

Grade Inflation!

Fight It by the Improvement of Grading Procedures

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Abstract

Grade inflation may be countered by improvement in grading procedures. Old proven methods and some new technology is explored as helps for the problem.

The evidence is indisputable. The average ACT and SAT scores of students taking the standardized exams have declined significantly over the past five years. At the same time the grade point averages of college students have escalated at such a rate that a recent news release from The Ohio State University News Services had the following lead: "If current grading trends at Ohio State University continue, the average student's grade in 1977 will be a B. By 1997, it will have crept up to an A — for everyone."

Moulds reports that:

Undergraduate cumulative grade averages on the Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin climbed from a static 2.59 in the academic years 1961-62 through 1965-66 to 2.93 for 1971-72. During the same period, the rise for freshmen only has been even more spectacular — from 2.28 to 2.68. Anywhere from one-half to two-thirds of Harvard's baccalaureates are being turned out "with honors." At the University of Illinois, the young assistants and instructors who teach freshman Rhetoric award A's and B's to nearly all comers. . . .

Figures on dismissal rates and on numbers on the Dean's List also indicate changing grading patterns. In my (Moulds') own college of Arts and Sciences, incomplete figures (complete since Fall, 1962) going back to 1955-56 suggest an annual dismissal rate steady at 16-17% of annual average enrollment until 1967-68. The decline that set in then resulted in a 9.2% figure for 1971-72. (2, p. 501)

An awareness of this dilemma is essential for professors throughout the United States. Obviously no one can prescribe for professors how to grade — neither how stringently — nor how loosely (better known as humanely). However, in view of the above evidence, each professor should assess his grading procedures more systematically and revise his basis for determining students' grades.

Basis For Evaluation

The most defensible basis for evaluating student performance is an assessment based on course objectives. It is extremely helpful for the professor to formulate spe-

cific objectives for his course. These objectives should delineate, in rather specific terms, what the professor expects students to know and be able to do upon completing his course. This process helps one to design more clearly the learning activities that will allow the students to develop the knowledge and skills deemed necessary.

Once the professor establishes such objectives he should then be sure he tests for the behaviors which he has indicated students should possess after the learning experience. While all instructors do not share their objectives with students, such a practice is helpful in terms of giving students an overview of what they are expected to accomplish in the course. This in turn allows students to periodically check the progress they are making toward meeting the course objectives.

Using behavioral objectives as a basis for course planning and student evaluation is only the foundation, however. A few other simple practices will further enhance one's grading effectiveness. It is crucial that the teacher carefully explain to the class his grading system, testing policies, and general philosophy of grading. This discussion should be conducted in an understanding, humanistic atmosphere rather than in a threatening or condescending manner. Such a discussion should include precisely how the final grade for the course will be determined. It is usually desirable to remind students of grading policies during the term.

Once the teacher develops a sound basis for grading he needs to build on this foundation. In executing the total grading plan it is important to be cognizant of a number of important principles.

Psychological Implications

Professors can substantially enhance performance of students by the manner in which they actually grade student's papers. Page says: "Each year teachers spend millions of hours making and writing comments upon papers being returned to students, apparently in the belief that their words will produce some result, in student performance, superior to that obtained without such words. Yet on this point solid experimental evidence, obtained under genuine classroom conditions, has been conspicuously absent. Consequently each teacher is free to do as he likes; one will comment copiously, another not at all. And each believes himself to be right." (3, p. 173)

Page conducted a study where he had teachers administer whatever objective test they had scheduled to give. The researcher then had all of the teachers (74) collect the papers and mark them as they normally would including a final numerical score and corresponding letter grade on each paper. Teachers rank ordered the

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papers with the best paper on top. The teacher then rolled a specially marked die to assign the papers, in the order in which they were stacked, to one of three groups: *no comment*, *free comment*, or *specific comment*. The teacher then returned *all* test papers with grades and comments according to their treatment group.

As might be expected no comment students received no remarks, free comment students received comments the teacher felt like making, and specified comment students received one of the following comments according to the grade they had received:

- A: Excellent! Keep it up.
- B: Good work. Keep at it.
- C: Perhaps try to do still better.
- D: Let's bring this up.
- E: Let's raise this grade!

The effect of the three treatments was measured by the scores received on the next objective test given in class. The results of the experiment revealed that the specific group achieved higher scores than the no comment group. The free comment group received the highest scores of all.

Such empirical evidence should demonstrate the value of taking time to comment on our students' performance. While this comment procedure is very helpful for objective tests, this writer suspects it is even more valuable to give clear written reactions to subjective evidence submitted by students. Without such feedback students cannot be expected to concentrate as specifically on areas needing improvement.

While feedback affects a student's subsequent performance and ultimately his final grade, fatigue or boredom can affect the grade a teacher assigns his students also, significantly. Evidence shows that students' grades on papers are affected by the length of time the professor continuously grades papers. A study conducted by Emily S. Dexter (1, pp. 664-667) offers the following conclusions:

1. There is usually a consistent tendency on the part of a scorer toward either increasing severity or increasing leniency. In other words, this variability is not, as a rule, merely different, or erratic.
2. Teachers' marks given early in a period tend definitely to agree more closely than do those given later in a work period. The moral of this, in the interest of fairness, seems to be not to work for too long a period at the grading of papers. One's inaccuracy keeps increasing.

When grading subjective items, grade the same question on all of the papers before going to additional questions. Have papers coded so you must grade the evidence rather than the personality. Have clearly in mind what the answer to a question must be before administering the first exam. These simple guidelines will help the professor avoid potential problems rather than having to solve them.

Once final grades for a course have been determined, students should be able to receive this information without having to wait for a grade report. Certainly there are many times when a professor simply does not want to face a "nit picking" or ambivalent student. However, in the long-run, if professors give frequent feedback and operate in a very open fashion with respect to grades their problems will diminish rather than mushroom.

New Grading Technology

A new process developed by A. B. Dick, called the latent image process, facilitates grading as well as learning. It allows the professor to conceal on his test the correct answers. Students use a special pen to mark the answer which they feel is correct. When the special pen touches the area containing the latent image, students discover whether their answers are correct or incorrect. This process allows a professor to make up a test which students can grade as they take the test. Not only are students able to grade their test (without cheating) but they are able to receive immediate feedback as well.

Since the test is self-scored it saves teacher grading time. Various grading schemes are possible, for example, full credit might be given if the student discovers the answer on the first attempt, half credit if the answer is discovered on the second attempt, and sharply diminishing credit if subsequent attempts are needed.

The latent image process could also be used for programmed instruction, study guides, and other learning packages where immediate reinforcement is desired.

Summary

While college grade point averages continue to rise rapidly, ACT and SAT scores are lower each year. In view of the current grade inflation, an increasingly better job of grading students' performance is needed.

Top priority should be an improvement of grading practices. Student assessment based on clearly delineated course objectives is a major improvement in procedures. Tell students how they will be graded. Remind them of grading policies as the term progresses. Student's performance improves with clear feedback. Watch fatigue while grading for extended periods of time. Fatigue generates increased grading inaccuracy.

Literature Cited

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3. Page, Ellis Batter. "Teacher Comments and Student Performance: A Seventy-Four Classroom Experiment in School Motivation," *The Journal of Educational Psychology*, (August, 1958).