

What Does an “A” Tell Us About Students Today?

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When employers and professional or graduate schools look at the grades of college students today, they find students with higher grade point averages (GPA) and higher standardized college admission test scores than ever before. Is today's student smarter or more dedicated to studying harder to earn higher grades? Or, is this a sign of relaxed standards in colleges and universities and on standardized tests for college admission? What does this mean to engineering educators in attracting students and producing competitive graduates? What does an “A” really mean in today's educational system?

Over the last few decades, almost every indicator of student performance has been lower, except grades.³ During the period from 1960 to 1994, SAT scores of high school seniors were consistently low. And, during this period there was a decline of 71% in the Education Productivity Index.⁴ Very few students made a perfect score on either the math or verbal sections of the SAT. In 1995, the test criteria were revised to make the test less rigorous.⁴ Thus, SAT scores have gone up since 1995 with numerous students making perfect scores on the test. This trend of increasing SAT scores is in contrast to the performance of US students on international tests. In 1995, students from five different grade levels from more than 40 countries took part in the Third International Math and Science Study (TIMSS). Although students from the US in lower grades ranked among the highest in the world, students in the 12th grade were well below average in math, advanced math, physics, and math and science literacy.^{10, 16} One reason for the poor performance of the US students may be that only 10 percent of high school graduates have taken calculus and 25 percent have taken physics.¹⁶

These same students are going to college and are getting higher grades than ever before at the majority of colleges and universities. Yet, according to a Carnegie Foundation report in 1990, approximately 80 percent of college students study less than 17 hours a week, or approximately one hour for each credit hour.¹¹ Receiving higher grades has been a growing trend over the last thirty years. Numerous studies show that grade inflation exists in colleges, from the most selective universities to every type of institution.^{1, 3, 5, 8}

What is grade inflation?

Over the last 30 years the distribution of grades has changed. The average GPA of college students in the US has gone up,^{1, 5} and students have come to expect higher grades. Thirty years ago, a C was considered an average grade, and A's and B's were given to those students who excelled or were above average in ability or performance. In the 1950's and 60's, professors "curved" grades and often forced grades into a bell curve so that only a few students received A's and B's and there were always some students who failed the class. However, there were many problems with curving grades especially in upper classes when all students had the ability to pass. The result was that curving actually resulted in adjusting grades upward.

Does grade inflation really exist?

At some of the more prestigious institutions, over 40 percent of the grades are A's. At still others, professors rarely give below a "C", and the policy at some institutions is to require that the professor write a justification and explain why a student made below a C in the course. According to Levine,⁸ reported GPAs of undergraduate students in 1969, 1976, and 1993 show that the trend for higher grades does exist. In 1969, only 7 percent of students received grades of A- or higher; in 1993, 26 percent reported this grade. The percent of students who received C or less changed from 25 in 1969 to only 9 in 1993. Although grade inflation has been reported at prestigious schools (at Harvard 46 percent of undergraduate grades given in 1996-97 were A's compared to 22 percent in 1966; at Stanford only 6 percent of all grades are C's; at Princeton, A's represent 40 percent of all grades),^{7,14,15} it is found at every type of institution – technology schools, two-year schools, small college, etc. Grade inflation has been reported more in the arts and humanities than in engineering and the hard sciences where many departments have held out against inflating grades. At some institutions, students in the arts and humanities receive almost double the percent of A's than those in math, engineering, or physical sciences (40 percent A's compared to fewer than 20 percent A's).¹⁵ Students withdraw from courses to protect their GPA's and avoid courses taught by professors who have the reputation of being a low grader.²

What do grades really mean?

Grades no longer help distinguish among the top students since many are lumped into the "A" category. Grades should reflect the ability of the student, the standing of the student in the class, the student's mastery of the material, and the ability of the instructor to teach the material. Grades should reflect differences between students and individual student efforts. At Harvard, 82 percent of undergraduate students receive honor grades.¹⁵ Is this really a distinction of students, or is this an attempt to assure that a higher percent of the graduates is accepted into graduate or professional programs? One weakness of grade inflation is that above average students are lumped together and there is less distinction among those students than among the ones that do make Cs and below. Employers are generally more interested in making distinctions among those with higher GPA's. With grade inflation, there is less opportunity to distinguish between the really top student and those just below.

Why does grade inflation exist?

Several reasons are credited for grade inflation.

1. A major factor that has been responsible for grade inflation is the student evaluation of the faculty member.^{6,12,13} Easy graders seem to be more popular with the students and usually receive a higher student evaluation. It is well documented that non-tenured faculty have a higher percent of As and Bs than tenured faculty. A study of 417 college courses by instructors of various ranks at a state university showed that the GPA was higher in the courses taught by instructors of lower status and less secure positions than in courses taught by those with higher positions and tenure.⁹
2. Changes in the requirements for a degree may be responsible for some grade inflation. Rather than the rigorous core of foreign languages, mathematics and science required in the past for some programs, more electives are now allowed.
3. Another reason for grade inflation is the institution's attempt to assure that a high percent of the graduates be competitive for acceptance into graduate programs or professional schools.
4. Also, with competition for students and the need for retention, grades are often inflated to retain more students. The minimum GPA necessary for academic retention has not changed over the years; it remains a C. Without grade inflation, at least 15 percent graduating from college today would not have met the standards to remain in school in the 1960s.

How does grade inflation affect the student?

Grade inflation usually results in lower academic standards and can give the student the false impression that low quality work is acceptable. Inflated grades can result in lower quality work from the student. This can affect the performance of the student at the workplace. Ultimately with grade inflation, a college degree will be viewed as a high school education was many years ago. Although students are told that graduate or professional schools consider the difficulty of the college major when looking at the GPA, graduate and professional schools report the average GPA and specialized test scores of their students. The student with the higher overall GPA and specialized test scores stands a better chance of admission at most schools. Some schools have a cut-off for GPA when inviting students for admission interviews. However, because grade inflation is recognized, admission committees at some professional and graduate schools are using scores on specialized admission tests (MCAT for medical school, LSAT for law school, GRE for graduate school) rather than GPA's as major criteria for admission.

What can we do about grade inflation?

Grade inflation contributes to poor academic standards and a reduction in the strength of the curriculum in programs. Grade inflation is a problem that will not change rapidly. Several suggestions for correcting this problem have been considered.

1. Universities should support responsible standards and grading policies that can make distinctions in student performance. Many universities or programs within the university have very lenient course withdrawal policies and pass/fail options and allow students to drop a course with no penalty just before the end of the term. Others allow a student to repeat a course and remove the first attempt grade. Still others allow students to remove an entire term's grades with no record. These lax policies make it easier for the student to drop courses that will adversely effect the GPA. Such policies should be reconsidered.

2. A different system for evaluating faculty can be implemented that will allow the instructor to maintain high standards for the course and grading, yet not jeopardize his/her chances of obtaining tenure and promotion.
3. A recent approach to curb the effects of grade inflation is to give the student's grade and include the average grade for all students enrolled in the class on the transcript. Therefore, prospective employers and graduate admissions committees will have a better idea of what the grade really means.
4. A grading system that uses more specific points, i.e. tenths of a point rather than whole points, will help distinguish between students. Using 0 – 4 point scale to represent F – A can be discouraging to those students who miss the next point by 1/100 of an average score, i.e., 3 point for 89 score versus 4 points for a 90 score, and does not give as much information about differences among students. The same 3 points are given to the student who has a final average grade of 80. There is definitely more difference between the 80 and 89 students than the 89 versus 90 students.
5. Some universities that have not inflated grades have added the student's percentile ranking in the class to the transcript in an attempt to offset the disadvantage of a lower GPA. This can show how the student compared to others in his/her class.

Grade inflation is a real problem for students, educators, and employers. Since grade inflation has progressed more rapidly in non-science based curriculums, many students avoid the sciences and choose grade-inflated majors to graduate with higher GPA's. This has major implications for engineering programs in attracting and maintaining students. However, we do not want to lower our standards and quality of education as we prepare the engineering student today for the engineer tomorrow. We must recognize this and work with administration to have a better means of reporting the quality of student's work and keep the student competitive with students in other curriculums.

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