

Grade Inflation at Wheeling Jesuit University:

Is it a Problem?

By

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For many faculty members one of the more difficult and less agreeable tasks is to assess their students' level of accomplishments and assign grades. Some faculty argue "the real threat to excellence isn't grade inflation at all; it's grades." In his article, "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation," Alfie Kohn claims that "the continued use of grades rest on nothing more than tradition," and that grades get in the way of true learning.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of faculty, however, see grades as a crucial element of student learning. I would argue that careful grading is important to the student, the teacher, and the educational institution. Further, I contend that grade inflation is not only a national problem, but one also for WJU that has grown increasingly acute during the last decade.

How do grades benefit students? Careful and accurate grades provide students with a realistic sense of how they are doing in the course in the estimation of the teacher. Harvey Mansfield, a professor of government at Harvard University, revealed that he gave his students two grades at the end of his courses:<sup>2</sup>

one for the registrar and the public record and the other in private. The official grades will conform with Harvard's inflated distribution, in which one-fourth of all grades given to undergraduates are now A's and another fourth are A-'s. The private grades from the course assistants and me, will be less flattering. Those grades will give students a realistic, useful assessment of how well they did and where they stand in relation to others.

Grades provide students, when they properly respond, with an incentive to improve. Grades provide students with an opportunity to feel a sense of personal accomplishment when they succeed as a result of more and/or better study. In addition, they receive recognition from others. Finally, grades are of some value to students in

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<sup>1</sup> Alfie Kohn, "The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 8, 2002, on line version.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey C. Mansfield, "Grade Inflation: It's Time to Face the Facts," *The Chronicle Review*, produced by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 6, 2001.

achieving career goals: being eligible to enter Honors Societies, gaining access to graduate schools, and securing employment.

Careful grading is also a vital aspect of what teachers do. First, when we measure our students' performances we learn not only whether our students are learning, but we also acquire information about our own teaching performance. After all, if our students are not learning what we want, part of the blame is likely to fall on ourselves. We need to ask ourselves whether we are doing a good job and how we might improve. Students performance or lack of it can lead us to revise our teaching methods and materials. The better and more nuanced a teacher's assessment is of a student performance, the clearer the subject matter is likely to be to the teacher. I know that assessment is easiest and most accurate when my own criteria of assessing my student is clear and nuanced, whether it be for an oral performance, project, objective quiz or essay exam. I do least well when I have insufficiently thought out how I will assess an assignment and invariably grades will be substantially higher. I hope students will not complain or even ask questions if they got a higher mark than they thought they deserved.

Finally, careful grading is of vital concern to the educational institution as well. Currently, we are preparing ourselves for re-accreditation by North Central and one of the most important areas that they will be looking into is assessment. How do we demonstrate that what faculty do in the classroom and labs really make a difference in learning outcomes? The school's right to exist is, in theory, partly dependent on its ability to realistically and accurately assess its students' performance. In addition, the academic reputation of the school can, over time, be affected by how well we prepare and assess our students.

The current *Wheeling Jesuit Academic Undergraduate Catalogue* (pages 19-20) spells out the policies that govern the assignment of grades and the giving of exams and tests. This section comes immediately after a paragraph discussing Academic

Integrity, which is focused on the students. So grades are a central part of the University's contract with its students.

It is clear that grading is an important part of a faculty member's duties. Several areas in the *Faculty Handbook* deal with a faculty member's responsibility to carefully assess (grade) their students' work. Section 3.1.7.2 states "No course at Wheeling Jesuit University may be marked on a curve (i.e., a scheme which imposes predetermined percentages of A's, F's, etc.). In a regular undergraduate course, no single examination may count more than one-third of a course grade." In addition, section 3.1.9.1 states that "each faculty member is required to explain his or her grading policy in writing as part of the course syllabus." Although the *Handbook* discusses several other aspects of grades, the last item concerns a teacher's authority in grading. Section 3.1.9.4 states:

the teacher is the final authority on all grades and has the sole responsibility for assigning or changing a course grade. Once reported to the Registrar, a grade may be changed by the teacher only if an error in grade calculation is discovered, and no later than the end of the third week of the next semester. . . . The teacher's authority in grading may be abrogated only in extraordinary circumstances. The determination of whether or not a given set of circumstances is extraordinary will be made jointly by the Chief Academic Officer and Faculty Council: in conjunction with such a determination, they will also jointly decide to whom the authority will be transferred. . . . These decisions will ordinarily be made after consultation with the department chair.

I have quoted at length these two documents to demonstrate that grading our students is a serious responsibility and that we need to do it as carefully and as accurately as possible.

One might well ask how all of this relates to the issue of grade inflation at Wheeling Jesuit. During the past decade grades on the whole have risen significantly and are now creating significant problems that are a threat to our educational mission. Below are grade statistics from two separate time periods: Fall 1996 to Spring 1999 - six semesters - and Fall 2006 to Fall 2007 - three semesters.

Wheeling Jesuit Grades - Table I

<u>Grade</u>	A	A-	B +	B	B-	C's	D's	F's	W's
F -1996	21.2	12.5	11.3	14.1	8.8	17.4	4.9	1.9	5.4
S -1997	19.5	12.8	12.1	15.7	8.9	19.2	4.2	1.9	4.2
F -1997	22.9	12.3	11.0	14.3	7.1	17.4	4.2	2.3	5.0
S -1998	23.2	12.2	10.7	15.5	8.5	16.1	4.2	2.5	4.3
F -1998	26.2	12.6	9.9	13.4	7.2	16.4	3.7	2.7	5.3
S -1999	27.5	11.3	11.0	13.7	7.6	15.8	3.7	2.0	4.9
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F -2006	34.5	13.6	10.9	12.5	7.2	12.9	3.0	1.2	0.3
S -2007	32.5	13.4	10.4	12.4	7.1	13.2	2.8	1.4	0.1
F -2007	36.5	12.8	9.7	11.9	6.0	12.1	3.2	1.7	0.2

The statistical data above is done in percentages of grades given and is based on the number of students at the grade levels during each semester for all students divided by the total number of grades given each respective semester. The percentages are rounded up to one-tenth of one percent. The total will not add up to 100% because some grades were not discussed: incompletes, audits, credit only, and X grades.

What does this pattern of grade distribution tell us? First, the number of people getting an A and an A- has risen dramatically in the last decade. I found the jump between 1996 and 1999 worrisome a decade ago. The numbers show the trend has continued. While I recognize there are all kinds of reasons that teachers give high grades in a particular course or even particular majors, we all need to be conscious of the negative consequences of compressing grades in the A and B categories. Below is

the grade pattern which has remained somewhat closer to the traditional grading patterns, those of the early 1990's.

Grade Patterns of One Department with Low Grades - Table 2

<u>Grade</u>	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C's	D's	F's	W's
F -2006	6.4	7.1	11.4	17.8	12.8	33.3	8.7	2.0	0
S- 2007	10.3	15.1	15.7	17.8	10.9	23.0	3.9	2.4	0
F- 2007	7.7	8.7	9.0	18.4	10.0	27.8	10.6	4.2	0

Teachers frequently assign grades based on numerical values. The most common standard on the Wheeling Jesuit campus is, I believe, the following: A -- 90 to 100, B -- 80 to 90, C -- 70 to 80, D -- 60 to 70, F -- below 60. Such a scale works especially well when exams and quizzes are objective in nature. When assessing an essay, paper, and projects some faculty use a grading rubric similar to the following: A's are given when students have consistently excelled. They know well the key concepts and facts and can use and explain them with authority. B's are given when a student has mastered key concepts and has some good factual content, but lacks some important elements and the means of expression need improvement. C's are assigned when students have satisfactorily done the minimum expected. D's go to students who have done the minimum, but often in a less than satisfactory manner. They have done enough to avoid retaking the course, but the performance is disappointing. F's are given to students who have not mastered the key concepts of the course or who have failed to do the assignments required. Other teachers will assign grades on whether a student has mastered a particular lab experiment, use of technology, created an acceptable project and assignment. It is possible for an instructor to argue in those cases that a student deserves an A because successfully achieving the goal means that he or she has reached the level of excellence demanded.

We should recognize that those who teach mainly students in their own major and in upper level or elective courses, will likely have higher grading averages than those who teach required core courses that will include many students who are not necessarily excited about being in that particular course or motivated to learn. In addition, Wheeling Jesuit expressly forbids faculty from grading on any kind of curve so that it is conceivable that occasionally, very occasionally, every student in a particular class could get an A. However, for a faculty member teaching large numbers of students in a core fulfilling course filled with non-majors, one would normally expect much lower grades on average.

What are some of the negative consequences of grade inflation? First, if too large a number of students receive excellent grades and there is too much compression of grades in the A and B categories, grades become increasingly meaningless in determining the performance or achievements of our students. They will be increasingly disregarded by graduate schools and employers. Second, students may have an unrealistic understanding of their own abilities. Third, the honors that we give out to our graduates will be viewed as of little value to the students themselves. The number of students on our Dean's List is very long and some might say excessive. Fourth, some departments will find it difficult to get any of their majors accepted into their Honor Societies. For example, the Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society requires inductees to be in the top third of their class. The History Department can often only induct one or two members a year, even though more than that number are Dean's List students.

Since grade inflation is seen as a national problem, the options that exist to curb the trend at the local level are limited. There are a number of reasons teachers are giving students higher grades. First, student evaluation of faculty performance is one factor, though it can be easily over-rated. Second, internal pressure on instructors themselves - they dislike giving students bad grades for a variety of reasons personal to themselves. Third, there may be confusion over the teachers' roles as advocates of

students and judges of students, an advocate is like a coach who encourages students through praise and rewards, while the judge has to enforce qualitative standards of performance. Fourth, whether a teacher is following a model of education that stresses information transmission or a model which is objective driven can be determinative. The latter model has a tendency to encourage higher grades because, if students successfully complete a task, they are often given an A. Finally, at an enrollment-driven university like Wheeling Jesuit, where there is much emphasis placed on retention, it is likely grades go up so students do not fail out.

Perhaps the best that Wheeling Jesuit faculty can do is for faculty to reflect on their method of assigning grades carefully and to discuss with colleagues why we give the grades we do and the kinds of standards that we have. We have established a reputation as an excellent academic institution in West Virginia; we must make sure that reputation is both deserved and protected.

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