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What's in a Grade: Faculty Responsibility for Grade Inflation

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THIS REPORT is the first of a two-part series that explores the topic of grade inflation from both a faculty and student perspective. The ethical and professional issues related to faculty disregard for knowledge attainment and assignment of an unearned grade is a hot topic of debate. There is currently a heightened awareness of grade inflation within higher education. In the context of ethics and professionalism, grade inflation needs to be considered as it relates to faculty teaching styles, relevance within athletic training education programs, and strategies that address the problem. What responsibility does an educator have for control of grade inflation?

The purpose of this report is to address the following:

- The definition of grade inflation
- Why grade inflation occurs (specific to athletic training education)
- Ramifications of grade inflation
- Faculty concerns
- Suggested strategies to minimize this phenomenon

Grade Inflation

Grade inflation is defined as “an increase in grade point average without an associated increase in overall student ability.”¹ This phenomenon cannot be dismissed as an abstract concept, because GPAs have increased 0.6 from 1967 to 2001. Moreover, private schools are demonstrating grade inflation at a rate that is 25-30% higher than public schools.¹⁻³ Educators would like to believe that grade inflation is the result of improvements in the quality of students. Surveys have demonstrated that American college students in the 1990s devoted less time to attending class, preparing written assignments, and studying than their predecessors did, but received the same or higher grades.³ Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that student quality has improved since 1980, but a significant amount of evidence suggests that students take less responsibility for their education. Factors associated with unearned grade assignment may include these:

- fear of poor student evaluations that may affect promotion and tenure
- not wanting to hurt students' feelings
- poor teaching efficacy
- inexperience in grading/evaluating students
- unclear expectations for student performance

Athletic Training Education

A substantial increase in the number of accredited athletic training education programs over the past five years has resulted in a large number of new faculty/staff members with teaching responsibilities (didactic and clinical). In many cases, new athletic training faculty/staff have limited classroom teaching experience or familiarity with pedagogical strategies for evaluation of students. In any education program, grade inflation is an indication that students are earning grades and course credit without having attained commensurate mastery of clinical skills and/or cognitive content. In athletic training education, the lack of adequate knowledge and skill attainment may result in poor performance on the BOC examination. However, the primary concern should be producing health professionals who are incapable of providing a high standard of care to patients.

Grade inflation prompted Ivy League institutions to create programs to reduce the number of A's awarded in an academic year to no more than 35% in undergraduate courses. No significant decrease in the number of high grades has been evident, but at least it's a start.³⁻⁴ Would decreasing the number of A's really stop grade inflation? Will the number of B's increase? If more than 50% of the students enrolled in a particular course deserved an A, would it be ethical to penalize students in the effort to decrease grade inflation?

Teaching Evaluations

Teaching evaluations play an important role in the evaluation of faculty at most institutions of higher education. In some cases, merit raises, promotion, and tenure of faculty are heavily dependent on classroom teaching evaluations performed by students. Evaluation of teaching can be done in a variety of ways, such as peer review, student projects, and independent studies. However, student course evaluations are the primary method by which a faculty member is evaluated at college, department, and academic program levels.

There are a variety of factors that may influence how a student evaluates a professor:

- course difficulty
- personality conflict
- perception of instructor inflexibility
- invalid evaluation instrument (items not relevant to the course)
- unwillingness to address the task in a serious manner
- instructor reputation for assignment of low grades

Examples of Grade Inflation

Those professors who value favorable student evaluations more than their students' mastery of subject matter may ultimately affect the reputation of the academic program and the institution. Have you seen examples of grade inflation in your setting?

One example is the "Here's your A, go away" approach. In this case, a problem student or average student is given a high grade to get him or her "out of the professor's hair." When a student becomes such a nuisance that a large amount of faculty time is consumed, some faculty may resort to giving a grade so they just "go away." In this case, students who demand extra time or effort from a faculty member (reasonable or unreasonable) are provided with a bribe (good grade) in the hope that the demand for attention will decrease. Faculty members looking for merit raises, promotion, and tenure may be inclined to give an A in the hope that the student will return the favor with a positive course evaluation.

Another example is the faculty member who pursues the "Mr. Nice Guy" approach. This is a typical "easy A course" that is characterized by an instruction level that is well below that of the students' capabilities, and grades are assigned primarily based on personal interactions with the professor. The professor may espouse high standards, but he or she is willing to bend the rules as the course progresses, allowing students to turn in assignments late or not at all. In this example, the faculty member is seeking popularity and does not typically hold students accountable. There are no firm deadlines in Mr. Nice Guy's class, and students can befriend Mr. Nice Guy to earn a better grade. This teaching style is associated with vague course objectives and poorly defined expectations.

The last example is a teaching style that characterizes many novice professors—the “I can change the world” approach. These individuals seek to change the status quo and improve the academic program by any means necessary. Challenging students to become self-sufficient, critical thinkers, and effective clinicians is the highest priority. This effort can be challenged by resistance to change and a threat of poor teaching evaluation. Students may try to force the instructor to adopt the same teaching style as that used by previous faculty. This can result in (a) grade inflation (the instructor gives up and provides higher grades because he or she was unsuccessful in raising the quality of academic performance) or (b) grade deflation (the instructor sticks to his or her teaching philosophy and gives the students low grades). Some students will rise to the challenge and achieve mastery of the course content, whereas other students may rebel and perform poorly in the course.

Different teaching styles and educational philosophies each present unique challenges. Following are suggestions to aid faculty in avoiding unethical practices in the assignment of grades.

Evaluate Mastery of Knowledge and Skills

Eliminate credit that is based on effort, participation, and subjective factors. Inclusion of subjective factors creates greater opportunity for special treatment and introduces ambiguity in terms of performance expectations.

Provide Clear Guidelines That Explain Grading Criteria

Students respond to early knowledge of the method for grade assignment at the beginning of the course. Providing a grading rubric for each assignment eliminates the instructor’s ability to change the grading procedure between the beginning and the end of the course. Consider having students grade themselves by using the same rubric. If there is agreement between self-rating and the instructor’s assessment, the student will believe that the grading is fair and will have a sense of pride. If there is disagreement, clarify the grading procedure and provide feedback to guide student efforts on subsequent assignments.

Provide Clear Objectives and the Means by Which They Will Be Achieved

Evaluation of instruction surveys typically contains a question regarding “clearly defined course objectives.”

Be sure to review course objectives at the beginning of the semester/term to clarify the purpose of the course. When objectives are clearly stated, very little argument can be made concerning the nature of assignments required to achieve the course objectives. Students do not like to be surprised; if they understand the course objectives and their relationship to the grade assignment rubric, motivation and learning will be enhanced.

Educate Faculty Regarding the Proper Basis for Awarding Grades

Grades are not gifts; they should be earned. Although there are faculty concerns that may promote “giving grades away,” the practice encourages students to expect high grades and fails to build self-efficacy. When high grades are expected, the motivation to acquire knowledge is limited. When grade assignment is clearly related to program, department, college, and/or university mission statements, the instructor’s perception of the need to “give” a grade is reduced.

Keep Students Apprised of Progress Throughout the Semester/Term

Individual meetings with students throughout the term are important. Although students might reasonably be expected to have an awareness of performance in relation to course requirements, some are oblivious to grade status until a final course grade is assigned. Meetings with students throughout the course provide the professor with feedback concerning the effectiveness of the teaching style for attainment of the course learning objectives, and students are not surprised by a low grade at the end of the course.

Conclusion

Grade inflation is clearly a problem affecting higher education. The individual who achieves a high grade point average at a given institution may not prove to be a highly proficient health professional. Consider the following questions:

Discussion Questions

1. Would you give a student a grade that was not deserved if it leads to a better teaching evaluation? What if a merit raise, promotion, or tenure was an issue?

2. Would you ever have a class in which no student earned an A grade? Are the students and/or the instructor accountable for the absence of any A grade?
3. Is grade inflation in athletic training different from that occurring in other academic programs? How about clinical competency grading?
4. What would you say about a student who has a 3.75 GPA, but has taken the BOC exam more than 3 times and has a GRE score that is below 800 (despite multiple examinations)?
5. How does a 3.75 GPA at your school rank compare to the same GPA other schools?
6. What are the long-term consequences for faculty and students in the "Here's you're A, go away" scenario? ■

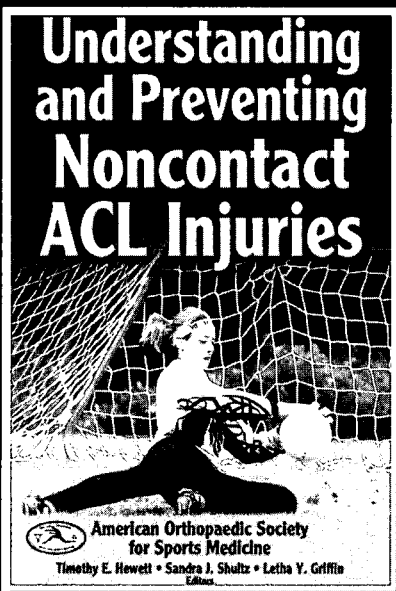
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