Grade Inflation: The Student’s Perspective (Part 2)

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The first portion of this two-part report defined grade inflation as “an increase in grade point average without an associated increase in overall student ability.” Grade inflation was discussed in the context of ethics and professionalism, faculty teaching styles, relevance to athletic training education programs, and instructor strategies to address the problem. The purpose of this report is to analyze grade inflation from a student’s perspective. What role does a student have in contributing to grade inflation or its elimination? Is grade inflation even a student issue?

The temptation for students to enjoy the personal benefits and potential gains from grade inflation seems very apparent. A high GPA is a critical component of a student’s academic portfolio. Often, a strong GPA can compensate for low scores on standardized tests (GRE) and facilitate acceptance into graduate school. Grade inflation will also benefit students who receive state and federal scholarships that require maintaining a minimum GPA. Therefore, from a student’s perspective, grade inflation can provide financial benefit and facilitate attainment of professional goals. Students encourage and contribute to grade inflation by

• Accepting a grade that was not earned
• Begging for points or grades
• Not speaking out against professors who give grades that were not earned
• Not speaking out against professors with poor teaching abilities
• Providing a positive evaluation for a professor who gave a high grade that was not earned

As a current student myself, I can understand why most students would choose not to say anything negative about a professor who is giving A’s for doing very little work. However, there is an ethical issue involved that should be addressed by both faculty and students. Consider the following scenarios:

Scenario A

Betty Sue, a junior athletic training student at Metropolitan University of the South, has aspirations to enter graduate school after completing her B.S. in Athletic Training. She is currently taking a course in therapeutic modalities, and although she admits that she could spend more time preparing, she regularly attempts to “suck up” to her professor. When she does not get her desired result of a high grade, she complains that the professor does not teach the students, is unwilling to spend office time to work with students, and threatens to submit a poor course evaluation.

• Will Betty Sue’s efforts ultimately yield a high grade?
• If so, were Betty Sue’s actions justifiable?
• Will most students test a professor to find out how loose or strict he or she will be when grades are assigned? Ask your students.
• Do some professors have a reputation for “giving grades”? Ask your students.

Scenario B

Scooter is an athletic training student with a C+ average. Scooter has never been strong in the classroom but...
has excelled in the clinical component of the athletic training program. Scooter is the most personable and agreeable student in the program, and he is always in the athletic training room looking for something to do. His teachers, clinical supervisors, and coaches love him because he is always working hard and he will do anything that he is asked to do. He is hopeful that he will meet the required 2.75 GPA to graduate, which is necessary to establish eligibility for the BOC exam.

- Does Scooter deserve a slight grade bump to assure that he will graduate and take the BOC exam?
- Who is a better representative of the athletic training profession? Scooter, whose only career aspiration is to become an athletic trainer, or Sally, who has a 3.98 GPA and hopes to enroll in a physical therapy program after graduation. Sally will probably pass the BOC exam on the first attempt, but Scooter may have to take the exam 2 or 3 times.
- Scooter knows that everyone likes him, and he plays that to his advantage when it comes to his grades. Is there anything unethical about that?
- Would a professor be more likely to inflate Scooter’s grade than the grade for a student who needs a high GPA for admission to a PA or PT program?

**The Springboard Profession**

An athletic training education program has become a common undergraduate choice for students who ultimately hope to gain acceptance into a graduate-level health profession program (i.e., physical therapy, physician assistant, or medicine). A high GPA is critical for students seeking acceptance into highly competitive programs. The combination of a high GPA and the clinical experiences offered in an athletic training education program is very attractive to graduate-level programs. Consider the following:

- Are grades rising across ATEPs because accreditation requirements now prevent athletic training students from being treated like a “workforce,” thus leaving more time to study? Or, are grades decreasing because students are spending fewer hours in clinical sites?
- Are students who carefully track fulfillment of required hours, and who are not afraid to say no when asked to travel to a big game, good representatives of the athletic training profession? Are these students among those who are using the ATEP as a stepping stone to another career?
- As a whole, are pre-medicine, pre-PA, and pre-PT students who are enrolled in ATEPs good for our profession? Do they contribute to grade inflation? What impact do they have on BOC results?

From a student’s perspective, the grade inflation issue is very complicated. Responsibility for the problem primarily belongs to the course instructor, but students should at least understand its long-term implications. Students should assume responsibility for their own learning, which is more rewarding over the long-term than success in gaining an unearned grade.

**Shift of Focus to Student Responsibility**

Students often approach courses with an expectation to do the least amount of work necessary to receive a “good grade.” Students often believe that a passing grade corresponds to preparedness, competence, and success. Although this approach may work for some courses, it may not work in athletic training education, which is guided by documentation of student acquisition of cognitive and psychomotor competencies and a curriculum that progressively builds upon a growing knowledge base to produce learning over time.

Difficult professors do not necessarily dislike a student or enjoy giving low grades. Professors may seem difficult because they have an expectation that the student will take an active role in the learning process. Tips for becoming a more active learner include the following:

- Preview information that will be covered in class prior to the class meeting, or use other reading strategies to prepare yourself before each meeting.
- Prepare questions to ask the professor about material that was unclear after attempting to understand it. Questions should be specific and concise, rather than taking the “I didn’t understand” perspective. Clearly identify the material that was not understood to help the professor help you.
- Use a system of note taking during lectures to make the process of receiving information more active.
- Review class notes as soon as possible after the class meeting to ensure maximum retention of information.