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Grade Distributions in the Basic Public Speaking Course: Exploring the Differences and Pedagogical Implications of Faculty Rank*

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Teaching public speaking requires a balance of passion, compassion, and dispassion (Osborn, Osborn, & Osborn, 2007). New and seasoned professors alike are challenged to teach and grade with compassion especially when students are affected by communication apprehension, defined by McCroskey (1977) as “the fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with others” (p. 78). Apprehension is exacerbated in the speech performance because students’ display of self is marked by high levels of what Richmond and McCroskey (1995) describe as *ego threat*. Behnke and Sawyer (1998) describe how this heightens student sensitivity to grades received, stating, “...criticism of the performance is tantamount to criticism of the person” (p. 151). Due to the reasons cited above, public speaking teachers can be particularly prone to assigning higher grades to avert ego threat. Given the performance-based nature of oral communication courses, there is no doubt that grading varies from most other courses required in the general education curriculum, but little research ex-

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plores differences in grading practice in the basic public speaking course with regard to general grade distributions or teacher rank.

Most studies analyzing the impact of teacher rank on grade distributions originate from research questions addressing grade inflation. Despite the need for sensitivity in grading and giving feedback, grade inflation is also a concern for public speaking courses. Grade inflation remains an issue throughout higher education and researchers claim it is a nation-wide trend even at prestigious institutions such as Harvard and Princeton, universities which require higher academic achievement for admission (Aronauer, 2005; Merrow, 2004). While some claim this inflation reflects a more highly prepared student, others argue that SAT scores have actually dropped and that many students must enroll in remedial courses (Merrow, 2004). According to Levine and Cureton (1998a), 32 percent of undergraduates have taken remedial courses. Some discussions of grade inflation link the trend back to the Vietnam War when male students who did not make the grade were drafted so grades were inflated as a form of protection (Levine & Cureton, 1998a). Others point to a connection between grades and universities' reliance on standardized teacher evaluations where an unspoken contract exists between students and faculty for high evaluations/grades (Martinson, 2004). Others see it as the commoditization of a college degree (Shepard, 2005). In other words, parents and students pay a lot of money for a college education, which bolsters an expectation of satisfactory grades. Boretz (2004) eschews the notion that grades are inflated due to a mindset of students as consumers. Instead, she suggests that attention needs

to be directed toward factors such as student learning and changes in educational and administrative practices, such as allowing students to revise work and extending withdrawal deadlines. Although faculty rank is clearly not the only variable in considering the overall high grades in college classrooms across the country, the increasing reliance on part-time, adjunct, and non-tenured full-time faculty make the study of their role in the grading process more important to consider.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 2003, 45.7 percent of all faculty members were part-time adjuncts. While adjuncts provide a wealth of experience to the classroom and universities save money by paying reduced salary and benefits, part-time faculty members are often left out of departmental conversations on standards, objectives, and curriculum (Cavanaugh 2006; Van Ness, Van Ness, & Kamery, 1999) and “receive minimal support for teaching, academic research, and professional development” (Townsend, 2003, p. 23). Part-time faculty often work in other non-university related positions and have limited prep-time and grading time. In addition, the tentative nature of adjunct contracts may make teaching evaluations even more critical to ongoing employment (Sonner, 2000).

Numerous studies examine the relationship between grade distribution and instructor status (part-time, full-time, untenured or tenured) and suggest that the lower an instructor’s rank, the higher the grade distribution (Cavanaugh, 2006; Sonner, 2000; Van Ness et al., 1999). Van Ness et al. (1999) studied this connection in basic finance courses at a small private school over a four-year period and found that although adjuncts’ grades were significantly higher, cumulative GPA was the best

predictor of performance in the class. Both Sonner's (2000) examination of grades in business courses at a small public university and Fedler, Counts, and Stonner's (1989) examination of the grade distributions in three journalism departments revealed that adjuncts awarded significantly higher grades than full-time faculty. McArthur's (1999) study of faculty grading at a community college revealed that students were significantly more likely to receive an "A" from an adjunct than a full-time faculty member. On a larger scale, Kezim, Pariseau, and Quinn (2005) analyzed business students' grades at a small private university over a 20-year period comparing adjuncts, nontenured, and tenured faculty and found that adjuncts did grade significantly higher than tenured faculty.

Researchers have posited that the connection between faculty status and grade inflation is connected to lack of experience with the course (Gohmann & McCrickard, 2001), universities' reliance on student evaluations (Eiszler, 2002), and a general lack of connection with curriculum discussions and decisions (Cavanaugh, 2006). Kezim et al. (2005) tested the claim that faculty grade 'better' as they gain experience and that nontenured faculty grade easier to ensure higher teaching evaluations, which are critical to gaining tenure status. They found no significant difference in grading before and after tenure.

Grade distributions in the basic public speaking courses have not been the subject of recent study. Crane (1979) wrote of the inherent issue of grade inflation within speech courses citing that smaller classes, stronger personal relationships, greater perceived threat of judgment and evaluation of student progress

all contribute to higher grades in the course when compared to other introductory liberal arts classes. He recommended departments review grade distributions with faculty including comparisons within departments and colleges and implement more objective assessment tools in addition to performance-based grades. In an effort to reduce grade inflation, most communication departments use a dual grading system composed of content exams and criterion-based speech performance (Behnke & Sawyer, 1998).

Even less research analyzes differences in grading practices in communication based on teacher rank. Williamson and Pier (1985) reviewed grade distributions in the basic speech course at one university over six semesters with 81 sections and found GTAs assigned more B's and incompletes than tenured or tenure-track faculty who assigned more C's and D's. The authors cite "lack of experience, lower standards, and more sympathy for students" as reasons for these grading differences (p. 1). This project explores the state of grade distributions in the basic public speaking course with attention to the increasing use of part-time and full-time non-tenure track faculty (Curtis & Jacobe, 2006). The following research question guides this analysis:

RQ: How does faculty status (adjunct/part-time, graduate teaching assistant, instructor, tenure/tenure track) influence student grade distributions?

METHOD

In this analysis, we examined grade distributions from the introductory public speaking course from two comprehensive, public American universities. The sample is composed of 442 sections with 11,381 students over a 2-year period from Fall 2004 to Summer 2006. The standard course enrollment cap at each university varied from 25 to 32 students, and the mean class size in the study was 26 students. Sections dedicated to honors or forensics students were excluded from the sample because these sections are more likely to have more positively skewed grade distributions as student performance is generally higher. Honors students tend to maintain high grades throughout all classes, and forensics students tend to have a much higher interest in and aptitude for public speaking. Additionally, the instructors of these courses have greater leeway in constructing a syllabus and assignments, which meet the needs of these groups.

Both universities share some important traits. First, both have basic course directors and varying degrees of standardization. One program provides a standard syllabus for all instructors of all ranks to use, and the other offers instructors a sample syllabus featuring required elements to include on all syllabi (i.e., disability accommodation statement, the required number and types of speeches, and requirements for weighting speeches, exams, and other assignments). Second, both programs feature differing forms of mentoring for GTAs. One university has a course required for all beginning GTAs that meets on a weekly basis, the other has a

mentoring program that pairs a GTA who plans to teach in the program with a talented and experienced full-time instructor. The GTA then attends classes with the instructor and is allowed to teach class sessions.

The data were coded according to four faculty ranks including: GTAs ($n = 63$), part-time adjunct faculty ($n = 151$), full-time instructors ($n = 210$), and tenure and tenure track faculty ($n = 18$). Tenured and untenured faculty were collapsed into the category of tenure/track due to the small population in this category teaching the basic course and due to the aforementioned findings by Kezim et al. (2005) citing no significant changes in grading before and after earning tenure. Student grades for each course were converted to a 4.0 scale providing a mean grade point average for each course ($A = 4.0$, $B = 3.0$, $C = 2.0$, $D = 1.0$, $F = 0$). Table 1 provides the summary data for the distribution of scores. The mean grade point average of each course was 2.83 ($SD = .40$) with 71.61% of students receiving an A or a B.

Table 1
Grade Distribution in the Basic Course

Grade	Total # Assigned	Percentage
A	3200	28.60
B	5047	43.01
C	2016	17.81
D	439	4.06
F	679	6.53
Total	11,381	

RESULTS

The researchers used analysis of variance to investigate how grading distributions differ in the basic speech course based on instructor rank. Analysis of variance revealed a significant difference between overall course GPAs based on instructor rank, $F(3, 438) = 4.69$, $p = .003$, $\eta^2 = .03$. The Levene test results ($p = .003$) indicated unequal homogeneity of variance; therefore, the Welch statistic was calculated confirming the significance of the ANOVA results. The Games-Howell test, appropriate for unequal variances and group sizes, was used to examine specific group differences. Results indicated that grades for students in sections taught by full-time instructors ($M = 2.76$, $SD = .43$) were significantly lower than teaching assistants ($M = 2.91$, $SD = .34$) and adjunct faculty ($M = 2.89$, $SD = .38$). No significant differences in course GPA existed between tenured/tenure-track faculty and the other groups.

Multivariate analysis of variance measured the impact of teacher rank on the percentage of specific grade levels (A, B, C, D, F) assigned in each section. The data revealed significant differences in percentage of D's, $F(3, 438) = 2.73$, $p = .043$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$ and F's, $F(3, 438) = 4.96$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2 = .03$. The Games-Howell comparison test revealed that the percentage of D's assigned by instructors ($M = .05$, $SD = .06$) and tenure/track faculty ($M = .02$, $SD = .03$) significantly differed. Instructors also assigned a significantly higher percentage of F's ($M = .08$, $SD = .08$) than tenure/track faculty ($M = .02$, $SD = .02$) and teaching assistants ($M = .05$, $SD = .05$). Tenure/track faculty also gave significantly fewer F's than

any other group. Finally, the mean scores between the percent of A's and B's assigned approached significance with p -values at .08 and .06 respectively.

As a follow-up to these findings, chi-square analyses showed the number of A's, B's, D's, and F's were significantly different based on teacher rank. Table 2 reviews the grades assigned within each group. GTAs and adjuncts assigned more A's, $X^2(3, N = 3200) = 28.38, p = .00$, and GTAs and tenure/track faculty assigned more B's than the other groups, $X^2(3, N = 5047) = 44.84, p = .00$. Finally, instructors assigned more D's, $X^2(3, N = 439) = 10.78, p = .013$ and more F's, $X^2(3, N = 679) = 19.68, p = .00$ than GTA's, adjuncts, and tenure/track faculty.

Table 2
Grade Distributions and Mean GPA by Teacher Rank

Grade	GTA <i>N</i> (%)	Adjunct <i>N</i> (%)	Instructor <i>N</i> (%)	Faculty <i>N</i> (%)
A	503 (28.29)	1196 (30.71)	1389 (26.59)	112 (23.05)
B	846 (47.58)	1694 (43.50)	2250 (43.08)	257 (52.88)
C	289 (16.25)	650 (16.69)	980 (18.76)	97 (19.96)
D	56 (3.15)	131 (3.36)	241 (4.61)	11 (2.26)
F	84 (4.72)	223 (5.73)	363 (6.95)	9 (1.85)
GPA	2.90	2.89	2.76	2.93
<i>SD</i>	.34	.38	.43	.29

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study explored how grades in the basic public speaking course differ based on teacher rank. Significant differences did exist among overall course GPAs, and the analysis suggests full-time instructors assigned lower grades than all other groups. These data suggest that the investment the university has made in hiring full-time instructors translates into a significant difference in grading patterns for students. The MANOVA and the chi-square analysis indicated instructors assign significantly more D's and F's than the other ranks. The chi-square analysis also revealed adjuncts and GTAs assign more A's than the other groups. These observations support other studies in this area, which show adjuncts award more A's (Cavanaugh, 2006; McArthur, 1999; Sonner, 2000; Van Ness et al., 1999). These data also partially confirm findings which suggest tenure/track faculty assign overall lower grades (Fedler et al. 1989, Kezim et al., 2005) because tenure/track faculty assign fewer A's than any other group, but significantly fewer F's than all other groups.

The following discussion addresses the unexpected finding of tenure/track faculty awarding significantly fewer D's and F's, the connections to previous studies of grade distributions and rank, and the pedagogical implications for how departments might foster an organizational culture that encourages rigorous grading practices by adjuncts. First, the low number of tenure/track faculty in this study may represent a lack of connection with the basic course at the two sample universities. If tenure/track faculty do not consistently teach the

course, they may not be as aware of departmental standards for criterion referenced grading. Another possible cause for the discrepancy between tenure/track and other ranks' distributions could stem from the fact that more tenure/track faculty do not teach the basic course during the regular school year, but instead taught in the summer term. Forty-four percent of sections taught by tenure/track faculty were in the summer. During the regular school year, students may drift away from classes and fail as a result of not completing the assignments. During the summer session, however, classes are condensed, thus making it more difficult to "drift." Additionally, during the summer term, students may be more apt to receive reimbursement for dropping a class, whereas a full-time student during the regular school year will not receive reimbursement as long as she or he maintains full-time status. Also supporting this interpretation of the data were the increased occurrences of withdrawals during summer term classes, something we had not studied as part of the original data set.

Apart from the differences in grade distributions by tenure/track faculty, the findings of this study with regard to overall course distributions were consistent with previous research. According to Levine and Cureton (1998b) between 1969 and 1993 the percentage of A's and C's awarded at universities reversed itself. In 1993, 26% of all students received A's, 53% B's, and 21% C's. Similar to this report, the grade distribution for our sample shows students in the basic speech course received approximately 29% A's, 43% B's, and 18% C's. This distribution, especially in the B category, is higher than those reported in the *NCES Profile of Under-*

graduates from 2003-04 with 27% of students receiving “mostly A’s,” 26% receiving “mostly B’s,” and 24% “mostly C’s.” More research and analysis of the basic course across universities is needed to determine the normalcy of the distribution with regard to the population.

The literature review showed that universities have become increasingly dependent on adjunct teaching. In line with the findings of this research, previous studies of grade distributions and instructor rank also consistently demonstrated a tendency for adjuncts to award higher grades. Differences in assigned grades according to teacher rank may be explained by multiple factors, but the consistency in findings regarding distribution patterns in grades awarded points to the organizational culture of the universities at large. The division in grading practices may be indicative of a lack of connection and community between adjuncts and the larger academic community. Strategies for developing a more inclusive organizational culture, with particular attention directed to needs and opportunities in the basic course can be addressed through involving the basic course director, and through examining the possibilities for course standardization, mentoring options, communication with adjuncts concerning expectations, inclusion of adjuncts in assessment, and use of technology.

The data from this study are of particular interest to basic course directors, who guide the curriculum and train new teachers and graduate students on departmental expectations. The role of the basic course director varies by institution, but many take responsibility for standardizing elements of the course, including the syllabus, textbook, major speech assignments, and daily

schedules. Little research addresses issues of standardization, but Shaver and Shaver (1995) suggest strategies such as uniform grading criteria for course assignments and tests composed by either a basic course director or a faculty committee. While standardized activities and exams may run the risk of enabling cheating and reducing teacher morale due to the creativity constraints associated with standardization, they can also provide a means of easing the workload of a grossly underpaid adjunct workforce and promote consistency in grading across sections (German, 1993). At the two universities in this sample, the public speaking course is standardized in terms of the syllabus, major speech assignments, and general weighting of course activities. The lack of significant differences between faculty groups in certain grade categories (such as C's) may indicate the positive effect of course standardization.

While course standardization eases the preparation burden for adjunct faculty, expectations for improving teaching quality are often not feasible for adjuncts, but are far more tenable for full-time instructors. Suggestions for advancing the quality of adjunct teaching include offering training programs (Strom-Gottfried & Dunlap, 2004) and providing handbooks and mentoring programs (Dixson, 1996). These options, however, create a burden both for the basic course director in developing these materials and activities, and for the adjuncts who often tack on an evening's teaching to their existing full-time workload for minimal financial reimbursement. Full-time instructors are more likely based on campus, and are thus more able to attend training and become more actively involved in curricular decisions. Essentially, the basic course is the livelihood of full-time in-

structors. Their extensive experience in assessing students in this class combined with greater access to on-campus training opportunities and their increased job security may be reflected in their seemingly more rigorous grading practices in this study. Course directors might consider scheduling pre-semester, instructor and faculty-led workshops on specific teaching tools at times convenient to adjuncts' schedules such as weeknights or weekends. For example, full-time instructors or tenure/track faculty could address best practices for grading speech outlines providing rubrics, student examples, and technology tools or training on how to evaluate speeches where sample speeches are viewed and evaluated as a group with the goal of achieving consistency in grading practices while emphasizing course objectives. These sessions might also address areas of weakness identified through formal assessment programs. While assessment information may typically be shared with all faculty as a report accompanied by new teaching materials and syllabus changes, it seldom takes the form of a formal discussion specifically addressed with adjunct instructors.

Another solution to these problems which appears more amenable to the needs of the adjuncts is to identify faculty who have both effective teaching practices and rigorous grading practices and have them serve as mentors to others (Boretz, 2004). This suggestion could be fruitfully applied to the basic communication course. Full-time instructors normally teach four or five courses per semester, and our data suggest that they appear to have more rigorous grading practices. Giving effective instructors release time of one course per semester to serve as a mentor who would visit adjunct classes and

encourage their development as faculty, would allow the adjunct to receive faculty development while not adding to the workload of either the adjunct or the basic course director. The instructor could then serve as a resource with whom the adjunct could discuss course issues. Additionally, the simple decision to make rigorous grading one component of perceived excellence used as a criterion for selecting faculty mentors becomes a statement about the organizational culture.

A component of the organizational culture that is particular to adjuncts is the delicate nature of their employment. Townsend (2003) noted the precarious position of adjuncts when it comes to job security as explained by a participant in his study, "Any complaints and you are never fired. You are simply *never* re-hired." According to Townsend, adjunct faculty "expressed concern about the amount of latitude this gave them in the classroom, particularly in grade disputes" (p. 31). Research on the correlation between grade inflation and student evaluations have had conflicting results. Of importance here, however, is the matter of perception. Whether awarding high grades *actually* correlates to higher evaluations is less germane to this study than whether the perception exists by the teacher that higher grades may translate into better evaluations. Given the contractual nature of on-demand adjuncts, the pressure to avoid job-threatening disputes mounts.

Some adjunct anxieties and expectations regarding the role of student evaluations in the re-hiring process could be alleviated by clearly stating the kinds of student evaluations that could be damaging (i.e., complaints about the instructor not coming to class or being unprepared) versus those complaints which are accept-

able (i.e., rigorous grading or heavy workload). Because adjuncts do not have the luxury of learning organizational culture through daily observation of and interaction with colleagues, clearer explication of the departmental philosophy on the role of evaluations becomes useful.

Beyond the data analyzed in the current study, this line of research points to some additional directions for improving pedagogy in basic courses. Besides standardization, the process of assessment is another means for enhancing grading integrity. National trends in course assessment for accreditation purposes require departments to consider specific outcomes for all courses, including public speaking in the general education curriculum. The process of assessment is valuable to departments because it redirects attention to course objectives and evaluation. Developing strong rubrics for grading and departmental assessment involves a process of training and testing. The goal is a common understanding of performance categories. This is often achieved by discussing speech assignments, watching sample speeches, and fine-tuning the criteria for each performance category. Involving faculty in this process is essential to consistency. Once reliability is established the assessment process becomes a strong tool for measuring course outcomes and a tool for training new instructors and graduate assistants. These conversations provide opportunities for refreshing faculty on departmental standards while at the same time serving to build community among adjunct faculty who are often excluded. Adjuncts could benefit from this form of community-building, but it would necessitate paying the

adjunct for her or his time, and scheduling assessment meetings at times where adjuncts could participate.

Another way to enhance standardization and build community is through technology use. Beyond the standardized syllabus, utilizing course management software for the basic course is not only a way to stay connected to students, but also to instructors of the course. WebCT and Blackboard are efficient tools for distributing information such as assignments, worksheets, grade forms, quizzes, outlining programs, and announcements regarding campus events, including invited speakers. These managed course websites are an asset for adjuncts without training on these tools or the ability to attend daytime technology workshops.

If reliance on adjunct faculty for the basic course is to continue, it seems reasonable to seek solutions, which address the precarious quality of the semester-to-semester contract and the unique scheduling obstacles faced by adjuncts in seeking greater participation in the larger academic community. While some of the suggestions, such as allowing course load reductions to mentor-instructors and including adjuncts in assessment processes involve some cost on the part of the university, we believe that the increasing reliance on adjuncts warrants such an investment.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to this study warranting consideration. First, the grade information collected (consisting of A, B, C, etc.) was converted to reflect a 4.0 scale instead of using the actual percentage grades stu-

dents received in the course. These broad categories narrow our ability to detect specific differences within and between each grade range. Future studies should consider collecting this information to increase precision. Increasing the sample size with regard to adding more tenure/track faculty would increase the power of the tests to identify differences. However, small numbers of tenure/track faculty teaching the basic course is consistent with national trends.

This research does not measure other potential intervening variables which may affect grade distributions. The low effect sizes reported in this study are a strong indicator that instructor rank only explains a small percentage of difference in student grades. Without examination of other data points, the researchers' ability to interpret the findings is limited, specifically with regard to reasons instructors assigned lower grades than other ranks. For example, teaching techniques, testing procedures or a lack of specific feedback for improving student performance could heavily influence overall grade distributions as could student GPAs, year in college, or SAT scores. The following section addresses other options for advancing this area of research.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Numerous opportunities exist for pursuing this line of research further. One avenue involves sampling grade distributions at smaller colleges and universities where more tenure/track faculty teach the basic course. Another fruitful avenue of research could entail a more

detailed examination of grading practices between faculty ranks, identifying patterns in grade distributions between speeches and other graded materials (i.e., exams). These data could be compared with data from institutions that did not have a significant degree of standardization for all sections of the basic course. Future research could also eliminate some variables that may skew results, such as the inclusion of summer term courses. Finally, more sophisticated statistical models should be used to investigate other contributors to student grades in the basic course. We recognize faculty rank as one variable impacting grade assignment, and future research could address class size, educational background of the instructor, type of institution, and teacher characteristics such as gender and number of years of teaching experience. It would also be interesting to examine whether adjuncts who work during the daytime and interact with a greater number of full-time faculty grade any differently than those who have little contact with the rest of the academic community.

This research explores the grade distributions in the basic speech course, differences in grades based on faculty rank, and the benefits of course standardization. The research lends further credence to maintaining connections with adjuncts, and affirms the value of hiring full-time instructors and developing a community of scholarship with regard to open communication about course objectives and standards for assessment. Due to the sensitive nature of grading the basic public speaking course, a greater degree of grade inflation is inevitable. In the interests of student learning and curriculum development, however, rigorous standards in the basic

course are enhanced by attentiveness to patterns and meanings of grades assigned.

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