, a senior analyst at the Institute for Higher Education Policy and a leading education researcher:**
 - One third of students who start in 4-year colleges don't graduate. (Lots of theories on this one, though.)
 - “Grades” today are not purely measuring knowledge and skills. Course grades include points for attendance, participation, attitude, etc. This could be called grade devaluation but not grade inflation.
- **OR: Faculty are better teachers; students are better learners?**

CAHEA Listserv Survey (Adult GPA increasing)



- Christian university #1

	Enrollment	1998	2008
Traditional	2846	3.21	3.24
Adult	1127	3.13	3.27

- Christian university #2

	Enrollment	1998	2008
Traditional	1023	3.01	3.06
Adult	126	3.32	3.66

CAHEA Listserv Survey

(Adult GPA declining—large universities)



- Christian university #3

	1998	2008
College of Arts & Sciences	3.006	3.205
Adult & Graduate Studies	3.806	3.621

- Christian university #4

	2005	2007
Traditional Undergraduate	2.922	3.035
Adult & Graduate Studies	3.530	3.402

CAHEA Listserv Survey (Adult GPA unchanged)



- Christian university #5

	Enrollment	1998	2008
Traditional	1200	2.985	3.050
Adult	1800	3.323	3.322

CAHEA Listserv Survey-- Qualitative



1. Adult students are wiser and more committed.
2. Adults are physically, emotionally, and psychologically different.
3. Adults are increasingly better equipped for college.
4. Adults have very high pressures to succeed (work, finances, family obligations).
5. Adult programs lay out clear expectations.
6. Adult programs have more subjective grading (papers, projects) than in traditional undergrad courses (multiple choice tests).
7. Adults who do poorly drop out or retake courses.
8. As adult program enrollments get large, classes may include more underprepared or lower aptitude students. (By contrast, smaller programs at private institutions may get some of the highest ability or most motivated students in the area.)



Problems with Grades

1. Not consistent across sections, programs, institutions
2. Not respected by employers (who sometimes give their own tests to ensure competence)
3. Not respected by states—e.g., for teacher and nursing licenses (states give their own tests too)
4. Not totally trusted by graduate programs (GRE, LSAT, MCAT)
5. Parents demanded a return to grades in the 70s but seem want all students to be above average.
6. Grades reflect a variety of criteria:
 - Mastery, prior knowledge, native intelligence, improvement, effort, attendance, participation, communication skills, persuasion skills, tenacity—all mashed together.
 - So what does a B in biology actually tell us?



What's the Real Issue?

- What are students learning?
- How do we know (ASSESSMENT!)

Examples:

- Grading rubrics
- Writing samples
- Portfolios
- Surveys
- Advisory councils
- Employer feedback
- Standardized tests



What We Can Do

1. Realize it's OK for advanced and/or highly motivated students to get good grades. (Grad programs often require a 3.0 for admission.)
2. DON'T force grades onto a curve just to avoid too many A's.
3. Encourage serious discussions about the purpose of grades with all departments.
4. Decide whether an A means just a certain top percentage or mastery of material or something else.
5. Decide whether it's OK for students to redo assignments for better mastery and higher grades.
6. If we're teaching more and the students are learning more, then it's OK to give more A's.
7. Have clear and consistent expectations and help everyone adhere to these standards.



What We Can Do

8. Use grading rubrics across sections; train faculty for consistency in grading.
9. Explore what's going on in programs and courses where almost all students get A's.
10. Consider saving samples of student work for several years and then comparing the older samples with recent samples.
11. Spot check samples of student work and instructors' comments, rubric scores, grades.
12. Work with adjunct faculty. Explain, train, remediate. Don't rehire those who keep giving all A's. (This is the practice of several CAHEA universities who responded to my survey and belies the adjunct profs in the article responses who give all A's to "stick it to the system.")
13. Teach adults using adult learning theory. Adults perform better in adult formats than in traditional formats (Tom Lehman, 2002, Preliminary Statistical Comparison of Two Degree Programs--IWU).



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