

THE AMERICAN ACADEMY

O F A R T S & S C I E N C E S

February 1, 2002
For Immediate Release

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The Consequences of Grade Inflation

A report published by the **American Academy of Arts & Sciences** demonstrates clear evidence of grade and evaluation inflation at U.S. universities. The authors of “**Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?**” are the former dean of Harvard University’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley, a Lecturer at the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education. The Advisory Committee that worked closely with the authors in producing the study includes Philip Altbach, Sissela Bok, Charles Fried, Carmine Gibaldi, Jerome Kagan, and Dean Whitley.

The authors believe that changing the current system will be difficult but also assert that the academic world has “the obligation to make education improvements when needed and when possible. Simply to accept the status quo is not acceptable professional conduct. We need, if possible, to suggest ways for institutions to initiate reforms that will allow as clear gradation as possible to replace the present confusion.”

According to Rosovsky and Hartley, the causes and consequences of grade inflation and uncritical letters of recommendation are complex. The authors cite a variety of possible causes for these developments, including:

- Higher education’s response to the Vietnam War and the turmoil of the 1960s
- Changes in curricular and grading policies
- The advent of student evaluations of professors
- The rise, in the 1980s, of consumerism – universities operating like business for student clients
- The watering down of course content
- The increasing role of adjuncts in university faculties

Rosovsky and Hartley find little evidence that the increasing number of students from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds has contributed to grade inflation. The authors assert that grade inflation began in the mid-1960s, when lower income and minority students made up only a small fraction of the national higher education student body. More importantly, they cite evidence from Bowen and Bok that demonstrates “black students... did somewhat less well in college than white students who entered with the same SAT scores. That finding does not support the idea of faculty favoritism toward minorities.”

The report explores the potential consequences of devaluation of grades, from an increasing reliance on standardized test scores to stronger dependence on becoming a part of an “old boy or old girl’s

network.” The authors make a strong case for both students’ and professors’ need for objective grades. “They inform students about how well or how poorly they understand the content of their courses. They inform students of their strengths, weaknesses, and areas of talent... they also provide information to external audiences: for example, to colleagues not only in one’s institution but to those in other institutions, to graduate schools, and to employers,” write Rosovsky and Hartley. They question the popular assumption that emphasizes the importance of academic “self-esteem” over achievement.

The authors offer some concrete recommendations to the academic world, including greater institutional dialogue, especially in establishing tangible and consistent standards for faculty; greater discussion among universities about their grading practices; the formulation of alternative grading systems; and the establishment of a standard distribution curve in each class to act as a yardstick.

Rosovsky and Hartley also note a similar state of affairs in the other major form of evaluation: letters of reference. However, according to the authors, the fear of litigation emerges as one of the principal enemies of candor. The report describes the consequences of inflated letters of recommendation and also makes specific recommendations to address this problem.

According to the authors, “A system that fears candor is demoralizing. Much is lost in the current situation, primarily useful information for students, colleges, graduate schools, and employers. Even if those who need accurate information have learned to ‘work around the system,’ the cost of what prevails today remains high. Instead of moving through formal and open channels, information is guided toward informal and more secretive byways.”

The report, available at the American Academy website at www.amacad.org, is the first in a new series of Occasional Papers to be released by the **American Academy of Arts and Sciences**. The report is the result of a yearlong project conducted under the auspices of the American Academy’s *Social Policy and Education* program. In the past year, the authors and the Advisory Committee members met at the House of the Academy in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to discuss the problem.

The American Academy’s *Social Policy and Education* program reflects the Academy’s central mission to promote a strong and virtuous society. Since World War II, this Academy program area has initiated and sponsored pioneering works on poverty, race relations, ethnicity, immigration, and education. Current studies focus on legal issues in this country, the relationship between the legislative and judiciary branches, and education at all levels—from primary schools through graduate institutions—here and abroad. Projects are designed to advance the state of scholarship and develop innovative solutions to critical social problems.

The American Academy was founded in 1780 by **John Adams** and other scholar-patriots “to cultivate every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people.” The current membership of over 3,700 Fellows and 600 Foreign Honorary Members includes more than 150 Nobel laureates and 50 Pulitzer Prize winners. Drawing on the wide-ranging expertise of its membership, the Academy conducts thoughtful, innovative, non-partisan studies on international security, social policy, education, and the humanities.

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