



News, Views and Jobs for All of Higher Education

June 3 Reality Check

Grade Inflation and Abdication

By [John V. Lombardi](#)

Over the last generation, most colleges and universities have experienced considerable grade inflation. Much lamented by traditionalists and explained away or minimized by more permissive faculty, the phenomenon presents itself both as an increase in students' grade point averages at graduation as well as an increase in high grades and a decrease in low grades recorded for individual courses. More prevalent in humanities and social science than in science and math courses and in elite private institutions than in public institutions, discussion about grade inflation generates a great deal of heat, if not always as much light.

While the debate on the moral virtues of any particular form of grade distribution fascinates as cultural artifact, the variability of grading standards has a more practical consequence. As grades increasingly reflect an idiosyncratic and locally defined performance levels, their value for outside consumers of university products declines. Who knows what an "A" in American History means? Is the A student one of the top 10 percent in the class or one of the top 50 percent?

Fuzziness in grading reflects a general fuzziness in defining clearly what we teach our students and what we expect of them. When asked to defend our grading practices by external observers — parents, employers, graduate schools, or professional schools — our answers tend toward a vague if earnest exposition on the complexity of learning, the motivational differences in evaluation techniques, and the pedagogical value of learning over grading. All of this may well be true in some abstract sense, but our consumers find our explanations unpersuasive and on occasion misleading.

They turn, then, to various forms of standardized testing. When the grades of an undergraduate have an unpredictable relevance to a standard measure performance, and when high quality institutions that should set the performance standard routinely give large proportions of their students "A" grades, others must look elsewhere for some reliable reference. A 3.95 GPA should reflect the same level of preparation for students from different institutions.

Because they do not, we turn to the GMAT, LSAT, GRE, or MCAT, to take four famous examples. These tests normalize the results from the standards-free zone of American higher education.

The students who aspire to law or medical school all have good grades, especially in history or organic chemistry. In some cases, a student's college grades may prove little more than his or her ability to fulfill requirements and mean considerably less than the results of a standardized test that attempts to identify precisely what the student knows that is relevant to the next level of academic activity.

Although many of us worry that these tests may be biased against various subpopulations, emphasize the wrong kind of knowledge, and encourage students to waste time and money on test prep courses, they have one virtue our grading system does not provide: The tests offer a standardized measure of a specific and clearly defined subset of knowledge deemed useful by those who require them for admission to graduate or professional study.

Measuring State Investment

If the confusion over the value of grades and test scores were not enough, we discover that at least for public institutions, our state accountability systems focus heavily on an attempt to determine whether student performance reflects a reasonable value for taxpayer investment in colleges and universities. This accountability

process engages a wide range of measures — time to degree, graduation rate, student satisfaction, employment, graduate and professional admission, and other indicators of undergraduate performance — but even with the serious defects in most of these systems, they respond to the same problems as do standardized tests.

Our friends and supporters have little confidence in the self-generated mechanisms we use to specify the achievement of our students. If the legislature believed that students graduating with a 3.0 GPA were all good performers measured against a rigorous national standard applied to reasonably comparable curricula, they would not worry much about accountability. They would just observe whether our students learned enough to earn a nationally normed 3.0 GPA.

Of course, we have no such mechanism to validate the performance of our students. We do not know whether our graduates leave better or worse prepared than the students from other institutions. We too, in recognition of the abdication of our own academic authority as undergraduate institutions, rely on the GRE, MCAT, LSAT, and GMAT to tell us whether the students who apply (including our own graduates) can meet the challenges of advanced study at our own universities.

Partly this follows from another peculiarity of the competitive nature of the American higher education industry. Those institutions we deem most selective enroll students with high SATs on average (recognizing that a high school record is valuable only when validated in some fashion by a standardized test). Moreover, because selective institutions admit smart students who have the ability to perform well, and because these institutions have gone to such trouble to recruit them, elite colleges often feel compelled to fulfill the prophecy of the students' potential by ensuring that most graduate with GPA's in the A range. After all, they may say, average does not apply to our students because they are all, by definition, above average.

When reliable standards of performance weaken in any significant and highly competitive industry, consumers seek alternative external means of validating the quality of the services provided. The reluctance of colleges and universities, especially the best among us, to define what they expect from their students in any rigorous and comparable way, brings accreditation agencies, athletic organizations, standardized test providers, and state accountability commissions into the conversation, measuring the value of the institution's results against various nationally consistent expectations of performance.

We academics dislike these intrusions into our academic space because they coerce us to teach to the tests or the accountability systems, but the real enemy is our own unwillingness to adopt rigorous national standards of our own.

John V. Lombardi, chancellor and a professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, writes *Reality Check* every two weeks.

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