



Good Grieve! America’s Grade Inflation Culture

Craig Evan Klafter

Published online: 24 July 2019

© Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2019

The university admissions scandal exposed in March 2019—in which parents paid a college admissions consultant to inflate their child's ACT or SAT scores or to fabricate a stellar athletic record—necessitates taking a fresh look at grade inflation. The reason is that those who paid to have their children gain admission to elite universities would not have done so if it was likely that their children would perform poorly in those institutions or even fail to graduate. The American culture of grade inflation has made those outcomes unlikely.

The most common American university grading system is A or 4.0, B or 3.0, C or 2.0, D or 1.0, and F or 0.0. Nearly all universities and colleges still define these grades as Excellent, Good, Average, Below Average, and Fail or Deficient. However, most university and college grading is in the range of A and B. Between 1940 and 2008, the percentage of “A” grades awarded increased by 28 percent and the percentage of “C” and “D” grades declined by 21 percent and 7 percent respectively. Forty-three percent of grades awarded in 2008 were “A” compared to only 15 percent in 1940.¹

At some elite universities, the situation is even worse, with the average undergraduate grade awarded much closer to an A than a B. Consider the following average undergraduate GPAs of recent graduates of some elite universities:

<u>Institution</u>	<u>GPA</u>
Brown University	3.75

¹Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy, “Where A Is Ordinary: The Evolution of American College and University Grading, 1940–2009,” *Teachers College Record* 114, no. 7(2012): 1-23.

Craig Evan Klafter is Rector Emeritus, American University in Myanmar; cklafter@aslh.net.

Stanford University	3.68
Harvard College	3.63
Yale University	3.63
Columbia University	3.6
University of California, Berkeley	3.59

At these universities an A- is average.²

Complaints about American grade inflation date to the late nineteenth century, but the American culture of grade inflation was born in the 1960s with the confluence of two movements. The anti-Vietnam War movement was strongest on university and college campuses. In 1965, the Selective Service System announced a change in its practice of granting draft deferrals to students enrolled in universities and colleges. No longer would all undergraduate students be deferred. Instead, students would be deferred only if they exhibited high intellectual ability as determined by class rank and scores on the Selective Service Qualification Test.³ John R. Seeley, Chairman of the Sociology Department at Harvard, reacted by exclaiming, “we might grade every one equally high.”⁴ In fact, professors throughout the country did just that as a means of registering their opposition to the war.

The Viet Nam-driven grade inflation came around the same time as another driver of grade inflation: the self-esteem movement. In education, the self-esteem movement had its start in the late 1960s with the publication of Stanley Coopersmith's *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* and Nathaniel Branden's *The Psychology of Self-Esteem*.⁵ One of the movement's early followers was John Vasconcellos, then a member of the California State Assembly representing Silicon Valley. He used his position to argue that low self-esteem was a primary cause of crime, violence, substance abuse, teen pregnancy, child abuse, chronic welfare dependency, and educational failure. He advocated what he called a “social vaccine”—government spending to boost self-esteem as a means of curing these ills and even balancing the California budget on the theory that people with higher self-esteem earn more money and pay more taxes. In response to his advocacy, “The State Task Force to Promote Self-Esteem and

²Kate Beckman, “The Top 15 Universities with the Highest Average GPAs,” 2018, [Ripplematch.com](https://ripplematch.com/journal/article/the-top-15-universities-with-the-highest-average-gpas-4f4b544d/), <https://ripplematch.com/journal/article/the-top-15-universities-with-the-highest-average-gpas-4f4b544d/>.

³Michael S. Foley, *Confronting the War Machine: Draft Resistance During the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, UNC Press: 2003), 39-40.

⁴Laura E. Hatt, “LBJ Wants Your GPA: The Vietnam Exam,” *The Harvard Crimson*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2016/5/23/lbj-wants-your-gpa/>.

⁵Stanley Coopersmith *The Antecedents of Self-Esteem* (New York: W. H. Freeman & Company, 1967); Nathaniel Branden, *The Psychology of Self-Esteem* (New York: Tarcher, 1969).

Personal and Social Responsibility” was established. The Taskforce’s final report, *Toward a State of Esteem*, makes many bold recommendations including, for example,

1. Every school district in California should adopt the promotion of self-esteem and of personal and social responsibility as a clearly stated goal, integrated into its total curriculum and informing all of its policies and operations. School boards should establish policies and procedures that value staff members and students and serve to foster mutual respect, esteem, and cooperation.
2. Course work in self-esteem should be required for credentials and as a part of ongoing in-service training for all educators.⁶

These recommendations were adopted throughout California and spread like wildfire throughout the United States.

One of the immediate effects of the self-esteem movement was on academic grading. William Celis wrote in 1993 that “The push to increase self-esteem has also helped sustain the trend toward grade inflation.” He cited the example of an Albuquerque middle school where “teachers tried to start a new academic honor society, using as the cutoff for membership a 3.5 grade point average on a 4.0 scale.” Two-thirds of the school’s 600 students were found to be eligible. Celis went on to note that “[t]eachers in many public schools are praising student accomplishments so indiscriminately that such praise has become meaningless.”⁷

In higher education, the self-esteem movement also influenced academic grading. Professor Michael Pomerantz found in 2008 that “substantial numbers of professors simply don’t believe in rigorous grading anymore, particularly in the arts and humanities. As they see it, grades are hierarchical and subjective, and they diminish students’ self-esteem to the detriment of learning.”⁸ The draft was ended in 1973 and the self-esteem movement has been widely condemned as a failure.⁹ Still, grade inflation has persisted. A key reason is university grade grievance policies.

⁶*Toward a State of Esteem*, Sacramento, California State Dept. of Education, January 1990.

⁷William Celis, “Down From the Self-Esteem High,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/08/01/weekinreview/the-nation-down-from-the-self-esteem-high.html>.

⁸*Measuring Up: The Problem of Grade Inflation and What Trustees Can Do* (Washington, DC: ACTA, 2008), 3.

⁹Steve Baskin, “The Gift of Failure,” *Psychology Today*, Dec 31, 2011, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/smores-and-more/201112/the-gift-failure>; William Storr, “It was quasi-religious: the great self-esteem con,” *The Guardian*, June 3, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2017/jun/03/quasi-religious-great-self-esteem-con>; Richard Lee Colvin, “Losing Faith in Self-Esteem Movement,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 25, 1999, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1999-jan-25-mn-1505-story.html>.

Nearly every American university and college developed grade appeal policies during the 1980s. These policies came about just as the transition of higher education into a mass consumer market was completed, and colleges felt compelled to present a more nurturing and softer image. But these policies were also intended to limit the number of appeals, establishing procedures and short deadlines as a means to deny appeals from students who fail to comply. What they did not plan on, however, was how diligent college students proved to be about mastering the procedures and deadlines that provide the possibility of higher grades. Consequently, the policies principally served to encourage appeals, burden faculty members and administrators, and promote grade inflation.

Grade appeal policies vary among higher education institutions. However, the typical policy allows students to appeal grades (sometimes final grades only) for any reason. The faculty member is the recipient of the appeal and his decision can be further appealed to the department chair or directly to a faculty committee. Further appeals are often permitted to the relevant dean, the provost and even the president. There are usually deadlines for each step—imposed on both the student appellant and the various respondents. Non-tenured and adjunct faculty members are often averse to burdening their superiors and colleagues, fearing that doing so will influence decisions about their tenure or reappointment. The policies have, in short, incentivized giving into student demands rather than contesting them, and have promoted a sense of entitlement about grades among students.

Five years ago, I counselled a first-time faculty member at an American university. She is the graduate of some of the finest universities in Europe, and took her grading of students very conscientiously. She informed her students in advance what the requirements of the course were and how the assignments in the course would be weighted when determining their grades. She carefully read student assignments and took detailed notes on student performance. Soon after her grades were posted, she began receiving appeals from students. These appeals were made by 16 percent of the students, those who received grades of B and C, demanding that their grades be raised to A. Their arguments reflect the students' sense of entitlement.

There were those students who contended that effort should trump performance. "I worked long hours, tried my best and diligently did every assignment. Your grade does not reflect all the hard work I put in." Clearly these students do not understand that effort should have no role in academic assessment. Should a student who earns an A grade with little effort be penalized? Of course not. Then why should a student have his grade inflated because he found the course to be more difficult than others?

Some students objected to how the professor assessed their performance. She specified that the final grades would be based on four components in her syllabus. Not one student complained when it was distributed. After receiving their grades, these students argued that more components would have been fairer. No rationale for this was offered. One component was “teaching skill” for a focus of the course was teaching English as a second language. She specified that she would observe the students teaching on two occasions. Again, none of the students challenged this when she initially informed them. After receiving their grades, these students argued that it was insufficient. Their strategy was if you don't like the results, challenge the rules of the game.

There were students who argued that their judgment or the judgments of their friends were better than the faculty member's judgment. The idea that faculty members hold their positions because they have qualifications, experience, and learning that students lack made no difference to these students. Perhaps it is not surprising that students obsessed with grades exhibited little respect for qualifications, education, and learning.

Some students peppered their appeals with terms of outrage. “I was shocked,” “I was stunned,” and “I am angry.” Presumably, they believed that terms of moral indignation strengthened their argument. All they actually do is reveal immaturity and a failure to understand that only well-reasoned arguments are persuasive.

One student said that she took the course because she thought it would “boost her GPA” rather than hinder it, and suggested that this was grounds for having her grade raised. This claim is akin to either false advertising or breach of contract. In effect, the student pleaded that either the faculty member misrepresented the course because it had a reputation for being an easy A, or the faculty member breached an agreement to give all students high marks. Actually, the faculty member was a last-minute substitute. Even if her predecessor had the reputation for being an easy grader, under what theory did this student believe the replacement faculty member would be bound by her predecessor's reputation? And, why did this student not see an inherent problem with a course where all students get grades of A regardless of the quality of their work? Perhaps, like in the Lake Wobegon of “The Prairie Home Companion,” they believed all students are above average.

The final arguments employed were attempts at guilt. “Your ‘B’ grade will ruin my chances of getting into graduate school” and “I am a consistent ‘A’ student, so this type of grade really affects my GPA.” The fact that this grade counted for just 2.5 percent of their overall grade point average—and only the difference between an A and a B—did not matter to them. What is even more

disturbing, however, is their unwillingness to take responsibility for their own performance. As they saw things, it wasn't that they failed to measure up, it was the professor's failure to recognize what the students believed to be the high quality of their work.

The faculty member was stunned by the appeals, and sought the advice of her department chairwoman. However, she did not get the advice she expected. The department chairwoman encouraged her to give in to all the student requests and raise the grades arguing that it would be easier to do so. This entire grade appeal scenario is typical of what is frequently played out across the country. It is proof that the harm caused by grade appeal policies far outweighs the benefit.

Although some grade appeal policies have been curtailed in recent years, most universities and colleges have yet to do so. They should revise their grade appeal policies now.

Their grade appeal policies should be relabeled “grade reconsideration” policies, restrict grade reconsideration to the faculty member who issued the grade, and state that a faculty member who reconsiders a paper or examination has the right to raise, lower, or not change a grade. These changes will add an element of risk to students considering filing appeals and accordingly should reduce the numbers of requests. Students should be required to write letters of appeal to their faculty members explaining their justification for the reconsideration within a specified number of days of the grade's posting. Only arguments that focus on the material that is the object of the assessment and/or the stated calculation used to determine the grade should be acceptable to require reconsideration. Faculty members should complete the reconsideration within a specified period. There should be no further right of appeal. Consequently, frivolous appeals will not merit reconsideration, faculty members would no longer suffer unreasonable pressure to give in to appellant demands, and the American culture of grade appeals will lose a key contributing factor.

Grade inflation penalizes truly exceptional students, for the grades they earn are only marginally better than the average student. Grade inflation disincentivizes hard work, as students know that they can earn a B grade with relative ease. Grade inflation permits those students who should not have been admitted in the first place to graduate—often with at least a “B” average. And, employers are finding it difficult to distinguish between excellent, good, and mediocre students. Revising grade appeal policies will help reverse the American culture of grade inflation, restore academic integrity to American higher education grading practices, and create a check on unqualified students being admitted to and graduated from universities and colleges.