What’s in a Grade: Faculty Responsibility for Grade Inflation

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This report is the first of a two-part series that explores the topic of grade inflation from both a faculty and student perspective. The ethical and professional issues related to faculty disregard for knowledge attainment and assignment of an unearned grade is a hot topic of debate. There is currently a heightened awareness of grade inflation within higher education. In the context of ethics and professionalism, grade inflation needs to be considered as it relates to faculty teaching styles, relevance within athletic training education programs, and strategies that address the problem. What responsibility does an educator have for control of grade inflation?

The purpose of this report is to address the following:

• The definition of grade inflation
• Why grade inflation occurs (specific to athletic training education)
• Ramifications of grade inflation
• Faculty concerns
• Suggested strategies to minimize this phenomenon

Grades Inflation

Grade inflation is defined as “an increase in grade point average without an associated increase in overall student ability.”¹ This phenomenon cannot be dismissed as an abstract concept, because GPAs have increased 0.6 from 1967 to 2001. Moreover, private schools are demonstrating grade inflation at a rate that is 25-30% higher than public schools.¹⁻³ Educators would like to believe that grade inflation is the result of improvements in the quality of students. Surveys have demonstrated that American college students in the 1990s devoted less time to attending class, preparing written assignments, and studying than their predecessors did, but received the same or higher grades.³ Currently, there is no evidence to suggest that student quality has improved since 1980, but a significant amount of evidence suggests that students take less responsibility for their education. Factors associated with unearned grade assignment may include these:
• fear of poor student evaluations that may affect promotion and tenure
• not wanting to hurt students’ feelings
• poor teaching efficacy
• inexperience in grading/evaluating students
• unclear expectations for student performance

**Athletic Training Education**

A substantial increase in the number of accredited athletic training education programs over the past five years has resulted in a large number of new faculty/staff members with teaching responsibilities (didactic and clinical). In many cases, new athletic training faculty/staff have limited classroom teaching experience or familiarity with pedagogical strategies for evaluation of students. In any education program, grade inflation is an indication that students are earning grades and course credit without having attained commensurate mastery of clinical skills and/or cognitive content. In athletic training education, the lack of adequate knowledge and skill attainment may result in poor performance on the BOC examination. However, the primary concern should be producing health professionals who are incapable of providing a high standard of care to patients.

Grade inflation prompted Ivy League institutions to create programs to reduce the number of A’s awarded in an academic year to no more than 35% in undergraduate courses. No significant decrease in the number of high grades has been evident, but at least it’s a start. Would decreasing the number of A’s really stop grade inflation? Will the number of B’s increase? If more than 50% of the students enrolled in a particular course deserved an A, would it be ethical to penalize students in the effort to decrease grade inflation?

**Examples of Grade Inflation**

Those professors who value favorable student evaluations more than their students’ mastery of subject matter may ultimately affect the reputation of the academic program and the institution. Have you seen examples of grade inflation in your setting?

One example is the “Here’s your A, go away” approach. In this case, a problem student or average student is given a high grade to get him or her “out of the professor’s hair.” When a student becomes such a nuisance that a large amount of faculty time is consumed, some faculty may resort to giving a grade so they just “go away.” In this case, students who demand extra time or effort from a faculty member (reasonable or unreasonable) are provided with a bribe (good grade) in the hope that the demand for attention will decrease. Faculty members looking for merit raises, promotion, and tenure may be inclined to give an A in the hope that the student will return the favor with a positive course evaluation.

Another example is the faculty member who pursues the “Mr. Nice Guy” approach. This is a typical “easy A course” that is characterized by an instruction level that is well below that of the students’ capabilities, and grades are assigned primarily based on personal interactions with the professor. The professor may espouse high standards, but he or she is willing to bend the rules as the course progresses, allowing students to turn in assignments late or not at all. In this example, the faculty member is seeking popularity and does not typically hold students accountable. There are no firm deadlines in Mr. Nice Guy’s class, and students can befriend Mr. Nice Guy to earn a better grade. This teaching style is associated with vague course objectives and poorly defined expectations.

**Teaching Evaluations**

Teaching evaluations play an important role in the evaluation of faculty at most institutions of higher education. In some cases, merit raises, promotion, and tenure of faculty are heavily dependent on classroom teaching evaluations performed by students. Evaluation of teaching can be done in a variety of ways, such as peer review, student projects, and independent studies. However, student course evaluations are the primary method by which a faculty member is evaluated at college, department, and academic program levels.