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Recommended Reading

Grade Inflation

Valen Johnson confronts university grade inflation

By *Brian Manhire*

March 31, 2004

- *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in College Education*; Valen Johnson; Springer Verlag; 2003; 212 pages.

Professor Valen Johnson's *Grade Inflation: A Crisis in College Education* is a scathing rebuke of the common practice in universities across the country. Read the [full article](#) by reviewer Brian Manhire.

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Grade Inflation: A Crisis in College Education, by Valen E. Johnson. New York: Springer-Verlag, 2003, 262 pp., \$25.95 hard-bound.

Brian Manhire

Grade Inflation is a tour de force. Insofar as I am aware, it is the first-ever book about grade inflation. Although grade inflation is now a well-known phenomenon, far too few, either on campus or off, seem willing to actively confront it, even as it continues to grow worse. Professor Johnson is among these few; and his book is a major contribution to the growing literature on this important subject.

The book is an outgrowth of a 1997 study of grading practices at Duke University and follow-up online DUET (Duke Undergraduates Evaluate Teaching) experiment. Based on this work, Professor Johnson reports his considerable historical research on grade inflation reinforced by trenchant analysis to present a thorough and convincing study of grading problems and their implications.

The book is qualitative, quantitative and written from the perspective of a scientist (the author is a professor of biostatistics at the University of Michigan). Although there is some mathematics in it, the statistical methodologies employed and the inferences drawn from them, both in his work and that of others, are carefully explained, including strengths, weaknesses and limitations. So readers finding mathematics daunting can still learn a great deal from this well-written book.

Professor Johnson's purpose in writing his book is twofold:

First I hope to expose many of the myths associated with grade inflation, the use of student evaluations of teaching for administrative reviews of faculty, the effects of disparate grading practices on students, and the effects of grading practices on student enrolment patterns. In particular, I provide evidence that higher grades do lead to better course evaluations, student course evaluations are not very good indicators of how much students have learned, higher mean course grades do not reflect higher levels of student achievement, and students can (and probably do) manipulate their GPAs by selecting courses with instructors who grade leni-

ently. Second, I hope to expand the discussion of college grading from the sensationalized topic of grade inflation to the broader issue of how assessment practices can be modified to reflect student and faculty achievement more fairly. Several strategies for accomplishing this goal are described at the end of the book. [14]

What follows is a chapter-by-chapter overview followed by some closing remarks of my own.

The first chapter provides an introduction to the book. Grade inflation, its history and its impact on both students and faculty is overviewed. The important point is made that both grade inflation and *inequities* in grading practices (e.g., across disciplines) have serious consequences. The story of the Duke study of grading and the DUET experiment begins. DUET and resistance to it by certain factions on campus is an interesting story in itself that continues in subsequent chapters and also serves as the backbone for much of the book.

Some earlier unsuccessful efforts at various institutions to combat, or at least accommodate, grade inflation are discussed, such as including average course grades on transcripts and the introduction of grades higher than A, such as A+ (an idea lampooned in the JIR¹).

While reviewing some of the excuses that have been made for grade inflation, Professor Johnson describes a sort of *Lake Wobegon*-like justification for high grades, based on allegedly better students, as follows:

Still, many professors are willing to accept the traditional premise that a grade of C should represent average work, a grade of B above average work, and so on. But for one reason or another, they insist that their students are above average. Interestingly, the reference group to which students are compared varies. Sometimes it consists of students at other universities; at other times, students in other classes at the same university; or, in the case of Duke, the alumni. [5]

He also describes how Dartmouth faculty intentionally inflated grades to reflect their perception that their students are academically superior to those at other schools. Citing a now well known *Chronicle of Higher Education* article by

Harvard Professor Harvey C. Mansfield², Professor Johnson goes on to write that traditional faculty reject the idea that better students cause grade inflation and he cogently asks:

I wonder also how many of the professors who make the argument that their students are better than students at other universities would assign uniformly low grades if fate had landed them at Below Average U.? And should community colleges and lower-rung state schools really be prevented from assigning A's? [7]

The unproven, misguided belief that student self-esteem is prerequisite to academic achievement (rather than an outcome of it) is also criticized, by way of Professor Mansfield's *Chronicle* article² as well as an incisive report highly critical of grade inflation recently published by the *American Academy of Arts and Sciences*.³ Postmodernism is also identified as a cause of grade inflation (more about this later).

Why have grading inequities become acceptable? Professor Johnson's answer to this question is:

The thesis of this book is that grading inequities persist because their consequences are misunderstood. In particular, they exist and are perpetuated by the following myths:

1. Student grades do not bias student evaluations of teaching.
2. Student evaluations of teaching provide reliable measures of instructional effectiveness.
3. High course grades imply high levels of student achievement.
4. Student course selection decisions are unaffected by expected grading practices.
5. Grades assigned in unregulated academic environments have a consistent and objective meaning across classes, departments, and institutions. [9]

The chapter concludes with a brief overview of impediments to reform. These include faculty aversion to change, that it is more convenient (and "career enhancing" [13]) to just give high grades, and the difficulties inherent to academic culture in reaching consensus across campus.

The online DUET experiment is the subject of the second chapter. The purpose of the DUET Website was (ostensibly) to collect and disseminate course evaluation information for Duke's undergraduates; but it also served as the principal data-collection apparatus for the research results reported in the book.

The power of the site as a research tool was its linkage to an abundance of database information including student transcripts and demographic information. Thus relationships between information generated through student access to the site (through time) could be explored in terms of additional information such as student major, courses taken and grades received, SAT scores, high school GPA, gender and ethnic group.

There are of course, potential pitfalls (e.g., *post hoc* fallacy, defective sampling, etc.) in statistical studies.⁴ With this in mind, important facts about the DUET experiment are disclosed (e.g., twenty-nine percent of the undergraduate student body *self-selected* to participate in it and there were some significant technology glitches) to help the reader understand DUET's limitations. Professor Johnson's meticulous defense of the validity of the inferences he draws from the experiment's statistics is impressive and convincing.

The narrative describing campus resistance to the online experiment continues in this chapter, focusing on objections leading to DUET's untimely death.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters comprise a thorough study of student evaluations of teaching (SETs), including, *inter alia*, their relationship to grades, teaching efficacy and student learning (validity). Professor Johnson describes over sixty studies, spanning seventy years, encompassing both observational and experimental studies. His analysis of these studies, which includes Fox-effect and related educational seduction studies, is formidable, balanced and fair. While I am neither a professional statistician nor an SET researcher, it seems to me that Professor Johnson's findings, based on both his historical research and supporting DUET-based analysis, leaves little room for doubt that grades do impact SETs and do not measure student learning and are in fact, pernicious. He has convinced me that SETs are so flawed that a national moratorium on their use should be declared until conclusive research leads to SETs free of the defects described in his book. In this way, hopefully his work will finally provoke long overdue SET

reform that has been called for earlier by Professor Paul Trout⁵ and others.

The sixth and seventh chapters examine, again by way of historical research and DUET analysis, the impact (found to be substantial) of grades on student course selection and grading equity (the effects of grading disparities resulting from different grading practices, especially across disciplines, are found to be severe). This is important for at least the following reasons:

For instructors, the implications of this finding are quite alarming, particularly when considered in conjunction with the findings of previous chapters. An instructor who grades stringently is not only less likely to receive favorable course evaluations, but is also less likely to attract students (another indication of poor teaching?). Because most departments are hesitant to devote teaching resources to undersubscribed classes, this means that stringently grading instructors are also less likely to have the opportunity to teach specialized courses in their academic area. And of course, to the extent that personnel decisions at an institution are based on teaching effectiveness, or at least on the institution's perception of teaching effectiveness, stringently grading faculty are less likely to be promoted, to receive salary increases, or to be tenured.

At the institutional level, differences in grading policies among academic divisions result in substantial decreases in natural science and mathematics enrollments, and artificially high enrollments in humanities courses. This shift in enrollment causes a disproportional allocation of resources to humanities departments at the expense of science departments.

Nationally, the effects of inequitable grading practices on student course selection decisions are extremely difficult to quantify. How does one measure the costs of scientific illiteracy? How has public discourse on issues ranging from stem cell research to genetic alteration of food products to discussion of missile defense technology to environmental protection policies been affected? To what extent has the ability of the average college graduate to function in an increasingly technological society

been compromised? The answers to these questions cannot be addressed using data collected during the DUET experiment. What can be said, however, is that the general level of scientific competence in America has been diminished simply because universities have not adopted more consistent grading policies. [193-194]

For students, the currency of academia is the grade. As the only tangible benefit that students receive for performing well in their courses, grades provide the primary mechanism available to the faculty for maintaining academic standards. In a very real sense, professors pay grades to students in return for mastery of course material, and students barter these grades for jobs or entrance into professional or graduate school.

In the early 1960s, student grades, like the dollar, were taken off the gold standard. Over the course of the next thirty-five years, inflation led to significant decreases in the value of both college grades and the dollar, and by the late 1990s, a grade of B generally represented the same "average" performance that a C had in 1960.

Some might argue that this inflation has caused no damage, and that like our economy, postsecondary education expanded and prospered during this period. The fact that an average student now receives a B instead of a C has not intrinsically devalued our educational system. A grade of C represents nothing more than an ordered categorical response; the definition of the categories completely subjective.

In reality, however, grade inflation did damage our educational system, but only indirectly. It damaged the system by drawing attention away from a much more serious flaw in the academic monetary system: It masked increasingly wild fluctuations in the exchange rates between academic disciplines. [196]

To this, I would like to add my concern about my own discipline (engineering). Over the past few years, at least six anecdotal reports have appeared suggesting that grade inflation has already contaminated engineering education.⁶⁻¹¹ In

addition to these six, it has recently been reported that at Northwestern University's McCormick School of Engineering and Applied Sciences, 48 percent of grades are in the *A* range and 86 percent are in the *A-B* range; and even more importantly "Stephen Carr, McCormick's associate dean for undergraduate engineering, said the school's faculty has discussed grade inflation and decided there was nothing wrong with it."¹²

If grade inflation has compromised academic standards in engineering education nationally (as I suspect it has, although there have been no formal studies to confirm this insofar as I'm aware), then given the intellectual proximity of science and engineering (and the distance of both from the humanities and social sciences), I think that Professor Johnson's remark above about "increasingly wild fluctuations in the exchange rates between academic disciplines" is not what is actually happening nationally (though it is no doubt true at Duke and elsewhere, now and in the recent past, as a transient phenomenon).

Instead, I think that grade inflation across all disciplines is converging as hyperinflation compresses all grades to the top—with the ultimate steady-state result being the single meaningless (Wobegon) grade of *A* for everyone.

Returning now to the book, the seventh chapter concludes by illustrating two methods of adjusting grades to account for grading inequities.

The eighth chapter concludes the book. In it, Professor Johnson makes a number of frank statements about dancing around grade inflation. To whet the appetite of the readers of this review, especially those who may be tempted to prejudge the book prosaic (it isn't), here is a provocative quote condemning faculty and certain educational researchers:

Faculty have contrived an almost unending sequence of fables to avoid dealing with the unpleasanties associated with student grading. The teacher-effectiveness theory ["which posits that good teaching leads to more learning, higher grades, and thus higher teacher-course evaluations", 94] described in Chapter 3 provides an ideal example of such a myth. The teacher-effectiveness theory was fabricated by educational researchers to repudiate findings that student grades biased student evaluations of teaching, and has been used by professors ever since to justify the assign-

ment of higher-than-average grades. [234]

Recapitulating his findings, Professor Johnson states that:

Research findings presented in this book, along with seventy years of previous educational research, permit the following conclusions to be drawn:

1. Differences in grading practices between instructors cause biases in student evaluations of teaching.
2. Student evaluations of teaching are not reliable indicators of teaching effectiveness and account for only a small proportion of the variance in student learning from student to student and course to course.
3. High grade distributions cannot be associated with higher levels of student achievement.
4. Differences in grading practices have a substantial impact on enrollments, and cause fewer students to enroll in those fields that grade more stringently.
5. Grading practices differ systematically between disciplines and instructors, and these disparities cause serious inequities in student assessment. [236-237]

As to why grade inflation/disparities have persisted for so long, the following reason is proffered (again, this is not a dull book):

Unfortunately, many faculty councils [senates] are populated by the very individuals who benefit most from inequitable grading policies. Or they represent departments that do. Appropriate strategies for reform thus depend on the integrity of the individuals who compose these bodies. [240]

Next, Professor Johnson critiques some of the reform policies proposed in the *American Academy of Arts and Sciences* report³ mentioned earlier and he makes suggestions of his own about grading and SETs.

The book is closed as follows:

A crisis exists. Current assessment practices are flawed, and both students and

faculty know it. Unregulated grading practices change student enrollment patterns and penalize students who pursue demanding curricula. They permit students to manipulate their GPAs through the judicious choice of their classes rather than through the moderation of their performance in those classes. Disparities in grading also affect the way students complete end-of-course evaluation forms, and so result in inequitable faculty assessments. As a consequence, academic standards are diminished.

To right the boat, two things must happen: More principled student grading practices must be adopted, and faculty assessment must be more closely linked to student achievement.

It is my hope that this book facilitates reform in both areas. [246]

I would like to close this review by giving my thoughts about the connection between grade inflation and postmodernism. Although the scope of its influence has been uneven and sometimes indirect, postmodernism¹³ has nevertheless become significant in the American zeitgeist (for an example outside the academy, see *The Postmodern Presidency*¹⁴).

More and more, grade inflation is being associated with postmodernism (e.g., see Sacks¹⁵). Professor Johnson adds further support to this notion by quoting what he describes as a “bizarre” [8] postmodern view of grading:

Teachers’ increasing awareness of the biases inherent in modern science is likely to affect their evaluations of students’ acquisition of subject matter. Because disciplinary content domains are increasingly open to diverse interpretations and the inclusion of alternative representations, the scope of what is legitimate and appropriate knowledge in the academic enterprise is widened. The global questioning of tenets once held to be singularly true allows a larger number of students to display with greater diversity a legitimate and appropriate grasp of a widened content. Consequently, grade distributions are higher than they were before the advent of postmodern challenges....As postmodern perspectives gain greater legitimacy, teachers’ openness to different conclusions and more diverse methods at ar-

iving at them favor higher grade distributions because evaluation criterion are broadened and there are many, rather than a few, acceptable discourses in which students can engage. Students are empowered to challenge not just the insights but also the methods presented by dominant orthodoxies. Failure to display reason, analysis, objective consideration of evidence, and distance is much less used as an explanation for poor grades, as these keystones of modern science are themselves shown to be biased in favor of certain, but not other, views, and are hence no more valid than any other method of arriving at conclusions.¹⁶ [8]

This turgid nonsense is a prime example of what is nowadays known as *pomobabble*.¹⁷⁻¹⁸ It promulgates a poor substitute for the considerable intellectual effort professors exert in order to judge the quality of their students’ academic work.

Professors are responsible for knowing the subjects they teach well enough to be able to recognize and gauge the extent and quality of student learning—and commit to grading academic merit accordingly, based on rigorous standards. Abdicating this responsibility to the vacuity of postmodern relativism, along the lines suggested above, is unethical; grade inflation is contrary to academic duty.

The above *pomolingo* is indicative of how some originally innovative and interesting postmodern ideas have metastasized in the academy to become specious justification for debasing traditional academic values. While “bizarre” is certainly an apt description of the *pomolive* above, *Bogus Sophistry* (BS) is more precise.

In conclusion, grade inflation’s long history (over thirty-five years), resulting in severe grade compression (at the top), is one of a number of indications that the intellectual and moral climate of universities is in decline (among others are political correctness,¹⁹ radical feminism,²⁰ diversity²¹⁻²² and the overall politicization²³⁻²⁴ and commercialization²⁵ of American campuses).

Nearly everyone involved with higher education is now complicit in grade inflation one way or another, including professors, students and their parents and their eventual employers, politicians and the public they serve. The immorality of this complicity speaks for itself and does not bode well for America. Grade inflation has

become part of what David Callahan calls *the cheating culture*.²⁶

Professor Johnson's book is essential reading for everyone interested in the integrity of both academic standards and assessment of student learning. Surely its definitive treatment of grade inflation will be well received by the academy and its constituencies and will foster long-needed reform.

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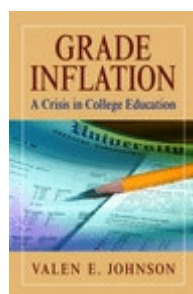
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