

GRADE INFLATION AND INEQUALITY

Grade inflation is considered to occur when instructors give higher grades to student work when compared to comparable work in previous years (so no increase in achievement to warrant a higher grade) (Hunt, 2008). Kohn (2008) argues that it is impossible to prove such a claim since there is not enough data to support it. Rosovsky and Hartley (2002) analyzed grading patterns in the United States from the 1960s to 1990s and found evidence of grades increasing on average a 0.5 letter grade (from C level to B level), a slight increase that could have been due to multiple factors. For example, some historical reasons account for the increase, such as ensuring male students did not have to join the wartime military service, changes in curriculum, more reliance on student evaluations, increase in student enrolment, and more contingent faculty (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012). In addition, Rosovsky and Hartley (2002) found increased disparity between disciplines (humanities higher than natural sciences), and significant increase in grades issued by Ivy League schools. Many factors have been identified to affect grade inflation, such as: grading practices; how students perceive grades; external interpretation and pressure by employers, parents, and other institutions; consistency of grading practices across departments and course sections; and the meaning and purpose of grades (Aufderheide et al., 2016). Hodges (2014) states that grade inflation occurs when instructors don't have clear expectations for students.

Different approaches have been suggested to ensure that grades are fair and not inflated. For example, contextualizing grades on transcripts by providing details about the difficulty of the course. Unfortunately, this approach requires significant effort by instructors and department to determine levels of difficulty (Aufderheide et al., 2016). Institutions that tried contextualizing grades found that this type of information actually led to grade inflation because students tried to take the more lenient courses (Aufderheide et al., 2016). Another approach is to cap the number of A's per course. This approach sets up a sense of competition for students and that certain quotas have to be met (Aufderheide et al., 2016). A more successful approach is to set grading standards and guidelines in departments or schools that aim to eliminate grade inequality and inflation (Aufderheide et al., 2016). Despite evidence that grades have increased over the years due to multiple factors, the real problem is grade inequality. **Grade inequality** is when students receive different grades for work that is of similar quality across departments, courses, or sections (Aufderheide et al., 2016). The same factors mentioned above that affect grade inflation, also affect grade inequality, and some more than others. For example, an increase in contingent (sessional) faculty teaching at higher education institutions, who sometimes are without significant background in teaching, knowledge about grading, and support from the department, coupled with the desire to maintain employment, are reluctant to issue lower grades to students (the same may apply to other inexperienced or vulnerable faculty, such as tenure-track) (Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005; Nikolakakos, Reeves, & Shuch, 2012). Hodges (2014) claims that rubrics with clear criteria eliminates the many factors that affect grade inflation and inequality. Rubrics indicate the standards that students need to attain to receive the assigned grade, with the result being that there is more consistency in grading, and a decrease in instances of students challenging grades (Hodges, 2014).

In summary, to lower incidences of grade inflation and grade inequality, the following is recommended:

- Ensure that all instructors are sufficiently familiar with department grading policies
- Encourage instructors to give students rubrics when the assignments are given so that it is clear how they are going to be evaluated and helps ensure consistency and reliability when grading
- Suggest that both formative and summative assessment are incorporated into each course
- Check that all assessment is valid and aligned with intended learning outcomes of the course

References

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