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Grade Inflation

*Academic Standards
in Higher Education*

Lester H. Hunt, editor

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Academic Standards in Higher Education

EDITED BY

Lester H. Hunt

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FOREWORD

Grade inflation is one of those topics that initially seems clear and simple but becomes murkier and more confusing the longer you think about it. Consider the following hypothetical scenario: At Great State University (GSU) the same faculty teach the same courses, assign the same homework, administer the same examinations, and use the same grade standards and definitions year after year. There are no fraternity files or other homework or exam files to be shared with incoming students. Each year the new class of GSU freshmen exhibits the same distribution of high school grades and test scores as prior entering classes. For years this has produced a symmetrical distribution of GSU grades (let's say, equal percentages of As and Fs; equal percentages of Bs and Ds; and more Cs than any other single grade). So for years the mean, median, and modal grade has been C, or 2.0. That comports well with "common sense" and common understandings: Some students are outstanding, some fail to understand or perform at all, and everyone else is somewhere in between. A "C" grade is widely accepted to mean "average," and the average student should, almost by definition, be expected to get an average grade.

Suppose, in some future year, it is noticed that everything else has remained the same, but the GSU average grades have been rising for several years in a row—fewer low grades and more high grades, shifting the averages upward. Is this, by itself, evidence of what most people mean when they talk about "grade inflation" and "relaxed standards"? Probably so. On the other hand, this hypothetical situation has never prevailed anywhere. All the things I postulated to be unchanging at GSU are changing constantly for real universities, and it is remarkably

difficult to tease out and identify unambiguously a “grade inflation” that would be universally recognized as being unjustified or inappropriate. Older faculty retire; new, better-trained faculty are hired (yes, better—teacher training, which almost none of us ever received, is now nearly universally available in top graduate schools); college courses and curricula change (for the better, one hopes); universities try consciously to improve teaching and learning outcomes; universities train K–12 teachers and influence high school curricula with a goal of improving teaching and learning at that level; and admissions officers try consciously to select and admit only the best-prepared applicants. All of these changes can and do affect academic performance in college and, therefore, might plausibly be expected to affect average college grades. Or should they?

Consider another scenario: GSU finds (for whatever reason) that the overwhelming majority of its applications for freshman admission are from students who are in the top 5 percent of their high school class and who have test scores placing them in the top 5 percent of all test takers nationally. When the best of these exceptionally bright, well-prepared students are admitted, what should the faculty expect? Should they expect better performance in GSU classes? If so, how should they respond? Should they give higher grades reflecting that performance, or should they ratchet up the difficulty of their courses as far as necessary to guarantee the historic percentage of Ds and Fs? The latter is always possible to do. But, as a matter of fairness, not to mention public policy, is it reasonable for GSU to take in the best of our high school graduates and label some fraction of this elite group as “failures” simply because they were not “the best of the best”?

This goes to the core question: What is the goal or purpose of grading? Are grades given to discriminate among the students, always striving to produce some symmetrical (perhaps a normal) distribution of grades so graduate schools and employers can identify the “best” and “worst” of the graduates, no matter how good the “worst” may be? This problem is almost universally addressed in American graduate schools by compressing the grade scale: At most graduate schools, outstanding performance and corresponding “A” grades are expected. Indeed, an average “B” grade is required for satisfactory progress and continuation as a graduate student. This is explicitly because graduate schools accept only the highest-performing bachelors graduates (“All our graduate students are above average!”), and anything lower

than a “C” grade is simply punitive because that amounts to a failing grade. So, in this sense, “grade inflation” is not considered a defect of graduate education, it is a design feature! Why should grading for GSU undergraduates be any different if all of GSU’s admissions are from the highest-performing slice of the high school graduates? So, reasoning by analogy with the *de facto* grading practices in graduate schools, should undergraduate grades simply certify that the students have either mastered or not mastered a certain body of knowledge and either exhibit or do not exhibit a defined set of skills or capabilities? If so, that amounts to a “pass-fail” system, in which case only two grades (A and F or, indeed, A and B) would suffice. Is it possible that the pass-fail system is appropriate in some disciplines and not in others? And so it goes. I could pose more scenarios and questions illustrating the complexity of this topic, but, after all, that is the subject of this book, and it is better addressed by the expert authors than by me.

Still, when all the arguments and rationalizations are over, a core issue must be addressed: How can we make certain, and how can we assure ourselves, the students, and the public at large that grades truly do represent something meaningful, whatever that may be—that we have “standards” on which people can rely? If there are elements of the “commonsense” understanding of grade inflation in our grading practices, then shouldn’t we identify, address, and either eliminate or explain them? This, I believe, is the central, motivating concern.

To that concern, I would like to add another related question that places apparent grade inflation in direct conflict with a major public policy issue. Colleges and universities are under great pressure, as a matter of public accountability, to increase their graduation rates. When most of the authors and readers of this volume were in school, college graduation rates were much lower than they are today. I frequently hear alumni relate how, in one of their first classes as a new freshman, the professor told them, “Look to your right, and look to your left: Only one of you is going to graduate.” This admonition was undoubtedly intended to be motivational: “Study hard because failure is a real possibility.” And the data bear this out. In the 1960s, graduation rates at Wisconsin and other large public universities were less than 50 percent—often far less. But with rising costs for K–12 and postsecondary education, failure is no longer considered acceptable by the public. Legislatures and trustees are increasingly holding us accountable for improving our graduation rates, and we are doing

it. Today, the median graduation rate of the public AAU (American Association of Universities) universities is 73 percent, and the median graduation rate for the private AAU universities is 88 percent. If we admit only those students our admissions officers believe can succeed in college, if we take it as our responsibility to help those students succeed (almost the definition of teaching!), and if we monitor their progress by requiring them to maintain a *minimum* C average (grade point average [GPA] 2.0) to continue in school and to graduate, then the average GPA of the student body will necessarily be *greater than* 2.0. That is a mathematical certainty. Paradoxically, it means that the average student must necessarily maintain above-average grades. So some amount of “grade inflation” is a necessary consequence of doing our jobs well, and “average” is not a term properly applied to the grade that defines the bottom of the acceptable range for graduation. When the graduation rate rises above 50 percent, the average student is, in this sense, automatically above average!

University faculty have a dual responsibility: On the one hand, they are expected to define and maintain high standards of academic excellence. The grades they assign and the degrees they award are supposed to certify to the public that those standards were met. At the same time, faculty are being held accountable for raising graduation rates: “We’re paying you to produce degrees, not Fs!” Clearly these expectations are in conflict, at least to the extent that we allow our grading practices simply to evolve without periodic examination and public discussion.

When I was provost, I asked our Academic Planning Council to undertake an examination of all aspects of our grading practices for exactly these reasons of self-examination and public assurance. Our Office of Institutional Research examined several years of grade data and, through a very sophisticated analysis, concluded that our average GPA went up very slightly over the period 1990–1998, and that only about a third of the increase was attributable to the increasing academic preparation of our students. For example, students in 1998 received grades averaging about 0.2 GPA points higher than similarly prepared students received in 1990. Only about 0.06 GPA points of this increase could be “explained” by detailed subtleties of student demographics, leaving 0.14 GPA points of the increase to be explained by other factors. This finding was based on averages over all schools and colleges and over all undergraduate levels. Great variation was found

at the individual school and college level, and for different slices of the distribution of student preparation, so no single conclusion could be reached for the entire university. Neither could we reach agreement on the cause or meaning of the increase for any individual school, college, or department.

That does not mean the exercise was a failure, however. In the process of searching for evidence of grade inflation, we discovered some other things about grades and grading that were of concern and would not have been addressed without the study. One is the grade variations among sections in multisection courses. Two students with, for all practical purposes, identical performance but in different sections of the same course should not get dramatically different grades. And that was happening in some courses. All other things aside, students should not have to depend on the luck of the draw as to which section they get in. The faculty agreed with this proposition and implemented measures to address the problem. We also examined some mathematical artifacts inherent in our seven-level quantized grading system (A, AB, B, BC, C, D, F) and addressed those in some of our rules that contain numerical GPA thresholds and cutoffs. In the end, even though we did not definitively identify or “solve” any problems of “grade inflation” *per se*, we did gain a much healthier understanding of our grading policies and practices, and we put ourselves in a much better position to be accountable for them. I heartily recommend that all universities periodically undertake studies of this sort to assure themselves and the public that they are continuing to maintain appropriate and fair standards while simultaneously educating and graduating more students.

Finally, I would like to commend Professor Lester Hunt and the Wisconsin Association of Scholars for organizing this important conference, and to thank all the contributors and participants. We need to engage in this sort of public self-examination on many topics, and “grade inflation” is an excellent starting point.

John D. Wiley, Chancellor
University of Wisconsin-Madison

NOTE

This foreword is based on Chancellor Wiley’s welcoming remarks at the opening of the Conference on Grade Inflation and Academic Standards at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on October 11, 2003.

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PREFACE: WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

The inspiration for this book originated in a nationwide discussion that was ignited, during 2002 and 2003, by media reports of grading practices at elite eastern universities, including Harvard and Princeton. The practices, as reported, involved awarding what most Americans would intuitively regard as excessive numbers of As. Among the sparks that set the controversy ablaze were comments by Harvard political theorist and “grade inflation” critic Harvey Mansfield.¹ More fuel was added to the discussion when education theorist Alfie Kohn published an article, a lightly revised version of which is printed here, in the November 8, 2002, issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. In it, he asserted that, contrary to what much of the recent media comment suggested, there may actually be no such thing as grade inflation in American higher education today.

With a grant from the Wisconsin Association of Scholars, I organized a conference on “grade inflation” and closely related issues, which was held at the University of Wisconsin-Madison on October 11, 2003. Almost all the chapters in this book are derived from (and in some cases are radically revised versions of) papers presented at that conference. The purpose of this book, as of the conference from which it arose, is to examine the issues surrounding the idea of grade inflation from as many different perspectives and methodologies as possible. Some of them are strongly empirical, and some are entirely conceptual. Some are scientific, while others are openly polemical or moralistic. Some maintain that grade inflation is an epidemic problem in need of a radical solution, while others doubt that it exists. A reader who dives right into these eddying currents is apt to fall into a state of confusion.

What I would like to do here is minimize this confusion if I can. I will try to say, as briefly and clearly as I can, what the basic issues are that our authors are treating and how the different essays are logically related to one another. Who is disagreeing with whom, and about what? Which of the views presented conflict, and which are complementary to one another?

First, I should say what *sorts* of issues are involved here. Purely for convenience—without, I hope, committing myself to any deep philosophical theories—I will divide the controversial issues into three broad categories: *conceptual* issues, *normative* issues, and *empirical* issues. Conceptual issues include questions of the proper analysis or definition of concepts, which for present purposes can be thought of as the meanings of words. For instance, the question of what *war* is, insofar as it is a question of the proper definition of the word “war,” is a conceptual issue. So is, with the same qualification, the question of whether a revolution is a sort of war, and of whether America’s “war” on terror is a war, or its “war” on drugs. Although it is always possible to frame conceptual issues as “merely verbal” ones, they are sometimes very important. The concepts (or words) people use to deal with the world tend to bend and shape their thoughts and actions. Once we start to think of a campaign against drugs as a war, we are willing to use methods that would not otherwise be permissible, or perhaps even thinkable. We can do things, and with a clear conscience, that we would not otherwise be willing to do at all. One sort of conceptual issue that can become important is whether a concept is expressed by a metaphor (either live or dead) that interacts with the concept in confusing ways.

Normative issues include questions of what people should or should not do, or of what would be good or bad things to do. Obviously these issues go to the very heart of the controversy about grade inflation. The reason there is disagreement is that some people think that professors are doing something they should not be doing, or that there is some other way of conducting their affairs that would be better.

Finally, empirical issues are questions about what (regardless of what should or should not be the case) is observably going on in the world. One legitimate input into these issues is what might be called “armchair empiricism,” or reliance on what one has already observed. Most of the people who read this volume assign grades as part of their professional activities, and they know by direct observation what they themselves do, and what some of their colleagues do. Obviously

to make much headway with these issues we need more and better empirical evidence, including primary historical documents, questionnaire responses, grade transcripts, and perhaps controlled experiments.

In addition, I will comment on two “bottom-line” issues, issues that rest on one’s solution to several of the more fundamental ones.

CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

How should we define “grade inflation”? Alfie Kohn defines grade inflation as “an upward shift in students’ grade point averages without a similar rise in achievement.” Closely parallel definitions are proposed by Clifford Adelman and Harry Brighthouse. As Kohn suggests, this definition would seem to imply that increases in grades do not constitute inflation if they happen because students are turning in better assignments, or because there are fewer requirements that force them to take courses outside of their areas of strength, or because it is easier to drop courses in which they are not doing well. If students are doing better in the courses for which they received grades, he seems to be saying, then perhaps grades ought to rise. The idea is that grade “inflation,” if the term is to be meaningful, must be closely analogous to economic inflation. Adelman, for instance, comments that grade inflation, if it exists, would consist in teachers *paying* a higher and higher *price* for the *same product* from students.

Of course, as is generally the case with hotly contested ideas, other definitions are possible. Richard Kamber, in “Understanding Grade Inflation,” defines grade inflation as the “reduction in the capacity of grades to provide reliable and useful information about student performance as a result of upward shifts of grading.” Note that Kamber’s proposed definition involves an assumption to the effect that the concept of grade inflation, if it makes sense, is the concept of a malfunction, and that it cannot be neutral about what this malfunction is. On his analysis, the malfunction is a failure in communicating information to students. Other definitions might imply that the relevant malfunction would be that some grades are not justified because the quality of the students’ work does not deserve those particular grades. One immediate implication of Kamber’s definition is that an upward shift in grades can be inflationary and still cause problems (contrary to what Kohn states and Adelman and Brighthouse imply) even if it is accompanied by an increase in the quality of the assignments that students

turn in. The reason is that the evil of grade inflation, in Kamber's analysis, lies in something that it has in common with grade *deflation*: namely, that it is an instance of grade *conflation*. I will return to this idea momentarily.

Brighthouse offers arguments that in effect are rejoinders to this line of reasoning. He maintains that students are not misled by inflated grades because, in the event that they find themselves in a class with inflated grades, they "discount" them accordingly. Note that this is just what economic agents do regarding price inflation. If bankers who make loans know how much the money supply will be inflated, they require interest rates high enough to offset the diminished value of the dollars in which their loans will be repaid. In addition, Brighthouse claims that the conflation of the highest levels of achievement into one grade affects relatively few students (namely, the very best), and that these tend to be the ones who are least interested in grades.

Is "grade inflation" a useful term? On the basis of his strongly economic analysis of the concept of grade inflation, Adelman concludes that it would not apply meaningfully to higher education. After all, there is no *same product* for which teachers could be paying either the same price or different prices. The papers and exams they were evaluating in 2002 were quite different from those that were being evaluated in 1972, because knowledge has grown since then. Interestingly, Kamber reaches a similar conclusion—that is, that the metaphor of "inflation" is not very helpful in understanding grading trends—though he does so on entirely different grounds. In his analysis, the difference in quality between student performance in 1972 and today is irrelevant to what grades we should be giving now. For him, the crucial difference between economic inflation and grade "inflation" is that the problems they cause are entirely different. Price inflation is an evil (if and when it is) because it causes an inefficient allocation of resources and an unjust redistribution of wealth and income, and none of these bad effects will happen if inflation is uniform and universally anticipated. Grade inflation is bad, according to Kamber, because of the way in which grading is *different* from pricing. Grades, unlike prices, constitute a system that is sealed at both ends, so the general upward or downward shifts result in phenomena being bunched up at one end of the scale: A refers to what used to be A work, but also to what used to be B work, so that it becomes impossible to distinguish between

those two levels of achievement any longer. This effect occurs, he maintains, even if the upward shift is uniform and anticipated.

NORMATIVE ISSUES

What is the proper purpose of grading? As we have seen, our answers to the question of what grade inflation is might rest on answers to a more fundamental question, of what grading is supposed to accomplish. Should grading be used to distinguish between the quality of performance of the students in a given class, program, or school? Or should it be used to assign absolute standards of value? Or should it inform prospective employers or admissions committees as to how well students have done? Or should it be used primarily to motivate students? Alfie Kohn speaks against the first of these answers, that grading should sort students out into levels of achievement, on the grounds that it creates a conflict of interest among students, a race to be at the head of the class. John D. Wiley points out that the second sort of policy—assigning absolute levels of achievement—could explain graduate schools in which the average grade is an A (if you are not outstanding, then you should not be in graduate school). Kohn criticizes the last of these functions, that of providing motivation, on the basis of his theory that such “extrinsic” motivation crowds out the “intrinsic” motivation (learning for its own sake) which, in his view, learning requires.

Kamber’s analysis, as we have seen, assumes that none of the previously mentioned purposes of grading is the fundamental one. The basic purpose of grading, in his view, is to communicate information to students about how well they are doing. Brighouse agrees that this is at least *one* important purpose of grading. He points out that grades are important cues that students can use as they allocate study time to different assignments and courses. While Kamber argues that inflation is a problem mainly because of the informing function of grades, Brighouse argues on the contrary that it is most likely to be problematic in relation to a completely different function, namely, that of motivating students. If As become routine, then they lose some of their power to inspire effort, while if Cs become rare, then they are more likely (when they are given) to discourage students and crush their desire to try harder.

An additional potential purpose of grading is discussed by Francis Schrag. It might be called “socialization.” Grading is done by applying

norms of conduct to human behavior—this is good, that is not good. One thing that grading might do is convey these norms to others, to imprint these norms on the minds of the students.

What ethical standards are relevant to grading practices? The two authors that focus on this issue are Schrag and (in “Grade ‘Inflation’ and the Professionalism of the Professoriate”) Mary Biggs. They give sharply contrasting answers. Schrag explores the implications of certain egalitarian conceptions of social justice and attempts to construct some grading practices that are compatible with his preferred variety of egalitarianism. The basic problem he is trying to confront is that grading, by its very nature, seems to treat people unequally. Biggs, on the other hand, approaches the subject from the point of view of professional ethics, in particular a version of professorial professional ethics that applies to the professoriate. In her view, the fundamental obligation of this ethic is to promote excellence. Obviously her fundamental principle, excellence, is very different from Schrag’s, which is equality, and it promises to lead those for whom it is a fundamental principle in quite a different direction.

EMPIRICAL ISSUES

Are there any demonstrable nationwide trends in grading practices? If there are, what are they? Obviously one of the issues at stake in the debate about grade inflation is that of what has actually happened to grades over the years. Kamber (“Understanding Grade Inflation”) discusses evidence that the first wave of grade inflation in the United States was not in the 1960s, as often assumed, but in the pre-Civil War period, when new colleges proliferated and fledgling institutions could ill afford to fail students. The later nineteenth century, he believes, saw a gradual tightening of standards. There also is evidence, he notes, that there was an inflationary surge, nationwide, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Citing studies published in 1976 and 1979 by Avro Juola, he finds a marked and strikingly universal upswing in grades from 1968 to 1974, with a slight decline in grades after the peak year 1974.

Clifford Adelman discusses the results of three nationwide longitudinal studies conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, which followed members of high school graduating classes of 1972, 1982, and 1992 for a minimum of twelve years, using grade transcripts from over 2,500 educational

institutions. He shows that these data show only rather subtle and complex changes from decade to decade, and the changes do not necessarily go in the direction that one might have expected. The high school graduating class of 1982 got slightly *fewer* As and slightly *more* Cs than the high school graduating class of 1972. Overall, the best data do not show a single-direction, nationwide trend throughout the three decades following 1972.

One feature of these two accounts, that of Kamber and that of Adelman, that is very salient, at least to me, is that each is perfectly consistent with the other. And yet, oddly enough, they are rhetorically positioned in opposition to each other. Kamber thinks grade inflation is a real problem, while Adelman is skeptical about whether it exists at all. How is this possible? Part of the answer, I think, lies in the conceptual differences we have already seen. If we ask whether economic inflation is (note the present tense) a problem, then we are asking about current shifts. What happened during the era of the Vietnam War is ancient history, irrelevant to the matter in question. On Kamber's view, that is not true of grade inflation—if grades were conflated during the Vietnam period and never came close to returning to earlier configurations, that can be a problem now.

What sorts of causal factors result in grades (sometimes) shifting upward? The answer one gives to this question will affect whether one thinks a given grading trend is inflationary, and it also will affect one's views on other relevant issues as well, such as whether reform is feasible and desirable, and which reforms one should prefer.

Kohn and Wiley point out that grades might go up because teachers are doing their jobs more effectively. As Wiley points out, helping students succeed is almost the definition of teaching. As we have seen, some of our authors are inclined to deny that grades that change for this reason are inflationary.

Kamber points out that upward shifts also can be the result of ideology. Teachers may want to show solidarity with students. Schrag indicates, in a somewhat indirect way, another way in which grading can be influenced by ideology. He describes several grading policies that accord with "luck egalitarianism"—roughly, the idea that what you get in life should not be a function of luck (as it would be if it were a result of your genetically determined abilities). All of the practices he describes involve allowing students to do extra-credit work to raise their grades. Obviously this would, other things being equal,

tend to raise the average grade. Further, as Schrag points out, they also would tend to muddy the informational content of grades in just the way that critics like Kamber identify with grade inflation, making it harder to tell from grades alone how good the students' actual performance is.

Kamber and Wiley speculate that upward shifts also can be influenced by pressures to increase graduation rates. If we lower our standards then, by definition, more students are doing satisfactory work. Kamber, Brighthouse, Biggs, and Hunt also argue that the advent of student evaluation of teaching in the late 1960s probably exerted an upward pressure on grades. Another possible cause discussed by Kamber and Biggs is enhanced time constraints on college teachers, such as an increased demand that they produce scholarly work of their own. For various reasons, lax grading consumes less time than rigorous grading. If you give a D or an F, and sometimes a C, then you will probably have to justify it in detail, while no one is going to demand that you justify giving an A. Professors who can ill afford to spend time meeting with angry students and parents have a reason to give plenty of As.

One possible causal factor that is denied by Biggs and Kamber is the frequently heard allegation that admission of inadequately prepared nonwhite students has led intimidated (white liberal) teachers to go easy on inadequate work. The modern wave of grade inflation began in the 1960s, when minority students were only 8 percent of the student population, and studies show them getting lower grades than white students with the same Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) scores.

Mary Biggs, in her two contributions to this book, traces grade inflation (or, as she prefers to say, grade "conflation") to two different causes. In "Grade 'Inflation' and the Professionalism of the Professoriate," she says that the cause of grade inflation is the faculty. This might sound like a mere witticism to some, but given that her approach (at least in this chapter) is fundamentally ethical, it is just what she (to be consistent) ought to say. As Nietzsche said long ago, morality is a theory of causes. If you are going to blame someone for some bad thing that has happened, then you must assume that the reason the bad thing happened was that person's act of will (including the person's abdications of the responsibility to choose), and you must suppose that the reason the thing happened is *not* to be found in the many things that the person cited as excuses for what was done. On Biggs's view,

the real reason grade inflation actually happens is that professors put personal profit above professional ethics.

Interestingly, in “Fissures in the Foundation: Why Grade Conflation Could Happen,” Biggs gives a rather different sort of explanation of grade inflation. There she argues that the ultimate cause of grade inflation is literally profound, namely, the decay of the intellectual *foundations* of grading. The sorts of causes that are usually mentioned (such as student evaluation of teaching) are at best superficial and intermediary causes. Grading as we know it today developed in tandem with a sort of scientism that held that the mind can be measured with scientific precision. As these ideas (deservedly) fell out of favor, and no new orthodoxy moved in to replace it, instructors lost confidence in their ability (or right) to assign grades. Insofar as Biggs is offering a historical explanation of grade conflation in the “Fissures” chapter, an unsympathetic reader might jump to the conclusion that her position here is incompatible with the moralizing sort of explanation she offers in the “Professionalism” chapter. If the cause lies in the historical situation, then the faculty cannot help what they do and cannot be blamed. But there are fairly straightforward ways in which Biggs can make the two explanations mutually consistent. For instance, she might say that the fissures in the intellectual foundations of grading simply removed a certain cultural support that facilitates conscientious grading. As the foundations crumble, something that once was a routine undertaking begins to require individual virtue and so becomes a test of one’s character. If one fails the test, one can be blamed for doing so. Biggs’s historical explanation is offered to show why grade inflation *can* happen, and her moralizing explanation is offered to show why it *does* happen.

Kamber, we might note, expresses skepticism about the historical explanation that Biggs offers in the “Fissures” essay. He argues (in “Understanding Grade Inflation”) that most of the professors who assign grades were untouched both by the intellectual principles of the psychometrics movement and those of its opponents.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Finally, there are the two bottom-line issues. They are fundamentally normative in nature and rest on many of the issues described earlier, including the other normative ones. They are: Is grade inflation a problem? And, if it is, is there anything that can be done about it?

Of course, we have already seen some of the things that our authors have to say about one or the other of these questions.

One class of reasons for denying that grade inflation is a problem would lie in putative evidence to the effect that either it does not exist, that it exists only in mild forms, or that we do not or cannot know that it exists. Adelman concedes that there has been an upward drift in grades in recent decades—from an average GPA of 2.66 for those who were twelfth graders in 1982 to 2.74 for those who were twelfth graders in 2000—but observes that this change is a minor one. Kamber denies that such a change is minor, partly because he understands the underlying problem differently. Such a rate of change would indeed be benign if it were economic inflation, but precisely because grade inflation differs from economic inflation such a trend, over time, can be seriously damaging, in his view. The conflation it causes remains in the system.

Depending on one's position on the underlying conceptual issue, one might well become very skeptical about whether we can know if there is any grade inflation at all in the long run. Kohn, Adelman, and Brighthouse argue, based on the position that grade inflation is an upward shift in grades without a corresponding increase in achievement, that rising grades do not per se support the conclusion that there is inflation. In addition, Adelman points out that, for a variety of reasons, we cannot compare what students achieve today with what their predecessors achieved in 1972, so that there is really no rational way to decide whether shifts in grading since then are inflationary or not. Brighthouse gives a similar skeptical argument against the idea that there is grade *variation* between disciplines. Kamber, as we have seen, denies the definition of grade inflation on which such skeptical arguments are based. For him, an upward shift is inflationary if it decreases the system's ability to distinguish between levels of achievement—period!

Another class of reasons for thinking that grade inflation is not a problem would be one that supports the idea that *even if* it does exist, it does not cause any serious problems. Brighthouse's "discounting" argument, which I have already mentioned, tends in this direction.

Finally, what, if anything, might be done about grade inflation? The one chapter in this volume that focuses on this issue is Kamber's "Combating Grade Inflation: Obstacles and Opportunities." The possible reforms that he considers are: (1) adopting caps that limit the

percent of a given grade that can be awarded (e.g., no more than 20% As in one class), (2) adjusting the value of submitted grades for a class upward when the class average is lower than a preferred average and downward when the class average is higher than a preferred average, (3) adding information on transcripts that clarifies or supplements submitted grades, and (4) requiring teachers to rank the students in each class. Of these four sorts of policies, the first one, grading caps, seems on the face of it to be the least politically feasible, mainly because it interferes most with what professors are allowed to do. Surprisingly, the faculty at Princeton have voted, and by a wide margin at that, to implement precisely this sort of policy. Kamber's recounting how this came about, and how it has been implemented, should be full of interest for would-be reformers at other institutions.

The most politically feasible type of response, Kamber thinks, is the third one: amended transcripts. Dartmouth and Columbia append to each grade on a transcript a note that indicates either the average grade for the class in which the grade was earned or the percentage of As given in the class. Such practices make grades more informative without interfering with what the instructor does, and so might be not be resisted by faculty as much as other reforms.

Brighouse discusses Valen Johnson's proposal that educational institutions deflate the higher grades of instructors who grade relatively laxly, replacing them with marks that are worth less (the second of Kamber's potential reforms, mentioned earlier). He rejects this on the grounds that it is politically infeasible, and because it would discourage the best students from taking courses from lax graders. Kamber points out (in "Combating Grade Inflation") that Johnson actually has a way to eliminate this effect, but it involves a sophisticated statistical formula that many faculty and students might find unintelligible.

Brighouse defends a reform that is regarded as radical in the United States, but is actually standard practice in Europe: separating the roles of teaching and evaluation. Teachers would continue to teach, but evaluation of student performance would be done by external examiners. By an interesting coincidence, Hunt describes what is essentially the same arrangement as the ideal way to evaluate the performance of *teachers*, of determining how successful they are at imparting knowledge. The only really effective way to judge teaching effectiveness would be to see how independent examiners would rate the proficiency of their students.

This volume concludes with a narrative by David T. Beito and Charles Nuckolls in which they tell of their attempts to bring about grading reform at the University of Alabama. Their campaign resulted in no change. It is instructive to compare their narrative with Kamber's narrative of reform attempts at Princeton, which did result in change. One difference that leaps forth is that the Princeton reform was in a sense a top-down movement, initiated by a dean, while the one at Alabama was a bottom-up one, initiated by two faculty members with no special institutional status. The Princeton dean was able to use her authority to focus attention on grading issues for eight years, before the crucial vote was taken. She formed a committee for the express purpose of doing so, and she chaired it herself. There are probably several lessons here that people who want to be agents of change would likely want to think about.

As I have said, I think many of those who thoughtfully read through this volume will find themselves in a state of confusion. But I think at least some of it would be a good sort of confusion, the sort that comes from a more nuanced understanding of the issues, and a grasp of the fundamental differences of principle that lie behind the positions that people take on those issues. As a small contribution to eliminating the not-so-good sorts of confusion, I will attempt, in a brief Afterword to this book, to say what, if anything, has been fairly definitely established by the preceding discussion.

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NOTE

1. Harvey Mansfield, "Grade Inflation: It's Time to Face the Facts," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 6, 2001).

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