

University Committee on Academic Policy
Sub-Committee Report on Grade Inflation

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What is grade inflation and why should we be concerned if our students are earning good grades? Inflation in the economic definition conveys a lessening of value. Inflation lessens the buying power of the dollar. Goods cost more. Grade inflation parallels economic inflation in that what once may have been considered a mean or average grade (c) no longer is representative of the average. Real grade inflation, like economic inflation, may be a cause for concern. Its causes and impacts are far reaching in an academic community.

Professor Harvey Mansfield, of Harvard University, said, "Grade inflation got started...in the late '60's and early '70's.... The grades that faculty members now give...deserve to be a scandal." This declaration echoed one from the Committee on Raising the Standard, Harvard University, that stated that grades A and B 'are sometimes given too readily' and that an A could be given for work of 'no very high merit, and, again, a B 'for work not far above mediocrity.' While sharing a common theme, it should be noted that Professor Mansfield comments were made in 2001 while the Committee on Raising the Standard published its work in 1894. The issue of grade inflation, real or perceived, has been, and continues to be, headlined in newspapers throughout the country, and is (basically) 'summarized' in an article in USA Today (02/04/2004) that states that at 'Harvard University, a recent study found that nearly half of all grades awarded were A or A-minus'. This same article also states that a tenured professor at Temple University was fired for refusing to make his courses easier and/or giving his students higher grades.

All of this rhetoric and ongoing debate underscores the issue that if the requirements for getting a college degree are lowered, then the meaning of the degree may change and ultimately have less value (Steve Falkenberg, Eastern Kentucky University). Dr. Falkenberg's article further states that there are many possible causes for the change in grade distribution, including the "dumbing down" of courses, the use of more effective teaching methods, changes in measurement techniques, course material duplication (the same material in more than one course), and, appropriately, a shift in the nature of higher education and its role in society. Finely, no less a source than The Chronicle of Higher Education, in a Chronicle Review article dated November 8, 2002 entitled 'The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation' states that even if grades are higher 'now' as compared to 'then', that this alone does not 'constitute proof that they are inflated' and that the burden to prove grade inflation rests with critics to actually 'demonstrate that those higher grades are undeserved.'

Grade inflation analyses on Michigan State University grades

Preliminary analyses were conducted in the Spring of 2003 to determine if any trends were evident. Regression analysis showed that there was a step-wise increase in mean G.P.A. each year. Grade point average would increase, statistically, from Spring to Fall semester each year (for the past five years), but remain constant from the Fall to Spring Semester. Given the evidence of increase in mean grade point average (grade inflation) further analyses were warranted.

The average grades were analyzed for 20 randomly selected first and second year courses. The grades were available for the fall semester 1994 through the spring semester 2003. These series of grades were analyzed under the general hypothesis that there may be grade inflation such that, over the years, average grades increase.

Results indicate that this is not the case. Specifically, the overall, multivariate null hypothesis of no increase in grades can be retained ($p = 0.963$). None of the linear and non-linear trends of the orthogonal decomposition of the series was significant. In addition, there was no semester effect ($p = 0.528$), and there was no year by semester interaction ($p = 0.740$). Furthermore, none of the time-adjacent comparisons of yearly grades, and none of the cross-time yearly comparisons of grades indicated significant changes. We conclude that, there may be no grade inflation, at this point in time.

It should be noted that these are results at the aggregate level. Individual courses showed large cross-time variations. Other courses showed large differences between the fall and the spring term average grades.

A second set of analyses was done with the ACT scores. There was not enough variation in the available data file for complete repeated measures analysis of variance. Therefore, significance tests cannot be reported. However, there is strong indication that the ACT scores increased of the observed period of time. In numbers, from 1994 to 2002, the average ACT scores increased from 23.1 to 24.1. Without the variance one can only speculate about the apparent relationship.

Additional contextual information

There is a growing concern of grade inflation in the undergraduate programs at Michigan State University. The higher GPA may be due to true grade inflation, that is, a higher grade earned which is not reflective of higher difficulty of work, or it may be due to higher academic standards imposed on students for "Satisfactory progress towards the degree" or a combination of both factors.

In many Colleges at Michigan State, the admission into upper school is highly competitive. There may be a defined minimum GPA for admission or there may be a limited enrollment in upper school and admission is based on GPA. Admission requirements for transfer students into upper school may be even more stringent. For example, admission for a current MSU student into the College of Business is a 2.4, for a transfer student, a GPA of a 3.4.

Though the GPA of the transferred courses is not used in the final GPA calculation, the University has selected highly competitive, academically successful students. Many undergraduate students compete for externships and internships to fulfill their degree requirements. Often, the students with the highest GPAs earn the “best” off campus experiences. In addition, the credits earned at the junior/senior standing in the College of Nursing, the College of Veterinary Medicine, and Teacher Certification are in direct contact with patients (animal and human) and students. These undergraduate students strive to provide the best patient care and educational experience. In doing so, they will easily meet the expectations associated with a higher earned grade. Further, several of the undergraduate degrees are “feeders” into the four medical schools on campus. The College of Veterinary Medicine, Human Medicine, Osteopathic Medicine and graduate degrees in the College of Nursing are highly competitive and selection may be heavily weighted on GPA. For example, the admission average GPA of CVM Class of 2007 was a 3.5. All of the above factors may give the students the perception that “Satisfactory progress towards the degree” is greater than the stated 2.0 GPA and each may play a significant role in the increasing GPA of the undergraduate students at Michigan State University.

The increasing GPA of the undergraduate students at Michigan State University may also be due to real inflation. The factors that may account for the grade inflation are embedded in individual courses and they may include testing modality (multiple choice versus essay), varying grading scales and adjustment of final grades through “curving”. Grading scales may vary by setting a 4.0 at a 90%, 92% or 95%. The 90% will result in grade inflation because the standard has been lowered. The 95% will also result in grade inflation. If the reason to set a 4.0 at 95% is to limit the number of students earning a 4.0 in the class, the course content must not be challenging to the students and it would be expected that the final distribution of grades in the class would shift towards the higher GPA. Adjustment of final grades through “curving” may also result in grade inflation and is dependent upon the determined mean/median. The final distribution of grades will be skewed higher if the mean/median of the bell-shaped curve is set at a 3.0 instead of a 2.5. These factors and many others at the individual course level will have a significant impact on the increasing GPA of the undergraduate students. The responsibility for uniformity of these factors is at the Department and College level.

While some may think there is cause for grade inflation concern, at least a part of the argument stems from an expectation that grade distribution should be normal. Could this distribution be the norm, or could this grade distribution indicate ineffective teaching? Is it the goal of the teaching professional to facilitate *all* students to learn? Would it be realistic to expect bright students to earn a 3.0 or higher? Could the better question be how specific grades are defined? Is a 2.0 or C average when our students are not average? Are they generally above average and should that be the norm of expectations? If we don’t allow students to graduate unless they earn at least a 2.0 GPA, then 2.0 can not mathematically be average.

What questions should colleges and/or units be asking themselves about grade inflation, grading procedures, grading guidelines, etc. in order to curb grade inflation at MSU?

Questions to ask individual faculty:

- ☞☞ Do you provide the opportunity to earn extra credit through participation in in-class activities, out-of-class activities, etc?
- ☞☞ Is "extra credit" awarded for activity or involvement vs. demonstrated performance of learning outcomes?
- ☞☞ Is the basis for grading balanced in such a way that students can earn a passing grade through participation or extra credit activities, even if they fail major assignments or examinations?
- ☞☞ How would you define or describe the "meaning" of grades on the MSU standard scale? What is an "average" grade? What does a 4.0, 3.0, 2.0, 1.0 MEAN?
- ☞☞ How do you believe student performance in your classes compare with student performance in other departments across campus? Are your students above average? average? below average?
- ☞☞ What do you believe about your own standards for grading: are you easier than your peers, harder than your peers, or just about the same?
- ☞☞ Do you think there is a relationship between grading standards and student ratings of instruction, as on SIRS?
- ☞☞ Do you feel that every student in your courses has the potentially to earn a 4.0?
- ☞☞ What is your perception regarding grade inflation at MSU?

Questions to ask students:

- ☞☞ Do many of your courses provide options for earning extra credit? Has that "saved" your grade in any classes?
- ☞☞ How would you define or describe the "meaning" of grades on the MSU standard scale? What is an "average" grade? What does a 4.0, 3.0, 2.0, 1.0 MEAN? Are there professors who grade differently for the same amount of work?
- ☞☞ Do you think there is a relationship between grading standards and student ratings of instruction, as on SIRS?
- ☞☞ What is your perception regarding grade inflation at MSU?

Questions to address department-wide or college-wide:

- ☞☞ What are our faculty/student perceptions regarding grade inflation? What data/information do we have to support or refute perceptions?
- ☞☞ What would aggregate grading information from the Registrar's Office look like for my college/department?
- ☞☞ Is there an upward trend in the GPAs of graduating seniors in my college/department? In which units does the increase seem more dramatic?
- ☞☞ Is there any discrepancy in grading standards across sections of multi-section courses?
- ☞☞ What correlation should exist between grades before the final exam and grades on the final exam? Is this issue more pertinent to courses with common finals?
- ☞☞ What information regarding trends in grade distributions, grading procedures and guidelines can we obtain from Course Reviews (generally done by the college curriculum committee)?

- ☞☞What do we want to do with any information, if found, regarding grade inflation?
- ☞☞What do we want to do about prevention of grade inflation (if deemed grade inflation does not exist in their college)?
- ☞☞Is it a regular practice among faculty within your department/college to provide students the opportunity to earn extra credit through participation in in-class activities, out-of-class activities, etc? Is "extra credit" awarded for activity or involvement vs. demonstrated performance of learning outcomes?
- ☞☞Is the basis for grading balanced in such a way that students can earn a passing grade through participation or extra credit activities, even if they fail major assignments or examinations?
- ☞☞Do faculty in your department/college share a common definition of the "meaning" of grades on the MSU standard scale? What is an "average" grade? What does a 4.0, 3.0, 2.0, 1.0 MEAN?
- ☞☞How do you believe student performance in your classes compare with student performance in other departments/colleges across campus? Are your students above average? average? below average?
- ☞☞Is there a continuum of standards for grading among the faculty in your department/college: do some grade easier than their peers, harder than their peers, or just about the same?
- ☞☞Do you think there is a relationship between grading standards and student ratings of instruction, as on SIRS?
- ☞☞Are you evaluating the grade distribution in each class in your college or throughout a department? What does the distribution resemble (bimodal or bell curve)? Is that an appropriate distribution of grades?
- ☞☞Do you have classes in which students want to receive < 2.0 so they can retake the course? Is this more prevalent in courses required for admission to a major?
- ☞☞What is the grading scale for each course? How often are grading scales and distributions reviewed?
- ☞☞How does grade distribution relate to the percent of students on the Dean's list each semester?
- ☞☞Are teachers taking a philosophy of "everyone can potentially get a 4.0 in my class"?
- ☞☞Are there correlations between class sizes and class GPA?
- ☞☞How is teaching effectiveness measured in the tenure and promotion process? Is it seriously measured at all?
- ☞☞Do departments/colleges have uniform standards for rounding grades? (i.e. does 3.8 or 3.85 get rounded up to a 4.0 department-wide?)
- ☞☞How much of a role do student evaluations play in the teaching/promotion process? (some articles I've read think this might be a factor)
- ☞☞Are there any significant differences in the grades of similarly sized classes taught by regular faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate student teachers?
- ☞☞What are our faculty/student perceptions regarding grade inflation? What data/information do we have to support or refute perceptions?

The bigger picture:

- ☞☞What would the information from the Registrar's Office look like if it were disaggregated? What would it look like if separated by college?
- ☞☞Is the upward trend in the GPAs of graduating seniors uniform across colleges? In which units does the increase seem more dramatic?

- ☞☞What are our faculty/student perceptions regarding grade inflation? What data/information do we have to support or refute perceptions?
- ☞☞Are the number of classes being dropped increasing? (Might students who are doing poorly be utilizing the time limits for dropping more, thus increasing a class' GPA?)
- ☞☞Are there correlations between class sizes and class GPA?
- ☞☞Are there any significant differences in the grades of similarly sized classes taught by regular faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate student teachers?
- ☞☞In your questions to colleges/departments, they need to be asked whether or not they regularly use the grading practices report sent to them?
- ☞☞Do they use the college term end reports to follow grade patterns? If so, how are they used? If not, why not?

Sub-committee recommendations:

The problem of grade inflation, such as it exists on campus, most likely is rooted in grading systems and expectations of the distribution of grades. That appears to be the most logical point to begin. Associate Deans and/or Unit Leaders may begin by assembling syllabi and scrutinizing grading scales.

- ☞☞How does grade distribution appear by course and department?
- ☞☞How does grade distribution appear by course level?
- ☞☞What is the expectation of grade distribution?
- ☞☞Should grade distributions be normal, and if so, are distributions routinely normalized?