

**Executive Summary:**

***Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?  
Grade Inflation and Letters of Recommendation***

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*Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing? Grade Inflation and Letters of Recommendation* marks the culmination of a series of discussions, sponsored by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, on the inflationary trends in student evaluation at the undergraduate level. The report examines the evidence for widespread evaluation inflation, its origins, and its long-term effect on the academy and society.

To determine if grade inflation exists, the report references several studies comparing student grades and performance over the past four decades. The studies find that while the GPA's of students have dramatically increased over time, the average SAT scores of the student population, an objective measure of student achievement, do not exhibit a corresponding increase. Thus, the marked rise in GPA's across disciplines, combined with relatively stable student achievement, indicate an inflationary trend. The studies also suggest that grade inflation initially exploded in the 1960s and continued to rise through the mid 1990s. While grade inflation exists across disciplines and institutions, it appears more prevalent in the humanities and in Ivy League institutions.

Several factors are examined to explain the rise of grade inflation in the academy. In particular, the report focuses on the cultural shift in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a result of the Vietnam War. Pointing to the dramatic rise in GPA's in the Ivies starting in

the sixties, most notably Harvard, the report suggests a shift of elite institution attitudes of “student centered” faculty members and a sympathetic inflation of grades for the purpose of draft deferment. The effect of the cultural and institutional changes of the sixties on grading practices reverberated through the academy and lingered throughout the 1970s.

The continued rise of student GPA’s in the 1980s and 1990s indicates that while grade inflation may have been jumpstarted by the cultural revolution of the 1960s, additional factors continue to feed the flames of evaluative inflation. Market forces have entered into the realm of academe to a greater degree than ever before, affecting both student and faculty attitudes and expectations towards evaluation. The growing influence of consumerism in the American university, where students pay steeper tuition fees and expect finite results (i.e., graduate school acceptance, high paying job, etc.), combined with a decrease in the applicant pool for undergraduate admission in the 1980s, has also significantly contributed to grade inflation. Other possible explanations for the continued rise in inflation include the changing nature of undergraduate education, the decrease of tenure track positions, the watering down of course content, and the pressure of maintaining the status quo of high GPA’s among overtaxed faculty.

The report also links grade inflation to the change in the quality and candidness of faculty Letters of Recommendation. Although reference evaluation is less extensively explored in this report, empirical, anecdotal, and experiential evidence indicates that it suffers from similar problems as grades. The rise in legal disclosure and defamation suits, increased

distance in student-faculty relations, and an increase in adjunct faculty have all contributed to the watering down of Letters of Recommendation. These poorly differentiated Letters of Recommendation only add another layer of dubious evaluation to an undergraduate's record for graduate schools and employers. The possible result of this obfuscation of distinction is a reversion to the "old-boy" networks and word of mouth recommendations, effectively undermining the notion of meritocratic achievement.

The report concludes with several recommendations for slowing, and potentially reversing, evaluative inflation. The first step is the recognition that grade inflation is a rampant and systemic problem across undergraduate institutions and disciplines. The increase of institutional dialogue among faculty and junior faculty regarding grading policies and standards is essential to addressing the trend and providing innovative solutions. The report acknowledges that because of the complex nature of undergraduate education, imposing a grading standard is not only cumbersome, but could indeed be detrimental to higher education. The best hope in improving student evaluation lies in embracing a series of small steps and individual institutional initiatives whose cumulative effects could amount to the beginnings of a reform movement. These steps may include: providing additional information about course grades on student transcripts, using alternative grading systems with honors pass/fail, having a standard grade distribution, and increasing confidentiality with regard to letters of recommendation.