Grade Inflation (Compression) in the U.S. and at UMN

Christopher J. Cramer

University of Minnesota, October 6, 2012
Retreat of the UMN Academy of Distinguished Teachers
Grade Inflation* — What is It?

Average GPA by Year for Different Schools

includes UMTC data

Source: Stuart Rojstaczer, [http://www.tcrecord.org/PrintContent.asp?ContentID=15928](http://www.tcrecord.org/PrintContent.asp?ContentID=15928) see also [www.gradeinflation.com](http://www.gradeinflation.com) for many, many references and data

* Some regard grade “compression” as the more accurate term as inflation of GPA beyond 4.0 will not be possible, absent introduction of a new top grade...
Grade Inflation — UMTC Data

UMN is worst among big 10 schools with respect to grade inflation.
Note Purdue’s outlier resistance to grade inflation over 30 years.
How’d That Happen?

*A has replaced C as the most common grade. Now #A > #B > #C (not exactly gaussian...)*

Source: S. Rojstaczer and C. Healy, [http://www.tcrecord.org/PrintContent.asp?ContentID=16473](http://www.tcrecord.org/PrintContent.asp?ContentID=16473)

Really? UMN (TC) Too?

Yes

20% increase in A grades, 25% increase in A+B grades, must be at expense of others

Source: University Senate records, Provostal reports, etc. (Dr. G. Engstrand)
Just in Case You Like Gaussians (or the Lack Thereof)

National average grading curves as a function of time, 1960, 1980, and 2007 for public and private schools

Is That Uniform By College?

Absolutely not

2011 1000 level grades in undergraduate-admitting colleges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Group</th>
<th>Grades</th>
<th>GPA</th>
<th>Pct A's</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>2536</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>24.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDES</td>
<td>1184</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>41.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFANS</td>
<td>2635</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLA</td>
<td>23564</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSE</td>
<td>14498</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSOM</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EHD</td>
<td>7036</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data provided to Senate Committee on Educational Policy every year, for all colleges, by course level, and duly reported to Faculty Senate, and duly forgotten immediately thereafter (meh)

Is it fair that students from one college might be compared against students from another with a very different average GPA under certain circumstances?
Grade Inflation — Redux

Source: Stuart Rojstaczer, http://www.tcrecord.org/PrintContent.asp?ContentID=15928 see also www.gradeinflation.com for many, many references and data
Speculation About Reasons

- Vietnam (poor male calculus skills don’t merit death)
- Student evaluation of teaching (you rub my back...)
- Lazy (or overworked) faculty (no complaints about A’s!)
- Compassionate faculty (tuition is so darn high!)
- Foolish resistance to use of S/N grading
- Irritation at the whole notion of grades
- Conflation of “effort” with “performance”

**UMN policy states:** All grades for academic work are based on the quality of the work submitted, not on hours of effort, and that an “A” should represent: achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements.

http://www.policy.umn.edu/policies/education/education/gradingtranscripts.html
Who Cares?

**Students!**

When so many students receive the highest possible grade, great students cannot differentiate themselves, and employers have trouble interpreting a student’s GPA.


New grade reporting method better for students and teachers.


**Colleagues!**

Grading that misrepresents student performance sends a false message, and it robs the best students of credit for their good work. It is misleading, and it eventually strips the faculty member and the university of professional credibility.

Bulk and Monte, White Paper, UW La Crosse Senate

http://www.uwlax.edu/facultysenate/Archived%20Documents/PositionPapers/bulk-monte.pdf
Every year, myedu.com makes a public records request of grade distributions, by class and by instructor, across the nation and makes the data available on its website. Think students might look to see which instructors give the highest grades at their institution? Nah... Probably not. Certainly no reason to agree to any sort of standards...
So, What to Do?

1949: 

b. That this report serve as a basis for departmental discussions within the University on the philosophy and mechanics of grading. Some of the issues which might appropriately be considered in such discussions:

Source: University Senate minutes, 1948-1949

1999: Each college, department and program should discuss what the standards of the Uniform Grading Policy mean for its courses and programs, and what expectations the faculty have of students in their field of knowledge in order to achieve those standards.

Source: Senate Committee on Educational Policy report to University Senate, 1999

2012: Professor [--] moved that the Committee affirm the 1999 statement requesting that departments have discussions about grading and that the Committee also ask the associate deans to facilitate the discussions by sending questions to departments and faculty members and asking them to report the result of the conversations.

Source: minutes of Senate Committee on Educational Policy, 9/19/12

63 years of discussion — and people think Congress can kick a can down a road... Maybe it’s time to do something, instead?
Any Other Options?

DISCUSS!

#AIsTheNewS