


2-2011

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Recommended Citation

GENTRY, JEFFERY (2011) "RADICAL CHANGE IN FACULTY AND STUDENT EVALUATION: A JUSTIFIABLE HERESY?," *Administrative Issues Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/aij/vol1/iss1/8>

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RADICAL CHANGE IN FACULTY AND STUDENT EVALUATION: A JUSTIFIABLE HERESY?

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This article addresses the connection between two continuing trends in higher education: semester evaluation of faculty by students (SE's) and grade inflation. The two phenomena are explored historically; then a two-part plan is proposed to enhance the evaluation of both students and faculty. This solution does not replace current evaluation practices; it merely adds information on each student's relative performance. Although subject to criticism as radical reform, the plan is offered as a feasible check on grade inflation and diminished student responsibility—one that is consistent with long held higher education values, as well as recent calls for increased educational accountability. The author concludes that such efforts offer hope in reversing a set of disturbing trends in student achievement.

Keywords: college grading, grade inflation, instructor evaluation, student achievement

Thomas Jefferson, third president of the United States and founder of the University of Virginia, is widely credited with the statement, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be" (Hartz & Chappelle, 1997). A centuries-long national commitment to quality education has contributed to the U.S. Constitution's record longevity as a national charter, one that has secured freedom and promoted prosperity. Unfortunately, American higher education seems to be slipping into a reputation for mediocrity at the same time that global competitiveness is at an all-time high (Mahbubani, 2010). According to Hassel and Lourey (2005), most college instructors advise their students they should expect to spend at least two hours on homework for every hour they spend in class. This would equate to 30 hours of study per week for the average full-time student. Instructor expectations of time spent on homework have not matched student performance, however. The authors report that fully two-thirds of students spend 20 hours or less on all their homework in a typical week. A more recent study cited by O'Brien (2010) concluded that actual study time has fallen from 24 hours-per-week in 1961 to just 14 hours-per-week today. O'Brien finds it ironic that student grades have risen while study time has declined. In fact, despite their underwhelming workloads, students today receive record-high grades, suggesting that academic standards have deteriorated.

Grade inflation as a concept suggests that mean grade point averages (GPA's) have risen without a concomitant increase in overall student performance. According to now-retired Duke University Professor Stuart Rojstaczer (cited by Hassel and Lourey, 2005), GPA's have risen regularly at a startling annual rate of .015 points on a 4-point scale. Rojstaczer's ongoing research concludes that college students in 1991-92 held a grade-point average of 2.93. This number steadily rose to a GPA of 3.11 in the year 2006-07 (gradeinflation.com, March 10, 2009). Hassel and Lourey also report that the rate of A's assigned in all American colleges rose from 7% in 1969 to 26% in 1993, without any evidence of greater student achievement during the same period. Rojstaczer (2009) reports that grades began rising precipitously in the 1960s, plateaued in the following decade, and then climbed again in the 1980s and beyond. Perhaps the greatest impact of this trend is that students receiving undeserved A's may develop an inflated sense of their own competence and later receive a rude awakening when employers and others do not share their professors' unqualified praise (King, 2005; O'Brien, 2010).

The academy in the United States promises quality higher education sure to make a permanent civic imprint on students' lives. Yet more and more empirical studies and qualitative analyses paint a picture of higher education in decline. Rojstaczer (2009) points to research suggesting today's students are ill-prepared for class, receive less content from instructors, and spend much of their time consuming alcohol rather than studying. O'Brien (2010) blames lower standards on the increasing power of students and the unwillingness of instructors to challenge their expectations.



If long-term trends are devaluing the quality of American higher education, then fundamental, perhaps even radical, measures are in order. This article analyzes the connection between semester evaluations of faculty by students and the problem of grade inflation: specifically, how the two phenomena may perpetuate each other in a downward cycle of academic responsibility. Second, it proposes a two-part plan that would modify faculty and student evaluation methods in an attempt to reverse negative trends in student achievement.

SE'S AND GRADE INFLATION

Two trends in higher education over the past 30-plus years are semester evaluations of instructors by students (SE's) and grade inflation. In the semester evaluation, students rate professors on their teaching effectiveness, usually with a Likert-style questionnaire, as well as with open-ended comments. According to Downey (2003), SE's are an almost universal practice, "despite historical controversy regarding their usefulness and validity" (p. 711). One of the problems which provokes criticism is an overemphasis on likeability, animation, easy workloads, and easy grading. As these evaluation scores play an important role in faculty evaluation at many schools, professors are incentivized to waive attendance policies, eliminate the required purchase of textbooks, reduce homework, and even denounce other professors in a game-theory race toward tenure and promotion (Germain & Scandura, 2005).

The most consistent complaint about semester evaluations is their possible effect on grade inflation. Grade inflation, or the upward compression of grades toward the A and B range at the expense of C's and D's, has affected higher education since the 1960's (Rojstaczer, 2009; Germain & Scandura, 2005). Grade inflation has become so pervasive that some elite universities graduate a majority of their students with honors, including reports of 82% honors-graduation at Harvard in the year 2000 and 91% in 2002 (King, 2005; Hassel & Lourey, 2005). A number of studies cited by Hassel and Lourey confirm a direct correlation between the grades students receive and the favorability of their evaluations of instruction, despite the lack of any evidence connecting higher grades with better teaching and learning.

The connection between semester evaluations and grade inflation is strengthened by research cited by Germain and Scandura (2005), who assert that students consciously give high marks to instructors who give high grades—a relationship reflecting the advance of postmodernism and its skepticism toward hierarchy. Instructors seem powerless against the cycle because, according to Hassel and Lourey (2005), "when the number of students enrolled in a class and student evaluations can mark the difference between an instructor having a job or not, it is easy to see why many instructors resort to grade inflation" (p. 4). Thus the literature on evaluation of instruction and grade inflation identifies how high grades can lead to high semester evaluations, which, in turn, lead to still higher grades (King, 2005).

The connection between inflationary grades and positive semester evaluations may be an important factor in what Hassel and Lourey (2005) have termed "the dearth of student responsibility" (p. 2), which includes the dual sins of apathy and absenteeism. A quarter-century ago, G. Jack Gravlee, who chaired the Speech Communication Department at Colorado State University for many years, often complained that higher education is the only business in which the customer says, "Here—take my money. Now cheat me. Give me the least quality for my money" (personal communication, 1987). Thus higher education may increasingly serve to certify competency, rather than develop it (King, 2005), as students fail to perform well and then wheedle for grades they don't deserve. Trout (1997) decries the lack of responsibility of today's students in strong terms, declaring that "they do not read the assigned books, they avoid participating in class discussion, they expect high grades for mediocre work, they ask for fewer assignments, they resent attendance requirements, [the list continues]" (p. 47). With higher education becoming more consumer-oriented, grades rise as expectations on students seem to decline.

King (2005) asserts that there is no clear villain in the phenomenon of grade inflation; hence, there is little incentive to do anything about it. However, it is not a victimless crime. The two major victims are rigorous professors and rigorous students. Professors who challenge students' expectations, and thus resist the urge to water down homework demands or test-difficulty, find themselves shunned and marginalized by negative word of mouth (King, 2005) and the punishing power of student evaluations. Their shrinking classes give administrators an excuse to offer thinly veiled warnings about "program demand and retrenchment" (Hassel & Lourey, 2005; *The Teaching Professor*,

2004). The clear incentive is to dumb down the curriculum and give away grades previously reserved for excellent work. Therefore, Hassel and Lourey's "dearth of student responsibility" applies to professors as well. Moreover, strong students have little to show for their achievement when lesser performances receive the same grade, which incentivizes mediocrity for all. But I assert that students tend to adapt to the challenges with which they are presented. Why should they be blamed for self-interested behavior in an absence of counter-incentives? And why should we assume that these same students would crumble under higher standards?

This downward cycle of student and faculty responsibility prompts a pair of analogies. Yakov Smirnoff (2003) ridicules the Soviet regime of 20th century Russia in his comedy performances. According to Smirnoff, the quashing of incentives for individual achievement made a train-wreck of the communist economy in which workers said, "We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us." Without incentives for excellence, some of today's professors can likewise say, "We pretend to teach and they pretend to learn" in a sort of quid pro quo arrangement with students in which lax standards are rewarded with glowing student evaluations (O'Brien, 2010). While acknowledging the problem generally, the majority of faculty members do not believe it applies to them. *The Teaching Professor* (2004) reports results from a study by J. McCabe and B. Powell that found 92% of all professors consistently underestimated the grades they gave students, asserting that grade inflation was only a problem for other instructors. And those who accepted that their class GPA's were higher than they had presumed defended the grades by claiming that *their* students just happened to be exceptional and deserved them. Outside of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegone, however, the majority of students cannot be above average (King, 2005).

Another salient analogy comes from the medical field. Most patients indicating cancer on an x-ray would be happier at that moment to hear a doctor give them a clean bill of health than to learn the truth. Such a patient, told this lie, would leave the clinic more satisfied than if he'd received the darker diagnosis. But a physician would lose his license if he told people only what they wanted to hear, and patient care would collapse. College professors, on the other hand, are rewarded with high student evaluations for doing the same thing. These incentives push higher education closer to a mutual praise industry in which students and faculty give each other unrealistic compliments while achievement suffers. Hassel and Lourey (2005) lament that, "more than ever, students expect to be catered to, to receive a B or better for merely paying for the class and making a good faith effort" (p. 2).

It would seem that the genie is out of the bottle. How can higher education reverse trends that have continued for more than forty years? If one agrees that slackening standards are real, and are linked to a cycle of grade inflation and semester evaluation, radical change may be in order. But entrenched barriers prevent making faculty and student assessments more realistic. As long as student evaluations are used in retention, tenure, and promotion decisions, faculty will demur at requiring more rigor. In fact, they are wary of anything beyond conversation on the subject and tend to condemn even recommendations on grading practice as a violation of academic freedom (*The Teaching Professor*, 2004).

Existing qualitative proposals are logistically problematic. Annual faculty portfolios, such as those used for tenure and promotion, are time consuming for both preparer and reviewer. Likewise, students at many schools might take to the streets if professors reverted to the bell curve or otherwise agreed to bring class GPA's back to earlier levels (as if obtaining such agreement from faculty would be possible in the first place). What is needed is a cost-effective addition to student and faculty evaluation to provide a more balanced perspective. To this end, Hassel and Lourey (2005) call for a more comprehensive means of assessing student performance, as upward grade compression blurs formerly realistic appraisals.

In an effort to increase student responsibility, Hassel and Lourey (2005) recommend several measures: "explicit expectations; smaller, engaged classes; absenteeism-consequences; grading consistency; elimination of the extra credit model; and reorganizing responsibility for retention and enrollment" (p. 2). Unfortunately, these voluntary initiatives only work on the individual-instructor level or require funds that today's colleges and universities lack. Moreover, those professors who take the authors' advice may sacrifice their own standing with students and administrators. In contrast, the following two-part plan promises enhanced information for administrative decision-makers without creating excess labor or re-inventing current evaluation policies.



ENHANCED FACULTY EVALUATION

Semester evaluations (SE's) of faculty by students are typically used for two purposes: to provide instructors with information they can use to increase student learning and to give administrators evaluative material for retention, tenure, and promotion decisions (Germain & Scandura, 2005). I argue that SE's should be used only for the former purpose. Instructors with thick skins can always gain an idea or two from their rating numbers and open-ended responses, despite the fact that some students write unusable comments as they vent their frustrations at the end of a difficult semester (Weaver, Wenzlaff, & Cotrell, 1991). If read for information, not evaluation, SE's can yield usable observations. But using them punitively in retention, tenure, and promotion reviews gives an incentive for students to punish rigorous instructors. This ganging up on faculty by students and administrators only creates an environment of intimidation and marginalization—and even banishment—perpetuating grade inflation and reduced responsibility among students and professors.

Eliminating the use of semester evaluations as an independent measure of teaching effectiveness would aid rigor in the classroom. But if SE's must be used for evaluative purposes, I urge that they be placed in some sort of context. Germain and Scandura (2005) conclude: "To improve accuracy, it is necessary to include assessments of students' characteristics and grade inflation in the faculty evaluation process." The authors provide no plan to bring this goal to fruition, however. Students can lie about their cumulative grade-point-average, for example, to seem more credible critics of rigorous instructors.

To address the influence of grade inflation, a new statistic would endow SE's with a greater sense of perspective. In the sport of platform and springboard diving, athletes are judged not only on their execution of a dive, but on its degree of difficulty. Different dives are graded according to their intrinsic difficulty level, and the two figures are multiplied for the true score. Therefore, a technically-perfect 10.0 dive with a degree of difficulty (DD) of 3.0 would receive just 30 points from a judge, but an imperfect 9.0 dive with the maximum DD of 3.6 would earn a higher score of 32.4. Applying this analogy to SE's in assessing faculty performance, mean evaluation scores should not be viewed in isolation because grade inflation and lower standards are the result. A remedy is to consider student evaluation scores in relation to an instructor's grading rigor.

Compare two professors who taught the same set of freshmen and sophomore courses last semester. Dr. Jones held the line on grade inflation and reserved the grade of "A" for students who demonstrated excellence. Her classes produced a cumulative grade point average (GPA) of 2.8 on a 4-point scale, below the departmental mean of 3.1. Her semester evaluations, graded on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being highest), indicated a mean of 4.4. This performance mean was in the bottom-half of her department, but not precipitously below the mean. Dr. Smith, on the other hand, is a popular instructor who touts his semester evaluation mean of 4.9 as a nearly "perfect" rating on this pseudo-objective scale. However, a look at Dr. Smith's classes' GPA indicates a mean of 3.4, which may reflect easy grading standards. If SE means are the only routinely-administered measure of a professor's effectiveness—which is the case at many institutions—Dr. Smith would be regarded as the superior instructor, even if the opposite is really true. I look more favorably on Dr. Jones' also-strong 4.4 rating combined with her higher degree of difficulty in grading.

This analysis implies a salient juxtaposition between semester evaluation means and class GPA. Like Olympic divers, instructors' SE's should be factored along with the degree of difficulty (DD) in their class grades. The following theorem uses a simple multiplication formula in which the instructor's SE mean is multiplied by the degree of difficulty (DD = the inverse of her semester GPA) to produce a quality rating: $Q = SE \times DD$ (see Table 1). The model assumes that an instructor's grand-mean GPA of 2.5 reflects higher-quality teaching than a 3.5 GPA, a claim some faculty might find difficult to accept. As an inverse statistic, it assigns 1.0 DD for a 4.0 semester GPA, 1.5 DD for a 3.5 GPA, and 2.5 DD for a 2.5 GPA. Thus Dr. Jones' 2.8 GPA receives a DD of 2.2, and Dr. Smith's 3.4 GPA receives a DD of only 1.6. To ensure that no incentive exists for artificially low grades, the DD value deteriorates once it dips below 2.5. Thus a 2.0 GPA scores only as well as a 3.0 (DD = 2.0), making 2.5 the maximum DD score.

Table 1

Q-ratings for Professors and Percent-below Ratings for Students

| | Dr. Jones | | Dr. Smith | |
|----------------------|-------------|------------|-------------|------------|
| Raw SE mean | 4.4 | | 4.9 | |
| GPA | 2.8 | | 3.4 | |
| Degree of Difficulty | 2.2 | | 1.6 | |
| Instructor Q rating | 9.68 | | 7.84 | |
| Grade | N | Pct. Below | N | Pct. Below |
| A's | 5 | 75% below | 10 | 50% below |
| B's | 7 | 40% below | 8 | 20% below |
| C's | 7 | 5% below | 2 | 0% below |
| D's | 1 | 0% below | 0 | --- |

*Change made to Table 1 on 4/18/2011.

Using this theorem, Dr. Jones' Q-rating ($Q = SE \times DD$) is calculated thus: $4.4 SE \times 2.2 DD = 9.68 Q$. Dr. Smith's Q-rating is lower: $4.9 SE \times 1.6 DD = 7.84 Q$. Thus a more holistic review of the two instructors favors Dr. Jones, whose Q-rating is 9.68, compared to Dr. Smith's 7.84, even though Smith's SE's indicate a higher raw score. The Q-rating does not erase Dr. Smith's high student evaluation marks. Nor does it eliminate other qualitative information that administrators may gather for retention, tenure, and promotion purposes. It only provides an *additional* statistic that takes into account the difficulty of attaining high grades in his classes. In light of her more selective grading, Dr. Jones' 4.4 SE mean is commendable (88% of a perfect score), and the Q-rating reflects her strong combination of grading challenge and student satisfaction. This rating provides statistical "cover" and incentive for Dr. Jones to maintain high standards.

To account for upper-division classes yielding understandably higher grades, adjustments could be made where the maximum DD score could flex for higher-course numbers. Thus the maximum DD of 2.5 is assigned to a mean GPA of 2.5 in 100-level courses, 2.5—2.6 on the 200 level, 2.5—2.7 on the 300 level, and 2.5—2.8 on the 400 level. The Q-score would incentivize instructors to work toward an effective balance of rigor and student satisfaction, rather than simply seek the highest raw SE scores possible.

ENHANCED STUDENT EVALUATION

Just as semester evaluation means per se may be poor indicators of instructional quality, letter grades in isolation may be insufficient to measure student performance. Although some universities have moved to a plus-minus grading system (A, A-, B+, B, etc.), this measure merely splits hairs. Moreover, it does not overcome grade inflation because overall GPA's remain unchanged, according to empirical analysis (Frank & Feeney, 2006). Another effort, instituted by Princeton University, forces faculty to limit the number of A's to 35% of each class (Rojstaczer, 2009). Although brutally effective, the plan seems artificial and even draconian when applied to a particular senior-level class with especially-strong students. My analysis advises against forcing professors to suppress their normal grading style. As in faculty evaluation, however, *more* information may be the solution. The statistic described in the following paragraphs is designed for such a purpose.

Years ago, when a student received a grade of A, she knew that only a select group received the same grade. The standard bell curve placed about 68% of all grades in the C-range. This left roughly 13.5% in both the B and D





ranges, and about 2.5% in both the A and F ranges. The inherently competitive bell curve has now been replaced by an absolute grading system that falls prey to grade inflation, as a larger proportion of grades are compressed into the upper tiers of the scale. As a half-measure to the problem, King (2005) cites one professor who, feeling crippled by the pressures of grade inflation, now assigns final grades according to today's weaker standards, but then privately informs students of the grade they deserved. This system adds realism for the student, but is purely voluntary on the part of the instructor. Moreover, it provides no information to employers or scholarship committees about the student's overall performance.

Continuing the example from Table 1, Professor Jones assigned 5 A's, 7 B's, 7 C's, 1 D, and no F's in her class, for a class GPA of 2.8. Students receiving A-grades in this class are in elite company: only 5 out of 20 students. Professor Smith's students, on the other hand, received twice as many A's—10—along with 8 B's, 2 C's, and no D's or F's. His class GPA was 3.4. Since half the class made A's, the top grade was not as competitive (see Table 1). In order to provide a sense of perspective, some national standardized tests such as the ACT compute an absolute score, but also indicate the percent of students scoring below the given student.

College transcripts could do the same thing. Registrar's offices could provide truth in grading by revealing the degree of difficulty of each letter grade in a given class section. This could be done by adding the "percent below" quality rating to the student's transcript for each class grade. In the scenario above, students who made A's in Dr. Jones' class would have two indicators: the grade of "A" and a quality rating of "75," meaning that 75% of the class made grades below an "A" (see Table 1). The A-students in Dr. Jones' class would receive a grade of "A" and a 50 percent-below, meaning only half the class made a lower grade. Likewise, students earning B's in Jones' class could be proud that their percent-below score was 40, meaning 40% of the class fell below this mark. In contrast, each B awarded in Jones' class would yield a percent-below of just 20.

The grade reports of two students with identical GPAs are provided in Table 2. The student at "Rigor College" produced the same semester-grade report as his colleague at "Leisure College": a 3.59 GPA. However, the percent-below scores are quite different, with means of 82% below and 63% below, respectively. This disparity could even apply to two students at the same university, where the rigorous student chooses professors with a more-challenging reputation and then is rewarded with higher percent-below scores. This statistic might prompt instructors to take greater care in assigning A's, providing those truly-deserving recipients a more exclusive honor. Students might even encourage instructors to be more rigorous so that only top performances would receive top grades. The percent-below rating would in no way contradict the letter grade; in fact, they would be directly proportionate within each class. The new statistic would simply add information about the relative difficulty in achieving the given course grade. In fact, one student's "B" could bring a higher percent-below score than another student's "A" received from a different instructor.

Table 2

Percent-below Ratings for Students

| | Rigor-College Student | | Leisure-College Student | |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| | Grade | Percent Below | Grade | Percent Below |
| English Comp I | A | 90 | A | 68 |
| U.S. Government | A | 87 | A | 70 |
| Public Speaking | B | 70 | B | 48 |
| Botany | B | 77 | B | 55 |
| Spanish I | A | 88 | A | 72 |
| GPA/mean pct. below | 3.59 | 82 | 3.59 | 63 |

An added advantage of the percent-below rating is that it requires no additional paperwork from the instructor and only a simple calculation by the registrar's office (which could be automated). The only disadvantage, that it might increase stress associated with higher achievement among students, should be considered of benefit in a globally-competitive economy. In this scenario, an upward spiral of student responsibility and academic rigor strengthens the quality of education. Like the Q-rating for faculty, this statistics does not replace or eliminate any assessment measure. It only adds information.

ANALYSIS

The benefits of Q-ratings for faculty and percent-below ratings for students are several. Both groups would gain incentives for increased academic rigor in the classroom, potentially reversing grade inflation and reduced student responsibility. This result would also satisfy Germain and Scandura's (2005) call to account for grade inflation in the faculty evaluation process. It likewise addresses Hassel and Lourey's (2005) plea for "more comprehensive examination of student performance" (p. 2), with no infringement on academic freedom. The proposals are highly feasible, requiring nothing but the simplest statistical calculations and data that are already collected routinely. However, convincing college administrations to adopt either part of this plan may be complicated, as the academy is inherently conservative and may not place a high value on academic rigor. Moreover, many popular professors and fun-loving students are likely quite satisfied with the status quo. Students particularly may manifest negative reactions if they perceive an increase in difficulty. In a culture of life-experience credit and grading on effort, movement in the direction of rigor may prove difficult to implement. However, the recent emphasis on educational accountability and even competition by both Presidents Bush and Obama (Kelderman, 2009) make the timing of these proposals all the more attractive.

Elite institutions are certainly not likely to be the first to adopt Q-ratings and percent-below statistics due to their extreme rates of grade inflation. Medium-sized public institutions such as regional universities may be the better starting point for such reform, especially those located in "Red" states where accountability is paramount and educational funding may come at a premium. But it may take just a few schools to adopt and market these measures for them to spread as a mark of excellence. Universities with high standards and little fear may start a compelling trend as students are actually drawn to challenging institutions and instructors rather than being repelled by them. Eventually, perhaps most universities will adopt these measures to augment traditional faculty and student evaluations.

This paper has proposed new ways to assess instructor and student excellence. Neither is capable of capturing all salient information, but, combined with qualitative data, they offer the potential to enhance the quality of higher education. Though not intended to be radical, both measures will likely be perceived as such because they challenge a conservative status quo, one that has produced the twin problems of grade inflation and diminished student responsibility. Current practices are clearly inconsistent with academic rigor, as Hassel and Lourey (2005) demonstrate by citing studies showing 90% of students admit to reading none of an assigned chapter. That three-quarters of all students surveyed considered themselves above-average should serve as a wake-up call to faculty and administrators committed to excellence in higher education. Finally, this plan dovetails with the Bush-Obama emphasis on educational accountability while avoiding a reliance on standardized tests (for which both presidents have been criticized; Roth, 2010). As intrepid colleges and universities hazard to implement the recommendations of this article, future research can measure their effectiveness in raising student responsibility and achievement.

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