

**Final Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Grade Inflation
October 10, 2016**

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I. Committee charge

- Grade inflation is a problem nationally. Recent publications such as *The Washington Post*, *The Chronicle of Higher Ed*, and *US News and World Report* have highlighted the issue. In particular, Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy outlined findings in <http://www.gradeinflation.com/tcr2012grading.pdf> and <http://www.gradeinflation.com/>
- The Provost and University Senate charged this committee with the task of determining if grade inflation is a problem at AU.

II. Report Summary

The Ad Hoc Grade Inflation Task Force was brought together at the beginning of the Fall, 2015 semester in order to review the problem of grade inflation at American University and to provide recommendations to the University Provost and the University Faculty Senate. The task force members reviewed the literature including case studies of other universities, policies they implemented in order to address grade inflation and the results. The committee analyzed AU's grade data and AU's grading patterns including comparisons of grade distribution for different course levels, different Schools, and different types of faculty status. The committee also reviewed data which illustrated the relationship between grades and ratings of student evaluations of teaching. Finally, the committee collected existing policies and reports from AU Schools in order to understand the current status and perception of grade inflation.

As a result of this research and much discussion, the committee concluded that grade inflation is a complex topic which does not lend itself to a single solution which will be effective for all disciplines. There are several "easy fixes" such as considering Pass/Fail options for certain courses, etc. However, if the university administration chooses to address this issue further, the administration must commit to a comprehensive and programmatic approach which would include full-time, dedicated personnel who would gain a deep understanding of grading policies throughout the university, work with individual Schools to develop policies appropriate for that area of study, implement communication strategies to inform the university community, and provide consistent leadership for ongoing review and assessment of grade inflation strategies.

III. Report Overview

- First, the committee would like to clarify that the outcome of our findings aim to create an AU-specific strategic perspective to address the problem rather than simply replicate what others have tried.
- Second, as the committee discovered, addressing grade inflation is a complicated issue with many factors at play, including: current practices; perceptions of grades by students, faculty, parents, graduate programs, and employers; meaning and purpose of grades; consistency of grading practices across schools, departments, and course sections; and many other related issues. We find there is not one, simple solution to the problem.

- Third, the committee stresses there are two linked discussions lumped into the general conversation: Grade Inequity and Grade Inflation. While the issues are related and connected, each one presents different issues, discussions, and solutions.
 - *Grade inflation occurs when instructors grant higher grades for student work similar in quality to work of past years. Contacts observe grade inflation through rising cumulative grade point averages; rising grades in individual departments, courses, or sections; and growing numbers of students eligible for year-end academic honors (e.g. Dean’s list, Latin honors).*
 - *Grade inequality occurs when similar quality student work receives different grades across departments, courses, or sections.*
- Finally, the committee determined that AU follows the national trend of awarding students higher grades. If this is an issue the University decides to address in a meaningful, consistent manner, we present initial recommendations but stress the need for further study and analysis.

IV. Brief History of Grade Inflation

Fifteen years ago, an informal group of academics from different fields and backgrounds came together a number of times over the course of 2001 at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (Cambridge, MA) to assess the situation with respect to grading issues, its consequences, and what remedies, if any, were needed and feasible. They produced an Occasional Paper (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002) with the results of their discussions, concluding that their review of the literature up to that point revealed overwhelming evidence that standards on undergraduate student grading had changed substantially over time. In particular, there had been widespread grade inflation from the 1960s through the 1990s (e.g., average grades had increased from the C to the B level); significant differences had opened up among the disciplines, with grades higher in the humanities than in the natural sciences; grade inflation was especially noticeable in the Ivy League (e.g., about 45% of grades awarded in League colleges were in the A range, up from the around 20% in the 1960s); and these trends appeared to be unwarranted when compared with stable or declining scores in SATs, or with increased enrollment in remedial classes: “Higher average grades unaccompanied by proportionate increases in average levels of achievement defines grade inflation” (Rosovsky and Hartley, 2002, 7).

Several reasons for grade inflation were identified at the time:

- First, faculty members had been reluctant to give poor grades to male students during the 1960s and 70s because forcing them to drop out of school would have made them subject to wartime military service, with the courtesies extended to draft-age males subsequently having become the norm.

- Second, certain curricular requirements (e.g., foreign language, mathematics and science) were abandoned by many schools, and class withdrawal privileges were extended later into the semester, giving students the opportunity to avoid and/or withdraw from difficult courses.
- Third, growing reliance on student evaluations (SETs), which research had suggested were significantly correlated with student ratings of faculty performance (i.e., courses with higher grades received higher SETs) because they were perceived to affect faculty promotion, tenure and merit-pay decisions.
- Fourth, the trend of more undergraduates pursuing a higher degree put more pressure on faculty to err on the side of grading generosity (e.g., Harvard’s president during the 1990s had stated that increased demand for graduate education had “led professors to give better grades so that Harvard students would not be disadvantaged”).
- And fifth, the trend of tenured faculty representing a diminishing proportion of total was perceived to be a factor encouraging less demanding grading, because untenured and part-time faculty are vulnerable from below in the form of student pressure, and from above in the form of the displeasure of administrators, and have less time and motivation to apply tough grading standards likely to invite more student and other questioning.

Grade inflation is a long-standing problem whose seriousness is demonstrated by a wide variety of studies of grade distributions.

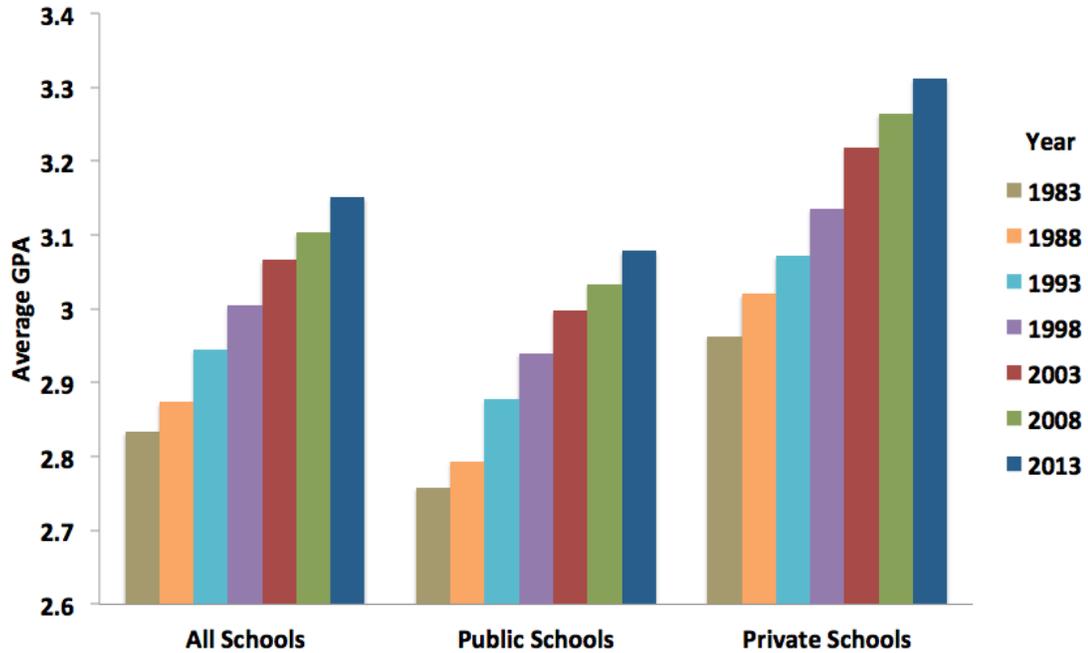
V. Status of Grades Nationally

Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy’s comprehensive 2012 report, “Where A Is Ordinary: The Evolution of American College and University Grading, 1940–2009,” published in *Teacher’s College Record*, found:

A’s represent 43% of all letter grades, an increase of 28 percentage points since 1960 and 12 percentage points since 1988. D’s and F’s total typically less than 10% of all letter grades. Private colleges and universities give, on average, significantly more A’s and B’s combined than public institutions with equal student selectivity. Southern schools grade more harshly than those in other regions, and science and engineering-focused schools grade more stringently than those emphasizing the liberal arts. At schools with modest selectivity, grading is as generous as it was in the mid-1980s at highly selective schools. These prestigious schools have, in turn, continued to ramp up their grades. It is likely that at many selective and highly selective schools, undergraduate GPAs are now so saturated at the high end that they have little use as a motivator of students and as an evaluation tool for graduate and professional schools and employers.

The figure below plots the overall national trend:

Recent GPA Trends Nationwide Four-Year Colleges & Universities



Source: Rojstaczer, Stuart and Christopher Healy, “Where A Is Ordinary: The Evolution of American College and University Grading 1940-2009”

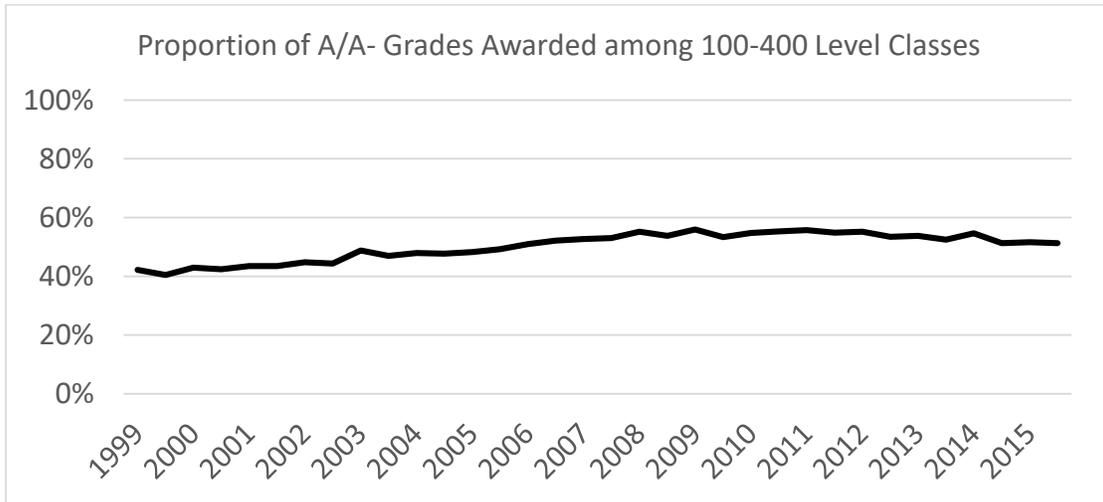
Inflation versus Inequality

Available data regarding changes in grades uniformly point to an upward trend in student grades. GPA data for sixteen colleges and universities indicate that GPAs increased by 0.5 from 1968 to 2001, with private schools experiencing grade increases at a rate about 25 to 30 percent higher than public schools, widening a pre-existing grade gap between private and public institutions. Most of the increase in college grades appears to be the result of factors other than grade inflation, e.g., changes in students' characteristics, which reflect overall trends in the American population (Hu 2005).

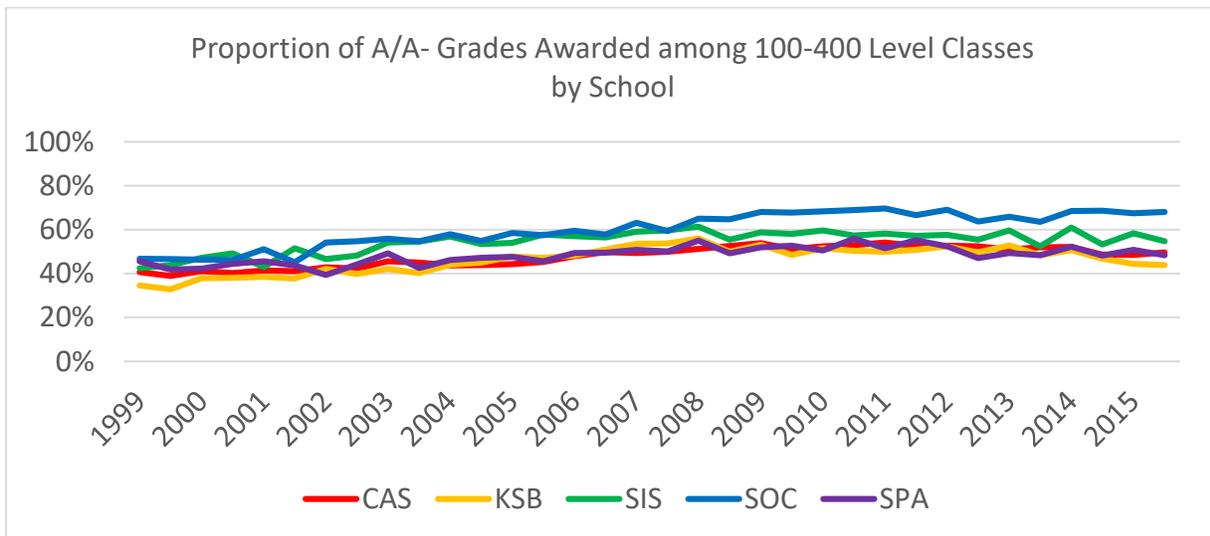
In fact, no systematic evidence supports the assertion that grade inflation is widespread. Grade inflation appears to be a moderate problem at best. Grading disparity, on the other hand, is a serious threat to the integrity of college grading. It not only affects students' choice of courses but also provides incentives for faculty to lower their grading standards. Grading disparity is an inappropriate incentive for students, for students often choose courses with lenient grading practices. Technical strategies can help eliminate some incentives for students to choose high-grading courses and for faculty members to give out high grades, but to ultimately correct college grading problems, it takes a change in the campus culture (Hu 2005).

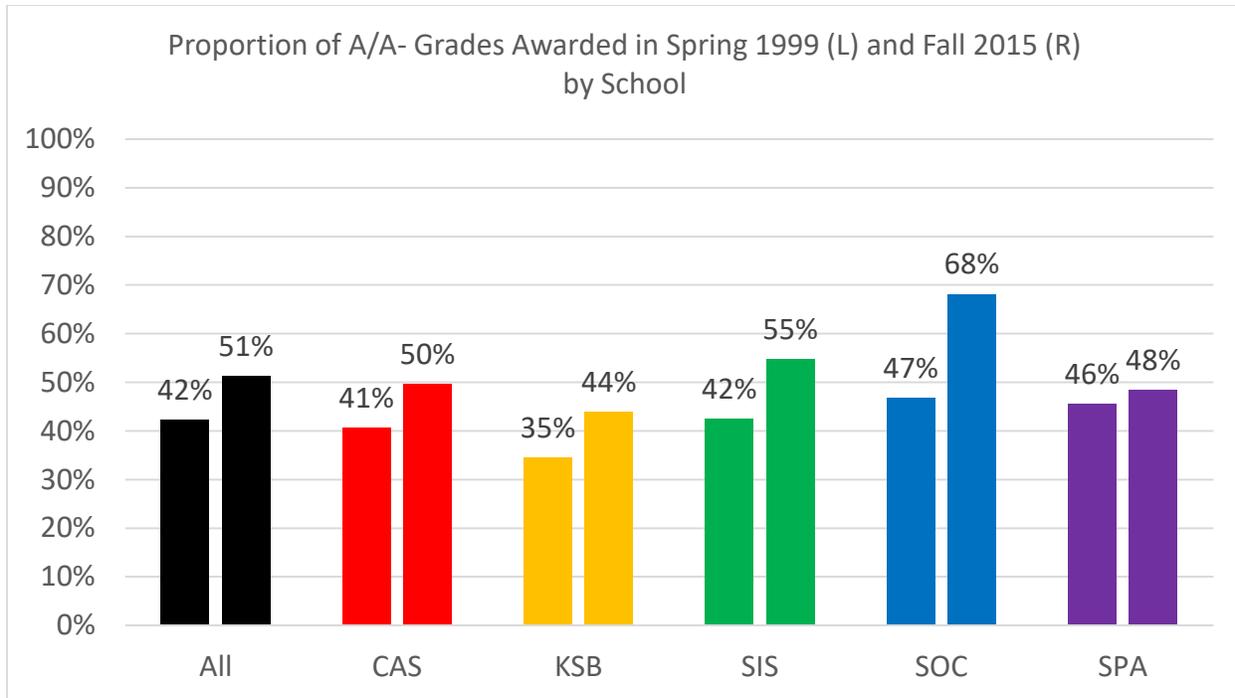
VI. Status of Grades at American University

The following grade distribution charts show the percentage of students who received an A or A- out of those who received a letter grade in 100-400 level classes. A similar analysis was done using mean grade but the patterns were similar and those charts have not been included. The first chart shows this overall. The percentage of A/A- grades given is 42% at the beginning of the series and 51% at the end. The highpoint was 2009:



The next chart shows the same data as the previous one broken out by school, and the second compares the percentage of A or A- at the beginning of the series with the end, for the whole university and by school. While there has been an increase across the board, it is important to note the increases differ considerably by school.





Source: All Data from Grade Distribution Report by David Kaib, Office of Institutional Research and Assessment. The source is final grades, where the student received a letter grade, for 100 through 400 level classes from spring 1999 to fall 2015, excluding summer courses.

The following chart shows that the average GPA of all grades awarded in 100-400 level courses in Fall 2013 was 3.30:

Average Undergraduate Grades Awarded, Fall 2013

Level		Faculty Status						All
		Adjunct	In Residence	Tenure Track	Tenured	Term	Visiting	
100-200	Mean	3.37	3.18	3.15	3.12	3.27	2.91	3.25
	N	5,650	974	2,218	3,643	9,380	33	21,898
300-400	Mean	3.44	3.44	3.27	3.34	3.45	-	3.40
	N	2,001	767	1,201	2,335	2,907	-	9,211
All*	Mean	3.38	3.30	3.19	3.21	3.32	2.91	3.30
	N	7,685	1,741	3,419	5,978	12,287	33	31,143

*Totals include 34 grades associated with classes at the 000 level.

VII. Grades and Student Evaluations of Teaching

When discussing grade inflation, a common argument is that faculty who are more vulnerable, such as tenure track, term, and adjunct, are more likely to give higher grade to receive better scores on SETs due to concerns regarding contracts and hiring processes. The following information compiled by David Kaib from the Office of Institutional Research and Assessment used SETs from 100 through 400 level courses from fall 2006 to fall 2015 course, excluding summer courses, addresses these concerns:

The key fields in the SET are ordinal, with most rating scales from 1 to 7 with 7 being the most positive option. Given this, Spearman's Rho is the appropriate statistic for analyzing the correlations among these items. The first correlation is for the student's expected grade and the two summary questions on instruction and course. Expected grade is more appropriate than actual grade given that the student's perception of their likely grade is what is hypothesized as driving assessments of faculty and course. Expected grade is on a 10 point scale, where F is 1 and A is 10. Given the large number of records, unsurprisingly all of the correlations reported here were statistically significant. Also, it should be noted that all of these fields are skewed to the right, i.e. students were most likely to report expecting an A, most likely to rate courses, instructors and the level of performance required at 7.

Expected grade * overall instructor:	0.20309
Expected grade * overall course:	0.23901

This indicates a weak relationship. Results were roughly similar when broken out by course level.

Given that expected grade was not strongly correlated with the summary variables, next whether students reported that the instructor required high levels of performance was correlated with these outcomes.

High performance * overall instructor:	0.49999
High performance * overall course:	0.47849

This indicates a fairly strong relationship. Once again, results by course level were similar.

Two further analyses were performed: first the correlation between overall course and overall instructor, which shows a strong relationship. The second looked at the correlation between expected grade and high performance, which indicates a weak relationship that is also negative.

High performance * Expected grade:	-0.05505
Overall course * overall instructor:	0.79126

In order to better understand these patterns, the following tables show the cross tabulations between several of these variables. In these tables, the cell with the highest row percentage is red. Table One shows expected grade and overall instructor. The largest cells are

for those rating the instructor 6 or 7, with 7 the highest for expected grades of B or higher, or F, and 6 for all other grades.

Table One

Expected Grade	Overall this instructor was...							Total
	One of the worst				One of the best			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
F	30 9.62%	21 6.73%	24 7.69%	38 12.18%	44 14.10%	66 21.15%	89 28.53%	312
D	74 10.76%	63 9.16%	72 10.47%	104 15.12%	111 16.13%	146 21.22%	118 17.15%	688
C-	141 8.02%	123 7.00%	156 8.87%	264 15.02%	354 20.14%	391 22.24%	329 18.71%	1758
C	447 5.39%	457 5.51%	686 8.27%	1153 13.89%	1750 21.09%	2002 24.12%	1804 21.74%	8299
C+	276 3.80%	334 4.60%	501 6.89%	877 12.07%	1469 20.21%	2059 28.33%	1751 24.10%	7267
B-	587 2.87%	733 3.59%	1231 6.03%	2265 11.09%	4304 21.07%	5980 29.28%	5323 26.06%	20423
B	1127 1.88%	1437 2.39%	2494 4.16%	5410 9.01%	11772 19.61%	18471 30.78%	19305 32.17%	60016
B+	880 1.18%	1207 1.62%	2202 2.96%	5192 6.98%	12614 16.96%	23462 31.55%	28810 38.74%	74367
A-	1063 0.88%	1653 1.37%	2799 2.32%	7056 5.84%	17714 14.67%	36850 30.52%	53624 44.41%	120759
A	1119 0.83%	1563 1.16%	2645 1.97%	6404 4.76%	16444 12.23%	35690 26.55%	70540 52.48%	134405

Table Two shows expected grade and high performance. Students were most likely to rate high performance a 7 for their courses regardless of what their expected grade was, although this was higher for those expecting a lower grade versus a higher grade.

Table Two

Expected Grade	The instructor required high levels of performance.							Total
	Almost Never					Almost Always		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
F	14	6	7	18	28	42	203	318
	4.40%	1.89%	2.20%	5.66%	8.81%	13.21%	63.84%	
D	15	11	15	47	71	149	380	688
	2.18%	1.60%	2.18%	6.83%	10.32%	21.66%	55.23%	
C-	27	27	40	96	200	429	964	1783
	1.51%	1.51%	2.24%	5.38%	11.22%	24.06%	54.07%	
C	89	88	167	484	967	2111	4517	8423
	1.06%	1.04%	1.98%	5.75%	11.48%	25.06%	53.63%	
C+	68	55	145	411	922	1949	3840	7390
	0.92%	0.74%	1.96%	5.56%	12.48%	26.37%	51.96%	
B-	139	183	368	1091	2567	5772	10692	20812
	0.67%	0.88%	1.77%	5.24%	12.33%	27.73%	51.37%	
B	324	453	1056	3106	7997	18079	30063	61078
	0.53%	0.74%	1.73%	5.09%	13.09%	29.60%	49.22%	
B+	352	527	1134	3519	9955	23812	36395	75694
	0.47%	0.70%	1.50%	4.65%	13.15%	31.46%	48.08%	
A-	596	1017	2099	6205	17851	39633	55471	122872
	0.49%	0.83%	1.71%	5.05%	14.53%	32.26%	45.15%	
A	1243	1737	3464	8668	21347	39102	61274	136835
	0.91%	1.27%	2.53%	6.33%	15.60%	28.58%	44.78%	
Total	2867	4104	8495	23645	61905	131078	203799	435893

Finally, Table Three shows high performance and overall instructor. Students rating their instructors highest on requiring high levels of performance also rated their instructor highest overall, and vice versa.

Table Three

The instructor required high levels of performance.	Overall this instructor was...							Total
	One of the worst				One of the best			
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1	1438	597	372	331	191	95	105	3129
Almost Never	45.96%	19.08%	11.89%	10.58%	6.10%	3.04%	3.36%	
2	790	993	905	823	482	245	147	4385
	18.02%	22.65%	20.64%	18.77%	10.99%	5.59%	3.35%	
3	697	1110	1788	2332	1683	888	405	8903
	7.83%	12.47%	20.08%	26.19%	18.90%	9.97%	4.55%	
4	828	1443	2692	6175	6865	4363	2081	24447
	3.39%	5.90%	11.01%	25.26%	28.08%	17.85%	8.51%	
5	586	1196	2634	7310	20036	21233	9844	62839
	0.93%	1.90%	4.19%	11.63%	31.88%	33.79%	15.67%	
6	571	1085	2353	6985	22810	57324	41012	132140
	0.43%	0.82%	1.78%	5.29%	17.26%	43.38%	31.04%	
7	1125	1396	2539	5948	16837	44686	132984	205515
Almost Always	0.55%	0.68%	1.24%	2.89%	8.19%	21.74%	64.71%	
Total	6035	7820	13283	29904	68904	128834	186578	441358

VIII. Summary Observations from Literature Regarding Faculty Perspectives

- One of the most interesting and perhaps unsettling explanations of grade inflation is student sense of entitlement, a right to high grades without earning them. Researchers concluded that academic entitlement is more likely due to a characteristic of the student rather than the classroom context (Ciani, Summers & Easter 2008).
- Faculty believe grade inflation exists, and contributing factors include concerns about job security; students' belief that they are entitled to A grades; faculty members' desire to obtain positive evaluations in return for top grades, and faculty members' unwillingness to defend their grades to dissatisfied students who do not get the As they expect and do not necessarily deserve. The high correlation between the percentage of A grades given and adjunct, untenured, or otherwise "insecure" faculty status may be a result of such faculty members' desire to appease students (Nikolakakos, Reeves & Shuch 2012).
- The student survey yielded a vastly different view: students do not believe that grade inflation exists; they believe they earn the high grades they receive, and they perceive professors' standards as rigorous and course content as challenging (Nikolakakos, Reeves & Shuch 2012).
- Instructor approval motivation is significantly related to grading behavior. Although there were significant differences between men and women, and tenured and non-tenured instructors with respect to ascription of responsibility, there appears to be no consequence on grading behavior (DeBoer, Anderson & Elfessi 2007).

- A perception of unfair grading is the 2nd most important reason for students to have a conflict with an instructor, with perceptions of faculty incompetence coming a little ahead (Harrison 2007).
- The arts and humanities, and to a lesser extent the social sciences, tend to have inflated grades at a higher rate than the sciences and other disciplines (Jewell & McPherson 2012).
- Incentives to inflate grades vary according to characteristics of academic departments, but the vast majority (over 90%) of grade inflation observed is estimated to be a result of either university-level factors or instructor-specific characteristics. Of the variation in grades that their regressions explain, less than 5% results from departmental differences; the main determinants of grade inflation are the time trend (explaining 52%) and differences specific to individual instructors (40%) (Jewell, McPherson & Tieslau 2013).
- Individual instructors find it rational to inflate grades for reasons specific to themselves, and this may in part reflect the now nearly universal use of SET scores as inputs into tenure, promotion and merit raise decisions. A university wishing to reduce grade inflation may need to base evaluations of teaching on a broader array of metrics (Jewell, McPherson & Tieslau 2013).
- Grade inflation has been shown to be related to faculty status with significant differences seen between mean grade point averages of students being taught by tenured and adjunct faculty and between those students taught by non-tenured and adjunct faculty. In this study, the average grades given by adjunct faculty were higher than those of either tenured or non-tenured faculty. Thus, the results indicate the increased use of adjunct faculty exacerbates grade inflation in higher education (Kezim, Pariseau & Quinn 2005).
- Using data on 4 years of courses at AU, regression results showed that actual grades have a significant, positive effect on student evaluations of teaching (SETs), controlling for expected grade and fixed effects for both faculty and courses, and for possible endogeneity. Implications are that the SET is a faulty measure of teaching quality and grades a faulty signal of future job performance. Students, faculty, and provost appear to be engaged in an individually rational but socially destructive game of grade inflation centered on the link between SETs and grades. When performance is hard to measure, pay-for-performance, embodied by the link between SETs and faculty pay, may have unintended, adverse consequences (Langbein 2008).
- A leading hypothesis from the literature contends the primary cause of grade inflation has been the increase in hiring of adjunct faculty in higher education, but does not report to what degree adjunct faculty perceived themselves to be influenced by factors thought to affect grade assignment leading to grade inflation. Data analyzed from 1,559 full-time and adjunct faculty of a Midwestern community college indicated full-time faculty felt they were significantly more influenced by administration pressures than adjunct faculty in their grade assignment, whereas adjunct faculty reported being most often influenced by student concerns such as (a) personal circumstances, (b) academic anxieties, and (c) success after the course. Also, in terms of the influence of SETs, both full-time and adjunct faculty

ranked student evaluations as one of their least influential (12th for adjuncts) choices out of a ranking scale of 1 (largest influence) to 16 in establishing grades (Schutz et al. 2015).

Note: By no means is this list exhaustive of the perceptions faculty have regarding grade equity, grade inflation, and assessment.

IX. Summary Observations from Literature Regarding Student Perceptions

- More students are expecting A/A- grades (most of this growth occurred throughout the 1990s) (Eiszler, 2002).
- Students want to be rewarded for effort (Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997).
- Grades influence student's choices about what fields to major in and careers to enter, what courses to take, and how hard to work (Butcher, McEwan, & Weerapana, 2014).
- Students report observing both meritocratic grading (based on achievement) and particularistic grading (based on individual characteristics or personal circumstances such as a particular student needing to pass a course in order to graduate) -- "particularistic" grading practices include curving grades, allowing them to retake exams, discarding the lowest grade, raising grades when there is improvement over the course of the semester (Gordon & Fay, 2010).
- Students' perception of whether or not there was fairness in grading was more closely related to perceptions of teaching practices intended to help them prepare than whether or not particularistic grading practices were used (Gordon & Fay, 2010).
- Students are frustrated by "artificial assessments" that require "good memory" and regurgitation of facts, which is unfair because it doesn't represent how much they actually learned and because it rewards students for "unimportant qualities" such as memory (Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997).
- Students also acknowledge that exams that require a higher quality of learning demanded more effort and time and some students are not as eager to take those classes (Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997).
- They also acknowledge that these higher quality learning assessments are a rewarding intellectual challenge and learning feels more valuable for developing knowledge and skills that would be useful later in life both inside and outside of the classroom (Sambell, McDowell, & Brown, 1997).
- Students felt that some assessments were unfair when they perceived that their peers had "more practice" than they did in a particular task (e.g., better preparation/instruction on writing skills) (Gordon & Fay, 2010).
- "Many students felt that openness and clarity were fundamental requirements of a fair and valid assessment system" and that "Clarity and openness of such assessment was perceived as an issue of control, affording them a measure of independence by equipping them with sufficient information to be able to pass judgments on their own work and take steps to improve it, rather than relying exclusively on staff to perform this function on their behalf" (Sambell, McDowell, & Brown 1997).

Note: By no means is this list exhaustive of the myriad concerns students have regarding grade equity, grade inflation, and assessment. The committee would like to acknowledge the work of

Rachelle Calixte, PhD student, Psychology, for analyzing and compiling the information in this section.

X. Case Studies

Universities have tried to address grade inflation via three general approaches:

1. **Grades in context**: Putting grades in context by providing information on grade distribution, in the hope that faculty, students and prospective employers will make more enlightened choices. With contextualized transcripts, students who maintain a higher grade in tougher classes are rewarded on their transcript, whereas those who obtain low grades in the easier classes are penalized.
2. **Grade rationing**: Rationing high grades, namely, by deliberately restricting how many high grades are awarded (e.g., by capping the percentage of “A” grades or mandating a specific grade distribution) in order to curb lenient professors.
3. **Grading policies by department/school**: Encouraging individual schools and departments to come up with their own guidelines for individual or multi-section classes, and, particularly for foundational or required courses, to discourage grading inequities and/or grade inflation.

1. Grades in context

A few institutions have changed the information on their transcripts in an effort to account for it. Proposals to index grades have been largely unsuccessful for a variety of reasons. A simple index, the Real GPA, is calculated as a ratio of the individual student’s instructor assigned GPA to the average GPA of the class and expressed numerically on the same scale as the inflated assigned grade. Recorded on transcripts next to the Nominal GPA, the Real GPA makes the relative degree of inflation in a transcript immediately visible and creates positive pressures on academic standards. The routine publication of such data, in forums ranging from promotion committees to department meetings to personnel offices in off-campus institutions will create long-term pressure on faculty just as SETs have, but it will be pressure to reverse the pattern of grade inflation that has accompanied the use of SET scores (Felton & Kopper 2005).

Cornell University

In the spring semester of 1998, Cornell University started publishing median course grades on the Internet. Their analysis found that the provision of course grade information online induced students to select leniently graded courses – or in other words, to opt out of courses they would have selected absent considerations of grades. They also found that the tendency to select leniently graded courses was weaker for high-ability students. Finally, their analysis demonstrated that a significant share of the acceleration in grade inflation since the policy was adopted could be attributed to this change in students’ course choice behavior (Bar, Kadiyali & Zussman 2009).

In a subsequent piece (Bar, Kadiyali & Zussman 2012), the authors explored the dynamics of the process that drove up Cornell’s average grades using an economic model based on game theory,

and they concluded that increased information does not always lead to optimal results, because the crucial question is to whom the grade information is given. While employers may use it to figure out which students are truly academically distinguished, providing it to students can backfire because many will use it to choose easier classes and thus attain a higher GPA. An important side effect is that instructors might respond to declining enrollment in their courses by making them easier.¹

These findings had repercussions at Cornell, and in May 2011 the Faculty Senate of Cornell University voted to cease the public publishing of median grades of Cornell courses. The Senate resolution explained that students had been using online information on course median grades to sign up for classes in which higher grades are awarded, contributing to the grade inflation problem at Cornell.² *Median grade reports for Cornell University courses are no longer available, but median grades have been posted on official transcripts for all undergraduates matriculating since Fall 2008 without adverse repercussions.*³

Columbia University

Columbia undergraduate transcripts show the percentage of students in each course who earned grades in the A range, calculated for all lecture classes with at least twelve students and in all colloquia and seminar classes with at least twenty-three students.⁴ Recently, a student developed a website that aggregates the information appearing in Columbia transcripts, thereby making it easier for students to identify the classes with more generous grading curves.⁵ *Despite the grade transparency, grade inflation apparently has not abated at Columbia.*⁶

Dartmouth College

The Dartmouth faculty voted in 1994 that undergraduate transcripts and student grade reports should indicate, along with the grade earned, the median grade given in the class as well as the class enrollment.⁷ Starting in 1998, Dartmouth transcripts also indicate the number of courses in which the student exceeded, equaled or came in lower than those medians. In addition, the university publishes the median course grades for all courses offered. However, this grading transparency has not stopped the upward drift of grades at Dartmouth, as documented by a faculty report issued in May 2015. *Writing that the cause of grade inflation is not the grading system but the graders themselves, the committee recommended that the faculty offer challenging courses and grade them according to the intended meaning of the grading scale.*⁸

¹ See <https://www.johnson.cornell.edu/About/Newsroom/Article-Detail/ArticleId/29496>

² See <http://www.news.cornell.edu/stories/2011/05/faculty-senate-vote-may-help-stop-grade-inflation>

³ The calculation of the median grade is made when all grades for the course have been submitted at the end of the semester, and is not recalculated to take into account grade changes, resolution of incompletes, etc., that are made at a later date. See <https://registrar.cornell.edu/Student/mediangrades.html>

⁴ See <https://www.college.columbia.edu/facultyadmin/grading>

⁵ See <http://gradesatcu.com/>

⁶ See <http://columbiaspectator.com/2011/01/28/students-profs-talk-grade-inflation>

⁷ See <http://www.dartmouth.edu/~reg/transcript/medians/>

⁸ See <http://www.dartblog.com/documents/Grade%20Inflation%20Report%2005.11.15.pdf>

University of North Carolina

At the University of North Carolina, where the problem of grade inflation had been discussed for over a decade, and in the wake of a 2009 report which concluded that there were three issues to be addressed (grade inflation, grade compression, and systematic grading inequality), transcripts now also provide context. *Next to a student's grade, the record includes the median grade of classmates, the percentile range and the number of students in the class section, and a new measure called the schedule point average (SPA), akin to a sports team's strength of schedule.*⁹

Texas Public Universities

In recent years, the Texas Legislature has considered bills that would require public institutions to issue “enhanced transcripts” that include the median grade awarded in the class as well as the student’s earned grade. This requirement would be similar to enhanced transcripts implemented at other academic institutions.¹⁰

2. Grade rationing

Wellesley College

In Fall 2004, Wellesley College implemented a policy whereby average grades in courses at the introductory (100) level and intermediate (200) level with at least 10 students should not exceed a 3.33, or a B+. The policy had an immediate effect, bringing average grades down in the previously high-grading departments. *Faculty complied by reducing compression at the top of the grade distribution, but there is little evidence that they increased the use of very low grades.* For African-American students and students with low initial test scores, the gap in GPAs versus their classmates increased in the departments where grades were reduced. Students lowered their evaluations of their professors’ performance in response to the change in the grading policy. *Butcher et al. 2014.*

Princeton University

The imposition of university-wide grade ceilings or targets is quite rare. From fall term 2004-05 through spring term 2013-14, Princeton University faculty had a common grading expectation for every department and program: A-range grades (A+, A, A-) were to account for less than 35% of the grades given in undergraduate courses and less than 55% of the grades given in junior and senior independent work. Each department and program determined how best to meet these expectations. In Fall 2014, however, the faculty removed this numeric target for the percent of A-range grades, following an adverse report from an ad hoc committee of 9 faculty members. *The committee found that numerical targets “are too often misinterpreted as quotas” and “add a large element of stress to students’ lives, making them feel as though they are competing for a limited*

⁹ See <http://www.aacrao.org/conferences/conferences-detail-view/providing-context-for-the-contextualized-transcript--a-case-study>

¹⁰ See http://engineering.utsa.edu/~aseegsw2015/papers/ASEE-GSW_2015_submission_123.pdf

resource of A grades,” recommending replacing them with a set of grading standards developed and articulated by each department.¹¹

3. **Grading policies by school/department level:** In a number of universities, individual schools and departments are encouraged to discuss grading standards and to come up with their own guidelines for individual or multi-section classes, and particularly for foundational or required courses, in order to discourage grading inequities and/or grade inflation.

Yale University

Yale University departments and programs are expected to have at least one meeting each year to discuss grading practices among themselves in whatever manner they deem appropriate.¹²

University of California Berkeley

At UC Berkeley, guidelines at the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Sciences state that a typical GPA for courses in the lower division is 2.7 and for the upper division it is 2.9, and that a class whose GPA falls outside the 2.5-2.9 should be considered atypical.¹³

Brown University

To curb grade inflation at Brown University, the Economics Department formally recommends that 30 percent of students in “Principles of Economics” be awarded As, 40 percent Bs, and 30 percent Cs.¹⁴

Columbia University

At Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), a graduate school, grades submitted for core courses must have an average GPA between 3.2 and 3.4, with the goal being 3.3 (B+).¹⁵

XI. Current Initiatives at AU to address Grade Inflation

A. College of Arts and Sciences Dean’s Advisory Committee

CAS and DAC convened a subcommittee AY 2014/2015 to examine grade inflation issues in the college. In doing so, this subcommittee undertook the following:

¹¹ Princeton University, “Report from the Ad Hoc Committee to Review Policies Regarding Assessment and Grading,” August 5, 2014, available at

http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S40/73/33I92/PU_Grading_Policy_Report_2014_Aug.pdf

¹² See <http://yalecollege.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Grading%20in%20Yale%20College.pdf>

¹³ See <http://www.eecs.berkeley.edu/Policies/ugrad.grading.shtml>

¹⁴ See <http://www.browndailyherald.com/2013/02/07/econ-dept-looks-to-curb-grade-inflation/>

¹⁵ See <https://sipa.columbia.edu/system/files/TeachingGuide.pdf>

- Examined AU data and national data to confirm grade inflation and assess some of the reasons for grade inflation
- Segmented grade inflation from grade compression and grade equity
- Looked at other schools that instituted actions to combat grade inflation
- Convened town hall meetings with student representatives to assess some of their issues and concerns
- Convened a coffee session with CAS faculty to understand their issues and concerns

Results: The goal was to launch college-wide conversations about grading issues, and solicit feedback and suggestions from faculty that will improve our grading practices in the College of Arts and Sciences.

1. Separated out the grading issues to insure that any action plan addresses these issues: Grade Equity, Grade Compression, and Grade Inflation.
2. Considered faculty incentives:
 - a. **Job security:** Approximately 40 percent of faculty are term faculty and 55 percent are on single year contracts. SETs are the primary evaluation tool for teaching and term faculty are primarily evaluated on teaching. In addition, adjuncts account for another 20% of the faculty. Higher grades were noted among single year term faculty and adjuncts. There is a sense that higher grades lead to better SET scores. Internal statistics of the percentages of A's given by faculty by rank (adjunct, term, tenure track, and tenure) may support this view (see attached document). A complicating issues is grade dispersion also varies significantly depending on the type of courses taught, department, etc.
 - b. **Department/college incentives:** Faculty may also feel pressure to minimize low grades to obtain and retain majors, as well as keep graduation rates high. Some instances of grade inflation are actually grade compression. That is, faculty members feel pressured to offer grades of C or higher for undergraduates and B or higher for graduate students. Because C- in undergraduate classes is perceived as a “failing grade.” Grades are even more compressed in graduate classes, when grades are often compressed into a range of B+ or higher.
 - c. **Student pressure:** Other stakeholders, such as parents, students, funding authorities, graduate programs, and even potential employers may also provide upward grade bias pressure on faculty.

B. College Writing Program, Department of Literature

- Use of a standardized rubric for all sections.

- All syllabi include common Student Learning Outcomes defined by the College Writing Program and Literature Department.
- While a rubric may well help resist grade inflation, the far more important function is to insure grade consistency. Students will, inevitably, become cynical and disengaged if they begin to realize that their grade is dependent on variables -- the teacher; the section; the academic unit as a whole -- which have nothing to do with a fair and transparent assessment of their work.
- To that end, we work to make the rubric *present*. That is to say, it cannot be a document attached to a syllabus, never to be mentioned again. It has to be connected to both assignments and instruction. Students should have a sense of the basis of their grade, and the rubric provides that foundation.
- Many professors have grade norming sessions *in class with students* to open the discussion of how essays are graded, what skills are being assessed, and how the rubric is used to evaluate work.
- Another way to insure a rubric's usefulness is through grade-norming sessions with faculty. Those sessions -- and the rubric which anchors them -- are perhaps the single best way we introduce and describe the culture of assessment of student work to new colleagues.
- We encourage teachers to become more attentive to their own quixotic priorities. For example, one professor may prefer that an essay does X, but she is part of a program. If the program doesn't share her preference, she has to figure out how to hew to the program's guidelines. For new teachers and adjuncts, we have mentors who work with them to ensure their assignments and assessments match the Program's goals. For term faculty, the Rank and Promotion Committee reviews and evaluates teaching portfolios on a regular basis (dependent on contract length); a significant component of that process includes a review of assignment design and comments on student work.
- As far as the rubric is concerned, the Program recognizes the document cannot be written in stone. We continually adapt and revise it, owing both to changes in the field of composition and rhetoric and in response to feedback from teachers employing the rubric.
- On written assignments, most professors include a "Grading Criteria" section to highlight what skills are being evaluated for each essay.

C. Kogod School of Business

The following is a summary of strategies undertaken by Kogod School of Business (KSB) to enhance the assessment of teaching as well as to address grade inflation. Currently, as part of the annual merit review process, each chair conducts a qualitative review of teaching, i.e., evaluating

teaching beyond the SET scores. The qualitative review consists of examining the following for each faculty member:

- Grade distribution for each course taught and its relation to the department and KSB average
- Review of the syllabus to ensure it is informative
- Review of exams and assignments to assess whether the mix of assignments and exam questions are appropriate given the course objectives and expectations
- Number of new preparations
- Type or level of the course: core vs. elective, undergraduate vs. graduate, online vs. face-to-face etc.
- Several departments have developed formal guidelines with regard to distribution of grades.

The Accounting Department was the first to adopt guidelines for grade distribution in Spring 2015. These guidelines went into effect in Fall 2015. In addition, to combat grade inflation in core courses, the Accounting Department has implemented the following policies:

- ACCT 240 Principles of Financial Accounting and ACCT 241 Principles of Management Accounting follow a common syllabus for all sections
- All students in the above two courses take a common final exam at the same time
- A common grading rubric is used
- Instructors are expected to follow the guidelines for ACCT 240 and ACCT 241 grade distributions

These policies are intended to promote uniformity across sections in terms of topic coverage, rigor, and grading.

Following Accounting, the Management Department adopted guidelines for their courses in Fall 2015 and those are currently effective. Other departments in KSB are also working on developing guidelines for their respective faculty.

XII. Recommended Actions to the Senate

In order to address grade inequity and grade inflation, it is this committee's opinion that there are a number of further actions that AU may consider regarding the issues of Grade Inflation and Grade Equity.

- The first, and most important action, is the appointment of a Senate Committee to continue this in-depth examination of grade inflation at American University and how it can be addressed, with the intent on advising the creation of policy. We envision this body will be a smaller group than the current Ad-Hoc Committee.
- We recommend an administrative-type position be created. This could be comprised of a faculty member (with a course release). We envision the primary role would be to

communicate policies and expectations to the various Schools and Departments. Without a central person to facilitate and inform faculty about these changes, there is the concern that any changes implemented will not have the intended effect to the overall grading culture. We anticipate the newly appointed Senate Committee would take on the task of determining the specific role of this new position.

- The data we compiled demonstrates that some Schools award higher grades than others. It would be beneficial to complete a more comprehensive analysis of course grades within Schools or Departments. Since there is not a one-size-fits all solution, it would make sense to see what strategies may be implemented within the different types of courses. For example, a common syllabus may work for one type of study and not for another.
- Schools and Programs may consider what courses to offer as Pass/Fail, rather than a letter grade. This may be very effective in skills courses or general education courses, and will adjust the atmosphere of across the board grading.
- Instituting an orientation to grades and expectations for incoming first-year students, incorporated into the new General Education curriculum. This may help to adjust the attitudes and expectations that students have in regards to the grades they receive.
- Communicating grading expectations to faculty: grading policies should be laid out at the program level and discussed thoroughly with adjuncts and term faculty, for transparency and consistency. Department and Program Chairs would be responsible for providing this material.
- Program heads should consider supplying letters of support that address grading policies and decisions to be included in merit and renewal packets for term faculty. This would be an attempt to give security to instructors who feel compelled to protect their evaluation scores through light grading.
- Language explaining what grades imply and “Course Objectives” at the School or Program level to be included on all syllabi, where appropriate. This will allow context for the different approaches to instruction and grading. The language should also live on programs’ websites for students, employers, and other outsiders to access.
- Include averages on transcripts where appropriate. We are mindful of the impact these additions have and encourage the further exploration of how other schools have handled this information.
- Consider seeking new and “out of the box” solutions to change the landscape of how we assign grades and how we evaluate them. These may include such ideas as:
 - ✓ Portfolio reviews for creative fields

- ✓ Accumulated point system (gaming model) of grading. I.E. it is clear to students that they start at 0 and build their grade, rather than start at A and try to maintain there.
- ✓ Considering course models that wouldn't use grades, but rather a system of evaluation and feedback based on learning goals without points or "bottom lines."
- ✓ Encourage instructors to stress concepts and critical application of knowledge within courses, rather than "teaching to the test."

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