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Folks

The posting below is a further look at the grade inflation issue. It is by Jonathan Dresner (<http://www.uhh.hawaii.edu/~dresner>) assistant professor of East Asian History at the University of Hawaii at Hilo, and a member of HNN's group history blog, Cliopatria (<http://hnn.us/blogs/2.html>). A longer version of this article appeared on the History News Network: <http://hnn.us/articles/6591.html> and is reprinted with permission.

Regards,

Rick Reis
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UP NEXT: Choosing a College

Tomorrow's Academia

1,601 words

GRADE INFLATION...WHY IT'S A NIGHTMARE

Jonathan Dresner

As my institution passed through accreditation review, I realized that there is a connection between grade inflation, accrediting agencies, the drive for standardized curricula, and quantitative learning assessment.

"Learning Assessment" is one of the hottest topics in education and it is making its way into higher education. Departments are being called upon to monitor not only core education courses, but also the progress their majors make at upper levels. My department is engaged in setting up assessment for our courses and majors at all levels, not because we believe in it, but because our chair is a savvy and forward-thinking veteran. We developed quantitative learning assessment for our World History surveys, we are working on on-line portfolios for history majors, and we videotape our senior symposium.

Our forward-thinking approach made us a star of our accreditation reports. I do think that my department is a good one: other faculty, employers and graduate schools all praise our majors, and our major numbers and enrollments have been rising. Still, we're assessing everything, and I'm inclined to think that my chair is right about the need to do this sooner rather than later, on our own schedule and in our own way instead of waiting for mandates and deadlines from above.

Because those mandates and deadlines will come. When is your next departmental review? When is accreditation renewal? Find out now, and plan accordingly. It took us a year's worth of meetings to work out our World History instrument; it'll take months to get our on-line portfolios up and running; then we have to gather four or five years of

data. Maybe we could have done it more quickly if we borrowed ideas and tests from other departments? We did, but our program -- like yours -- has quirks and particularities that required us to tinker.

What's the connection between grade inflation, accreditation and review, and assessment? Grades are unreliable as a measure of academic success, so stakeholders are looking for alternative ways to gauge our graduates, and tools to aid and inspire us to more effective teaching. Since academic institutions themselves have done too little, governing bodies, including accreditation agencies and government, are taking what seem like good ideas and making them mandatory. For primary and secondary education, this has come in the form of high-stakes testing, including NCLB assessments and Massachusetts-style graduation tests. If we are going to avoid similar "solutions" being imposed on higher education, we need to develop alternatives that credibly address the problem.

Why is Grade Inflation a Problem?

Inflated grades interfere with teaching and learning, with hiring and tenure, with the quality of our work environment and with the academy's relationship with the wider community.

The most obvious effect is that it becomes harder to use grades as a shorthand form of communication with students. Sure, individual teachers can explain "what grades mean," but varying standards make it hard for students to keep track. Narrative responses to work help, but, unless an assignment involves revision, students tend to ignore anything except the grade; conversely, narrative responses without an explicit grade will tend to be interpreted in the most positive possible light, making the eventual grades unnecessarily traumatic.

The disjunction between graduate training and student expectations makes it likely that faculty starting out will have standards somewhat higher than the norm for their hiring institutions. Harvard's Career Counselors refer to the "H-Effect", the assumption by interviewers that a Harvard-educated Ph.D. will be disappointed by the quality of local students and have difficulty teaching at their level. To some extent it is justified, particularly since new hire mentoring is anemic, and this results in an elevated rate of attrition.

A corollary is the breakdown of morale and collegiality that comes from struggling against what feels like constantly falling standards. New hires' high standards are met with hostility by students and suspicion by other faculty. Differences in grading between departments become factions, and the implied threat to academic freedom presented by standards imposed from outside makes nearly all academics bristle and stiffen, so it festers.

Finally, grade inflation has led to public dissatisfaction with educational results. The same forces that have driven the primary/secondary assessment movement seem to be pushing into higher education as well, and their steady and credible expressions of concern about the process and results of higher education will continue until we, or they, find a solution to the problem.

Solutions already being tried

Some colleges and universities have tried to adjust their grading systems: Princeton instituted a limit to A-level grades. Harvard adjusted its GPA calculation to narrow the A-/B+ gap. Some have tried acculturation through discussion, but without hard data there is mostly a chorus of "our department isn't the problem." Tenure, for all its charms, both insulates its possessors from pressure to change and provides strong motivation for grade leniency to the untenured. Still, "post-tenure review" with an eye toward continued teaching effectiveness is already being put in place or seriously discussed throughout the American academy. Academic freedom, precious though it is, is used to deflect significant discussions of grading or pedagogy.

The accreditation agencies use periodic review to promote the scholarship of learning and current "best practices." Many of their themes are encapsulated in the now-popular "Master Syllabi" that clearly lay out learning goals that can be demonstrated, assessed, evaluated in some fashion. Syllabi seem to be very important: collecting syllabi and putting them on the internet was an important part of the accreditation review. Any ambiguity or reservation about the idea of "syllabus as contract" seems to be over and done.

They do not seem terribly interested in grade inflation -- perhaps they've given that up as a losing battle -- but instead focus on metrics separate from grades: Pre/post-testing, portfolios, post-graduation interviews and graduate tracking. There is little discussion of how "best practice" applies to different disciplines, or different levels; we're supposed to figure that out ourselves, but without deviating significantly from standards of best practice that they recognize.

One issue raised repeatedly in our accreditation was governance. They were concerned about how general education standards were set and enforced, particularly about the independence of the individual college faculties and about the lack of review of workload and pedagogical aspects of courses. Clearly a more centralized approach

was preferable.

Some institutions have abandoned grades as a measure of success or ability. Ironically, the most widespread form of national post-graduate testing is graduate admissions tests. Lip service is paid to grades, recommendations and personal statements give admissions readers some way to tell applicants apart, but the ubiquity of standardized tests is perhaps the most damning form of self-criticism possible. Professional licensure in several fields is test based, recognition that completion of the relevant degree may not indicate technical mastery. Some departments have gone so far as to include a "preparation for the test" course as a component of the major.

What's Next?

My suggestions, which most readers will cheerfully ignore in favor of their own, focus largely on the nexus between grade inflation, student evaluation of teachers, and tenure review. Some form of open grade norming -- putting the class median on transcripts, for example -- would reduce the opacity of grades. In the long run, outlier departments must be called to account, and discussion of grades, standards and norms must be ongoing, data-driven and interdisciplinary. Reform of social promotion and grade inflation at the primary and secondary level would help immensely.

Reform of the institutional culture must include an environment in which teaching issues can be discussed without fear that sharing concerns will be used against you in evaluation. If I have one word of advice for untenured faculty, it is: do not admit that you have any difficulty with teaching, because it will be used against you. Faculty need some form of confidential mentoring or some form of mutual class visitation and discussion that does not assume a problem on the part of the participants. Tenure/retention review should emphasize qualitative material, and problems, if noted, must be addressed with mentoring and support. Post-tenure review could remove the most egregiously bad tenured faculty from the classroom without threatening academic freedom. But these reviews and discussions must be sensitive to disciplinary differences, course level, and to the student population.

If grade inflation continues and no strong articulation of standards is forthcoming, the worst-case scenario is easy to project. National standards for college curricula, enforced by testing in core subjects, have already been discussed by national legislators. Accrediting agencies and federal funding would force schools to address their curriculum to these tests, which would entail the functional loss of academic freedom. Faculty whose students failed to perform well would be penalized, probably with dismissal, and tenure would be obsolete. Students would be forced to take more general education courses, but would have fewer choices. At this point, college really would become an extension of high school.

We are faced with change: we must decide what sort of change we prefer. I would prefer that we be accountable to ourselves, as an intellectual and teaching community, and that others respect that system because it produces high quality results. If we cannot demonstrate those results, and that accountability, it will be imposed on us in a form that we may not recognize or appreciate.

Dedicated to the Invisible Adjunct.