

# Spotlight On: PR Education

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## Only an A- ? Combating grade inflation

By Rich Long

May 5. End of the winter semester. Grades are in, and students will start accessing them by computer today. Then the calls and e-mails will begin arriving from those who expected - or demand - a higher grade than they got. Those I can handle.irate mothers are another matter.

May 6. I wasn't disappointed. My visitors included a near-tearful student who had never received an A- in four years of college work. A second, via telephone, said the B+ she received might keep her out of the law school of her choice. Yet another couldn't understand why she failed the class, even though she missed seven assignments. Her plea was for a D-, which was better than an E.

A survey of a dozen PR and communications professors provides some comfort, because my experience is similar to theirs. Students are more preoccupied with grade point average than with skills gained, and their expectations are high - even an A- is viewed as an insult. There is some good news in all this discussion about grade inflation. It didn't originate with PR programs, nor is it unique to PR curricula, and schools at all levels of the economic spectrum are struggling with rampant grade inflation.

A casual search of the Internet reveals hundreds of stories about college grade inflation (and nearly as many about its high school equivalent). The causes and apologies are many:

- Students have become smarter over the years, so grades will naturally inflate. One study says 70 percent of the entering freshmen at private universities had an A average in high school. Just more than half of those entering public universities also had straight-A averages.
- Standardized testing scores, such as for the SAT, have been declining, raising obvious correlating questions about grades.
- Students are coming out of high school with two notable skills. One is memorization, which has been honed in rote precollege classes and which serves them well in many college courses. The other is manipulation, which helps them twist the system, pressure educators to deliver the expected grades and, at the very least, persuade professors to change grades after the fact, following a tearful or perhaps cranky appeal.
- Over 20 years or so, the academic community has managed to link grading policies with students' self-esteem. The net effect is to have students graduating with good feelings about themselves, but fundamentally counterfeit transcripts that do not reflect their actual achievements.
- Faculty members, especially those not yet protected by the lifetime security blanket of tenure, are reluctant to give C's and D's to students. The reasoning is clear: If I grade too hard, students will avoid my classes and their evaluations of my performance as a professor will plummet, thus threatening my chances of tenure and/or promotion.
- Parents are not shy about reminding their children - and sometimes university officials - that they aren't paying \$30,000 a year for their child to get C's.
- More grades are being influenced by graduate assistants and part-time faculty, while senior professors concentrate on research and writing. This leads to less in-depth scrutiny of the grading process by teachers who have only short-term experience with the students.

There is strong agreement that grade inflation got a boost during the Vietnam War, when low college grades meant lost draft deferments and an almost certain invitation to join the U.S. Army. Many professors acknowledge giving higher-than-deserved grades in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a way of making their own statement about that unpopular war.

Just how serious is the problem of grade inflation, what is being done about it, and what does it say to potential employers about many of their bright but misled young job applicants?

The literature strongly suggests that grade inflation is a national epidemic, affecting all levels of higher education. For example, 91 percent of Harvard's 2001 class graduated cum laude, magna cum laude or summa cum laude. One

Harvard professor, obviously frustrated with the trend, has begun giving his students two grades. One goes on the official transcript (and to graduate school admissions boards) and the other reflects the actual level of work completed in class. Only the professor and the student see the latter, which is courageous, but not likely a net solution to grade inflation. A Duke University professor told *The Washington Post* earlier this year that he no longer gives any grade lower than a B in order to protect his teaching career.

It's also clear that science and engineering programs have much stiffer grading standards than the liberal arts, humanities, social sciences and other nontechnical disciplines, adding to an already abysmal understanding of science and technology among the U.S. populace. Unfortunately, programs such as print and broadcast journalism, public relations, advertising and communications studies are among the highest graders at the college level.

Carole Gorney, APR, PRSA Fellow, says her PR students at Lehigh University have clear expectations. "They consider only an A acceptable, and an A- is not the same. Students also fail to recognize that hard work is not the same as quality results," she says. Even in practicum classes, where students grade their peers' work, inflation is apparent, because young people are reluctant to confront their peers about substandard work.

Donn Tilson, APR, Fellow PRSA, is a member of the University of Miami's Faculty Senate. "We talk about grade inflation all the time," he says. Tilson uses several techniques to combat the creeping inflation in his classes. First, he gives no extra credit. "There is plenty to do in my classes without extra credit. If they focus on what they should, they'll do well," he says. Second, he makes no grade changes after a semester ends. "Many students come to me with problems and excuses for not getting work done, but unless I've made a mistake in calculating their grade, I won't change it."

Tilson's experience at Miami has produced one surprising discovery. There seems to be no correlation between grading policy and student evaluations of their professors. "Serious students will find serious professors who will push them," he says.

Competitive young students, without the advantage of gray hair or much long-term perspective, can be single-minded about grades. They don't realize - and some don't care - that A's in college don't necessarily guarantee success in the working world. Which raises the question: Is there value in attaching a transcript or listing a college grade point average on an internship or job application? There is some value in seeing the range of courses an applicant has taken, on the premise that someone with a political science minor and a second language fluency may be a more compelling candidate than others who have taken 14 one-credit dance classes or every recreation class in the catalogue. Otherwise, it's a sad truth that Sam's 3.65 grade point average doesn't tell much. It may also camouflage mediocre writing skills, because, in some programs, writing tutors, roommates and significant others do considerable surgery on writing assignments.

The good news is that there is a great equalizer available to professors and administrators who want to take some of the steam out of grade inflation. That equalizer is spelling tests. Most of today's high school graduates have been raised on computers and are accustomed to software catching their spelling mistakes. Alas, even the computer can't save students from misspelling the "public" in "public relations" (a 25-point penalty in my classes).

Having a steady regimen of spelling quizzes as part of all PR and journalism programs would accomplish three major goals: 1) inject a dose of reality into semester grades; 2) provide a bit of humble pie to young people who put too much stock in their grade point average; and 3) resurrect a vanishing American art form.

Finally, a bit of advice to the young people who will someday have children of their own: Never show the kids your report cards. For years, I had my brood of eight convinced I was a 4.0 student in high school and college. Then I showed them some report cards and they learned the stark truth - a 2.0 in the fall semester and a 2.0 in the winter semester do not make a 4.0.

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