

Grade Inflation Remains Widespread and Persistent

By Don Sutherland

At mythical Lake Wobegon “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” Of course, it is mathematically impossible for everyone to be “above average.” But in some areas of higher education, courtesy of widespread and persistent grade inflation, the notion that most students are “A” students may not be so far-fetched in the future.

Updated research conducted by former Duke University professor Stuart Rojstaczer and Furman University professor Christopher Healy revealed that an “A” has become the most common letter grade at four year colleges and universities. Moreover, nearly half of all grades are “A” grades.

The GradeInflation.com website on which their findings have been published revealed:

By the mid-to-late 1990s, A was the most common grade at an average four-year college campus (and at a typical community college as well). By 2013, the average college student had about a 3.15 GPA... and forty-five percent of all A-F letter grades were A's... If you pay more for a college education in the consumer era, then you of course get a higher grade. By 2013, GPA's at private colleges in our database were on average over 0.2 points higher than those found at public schools.

Upon seeing these statistics, I looked at how my own classes have fared over the past three years. During that timeframe, 45% of my students earned a “B” or higher while 55% learned less than a “B.” During that same timeframe, just under 16% of my students earned “A” grades. Nearly 29% earned grades ranging from “B” to “A-” and nearly 31% received grades ranging from “D” to “C.” Grade inflation has not yet breached my classroom.

Grade inflation poses a number of potential issues. Such issues include:

- Reduced reliability of assessment information concerning student learning
- Reduced reliability of public relations materials concerning an institution’s impact on student learning
- Reduced ability to identify and support at-risk students whose grades made overstate their actual performance
- Skewed perceptions of how well students are prepared for careers, graduate study, and meaningful lives
- Lost opportunity to improve pedagogical practices
- Suboptimal planning and resource allocation
- Reduced confidence of key stakeholders in higher education institutions

In an era of widespread grade inflation, accreditors may well need to devote greater attention to gathering and analyzing evidence that students are, in fact, making desired progress in achieving course, program, and institutional learning goals. Greater weight may need to be placed on instruments and artifacts that are less vulnerable to grade inflation. Such instruments and artifacts might include evidence from fieldwork or lab observations, capstone projects, research projects,

case study analyses, rubric-based assessment, licensure pass rates, and even standardized tests (despite documented limitations of such exams). In such a setting, accrediting bodies could increase the threshold for demonstrating that student learning goals are being achieved and that assessment processes are sufficiently robust to combat the added uncertainty created from inflating grades.