

Reduced Rigor and Grade Inflation Diminish the Quality and Credibility of Higher Education

**Allen Zimmerman, Professor
The Ohio State University
Wooster, OH 44691**



Commentary/Opinion

Articles documenting reduced rigor and grade inflation at colleges across the country appear frequently in the media. Examples of reduced rigor include reports that a majority of college students spend 15 or fewer hours per week outside the classroom engaged in academic activities, passing rates are low for graduates required to take certain certification and licensing tests, and business personnel find that many college graduates do not have the expected and appropriate levels of knowledge and skills. Examples of grade inflation include reports that the average GPA of the student bodies at many colleges is in the B+ or higher range, some colleges have raised the requirements for the dean's list and graduation with honors because of the large percentage of students who have been qualifying for these distinctions, and many business personnel discount or ignore the GPA's of college graduates.

My colleagues in higher education are sources of numerous anecdotes that also reflect the reality that reduced rigor and grade inflation are becoming more and more pervasive on college campuses. Examples include the following: prospective enrollees who openly ask instructors if their courses will be easy in terms of rigor and grades, instructors who reduce rigor and inflate grades in order to improve student evaluations and/or to make teaching less work; students who make course and section selections based primarily on the instructors' reputations for being hard or easy; teachers who hand out a syllabus at the first class meeting and then dismiss the class; students who have successfully completed required prerequisite courses entering advanced courses without possessing the necessary basic knowledge and skills; teachers who habitually cancel classes without providing any make-up work; students who openly complain to current instructors that their courses are too demanding; teachers who do not give finals or give them during a class session as opposed to finals week; students who routinely request and expect changes in final grades; teachers who use class meetings as a college version of study hall; replacement of the term and practice of the "gentleman's C" (an obviously sexist phrase formerly used to describe the situation in which teachers would basically guarantee any student a grade no lower than a C) with the updated version, "pay your fee and get your

B"; industry contract and distance education courses in which it is politically expedient that all students receive high grades; and instructors whose grading patterns are in essence "all A's, all the time."

Skilled and knowledgeable graduates should be the product of higher education and grades should be the major indicator of the amount and level of knowledge and skills that graduates possess. However, due to reduced rigor and grade inflation, it cannot be assumed that graduates have acquired the appropriate knowledge and skills and grades have become almost meaningless. The quality and credibility of higher education have certainly been diminished as a result. In addition, critics of higher education have been provided with an obvious example to use when they raise questions about the value, relevance, and costs of college education.

If it is agreed that reduced rigor and grade inflation are in fact major problems on our campuses, then what are the remedies that might help improve the current situation? I have listed some recommendations for consideration below.

First, it is time to recognize, honor, respect, and treat students as students and not as customers. The dictionary I consult defines students as scholars, learners, and those who study. It does not define students as customers (nor customers as students). How can anyone seriously advocate placing higher education at the mercy of students who act and expect to be treated as retail customers buying a degree? Yet the phrase "treat students as customers" has become all too common on college campuses. Faculty, not students, have the responsibility for determining and setting course content, objectives, expectations, and standards. Faculty, not students, have the responsibility of evaluating student work and doing so in a scholarly manner.

Second, the misuse and overemphasis of student evaluation of teaching (SET) instruments needs to be addressed. Obviously, students can and should provide feedback on some limited aspects of teaching. However, as a committee at my university recently reported, the SET process measures student satisfaction instead of quality of instruction, has questionable reliability, and does not take into account certain factors that influence the scores (in particular the effect of grades). Whether consciously or not, many

faculty do pander to students in terms of rigor and grades in order to influence SET results. Untenured faculty in particular often feel pressured to adopt this course of action when placed in situations where the use of designated SET instruments is mandated.

Third, peer evaluation of teaching must be upgraded in terms of importance, process, extent, and rigor. As a committee at my university recently reaffirmed, the evaluation of instruction is first and foremost a responsibility of the faculty. However, evaluation of teaching must involve more than occasional classroom observations. In order to maintain academic standards, peers have the responsibility and obligation to evaluate regular and adjunct faculty in terms of the rigor of their course content, assignments, graded materials and tests, and to verify that the evaluation of student work is appropriate, consistent with policy (at my university, faculty rules clearly state that the grade A is to be assigned for excellent performance, B for above average performance, C for average performance, and so on), and conducted in a scholarly manner.

Fourth, administrators need to recognize that short-term emphasis on quantity (number of FTE's) at the expense of academic quality leads to a long-term reduction in both. The subtle and (as some colleagues report to me) overt pressure placed on faculty to reduce rigor and inflate grades in order to placate students, improve retention, and increase graduation rates is self-defeating. Competition for FTE's by a college at the expense of lowered academic standards may yield temporary improvements in the bottom line; however, the reputation and status of the college will suffer as a result. Colleges that maintain appropriate academic standards and make a public commitment to quality become more competitive in the long run in terms of the types and numbers of students they attract.

Fifth, a graduation requirement that all students pass comprehensive final exams should be instituted at the undergraduate level. These exams should test the students' competence based on content drawn from all areas of the curriculum. Since students know that they will have to acquire and demonstrate their competence in all subject areas as a condition of graduation, it will be counterproductive for them to just to get by in their course work or pick easy courses and instructors. At the same time, instructors will have much more incentive to uphold academic standards. Comprehensive exams will also help identify any discipline areas at a college where reduced rigor and grade inflation are a serious problem.

Sixth, and perhaps the most essential of all, students must be educated on the importance and benefits of appropriate rigor and grading standards to their self-interests and careers. One way to do this

is to engage students in a questioning exercise such as the one that follows. Aren't they spending a considerable amount of time, effort, and money to obtain a college education? If so, then shouldn't they be demanding that instructors give them their money's worth in each and every course? Isn't an instructor who cancels classes, requires little work, and offers a course that is not challenging doing students a disservice? Aren't instructors who give all students high grades in a course misleading students in terms of the way performance is evaluated in the real world? Aren't these same teachers cheating the students who really do deserve the high grades?

So, what about the rigor and grades in my own courses? I strongly believe that the overarching purposes of higher education include helping students a) gain important knowledge and skills, b) improve their ability to think critically and creatively, c) become informed and responsible citizens and members of society, and d) prepare for lifelong learning and career success. Therefore, given the challenge presented by these overall goals and the specific learning objectives in my courses, students do have to spend two to three hours outside of class for every hour in class working on various learning activities which (depending on the course) may include studying new material, completing problem solving assignments, writing papers and lab reports, reviewing for quizzes and tests, composing journal entries, engaging in group projects, and conducting library research. My grading standards have remained consistent during my long career in higher education and I assign grades based on full use of the range from A to F. Students whose performance is average are assigned C's (not B's) and only those whose performance is excellent merit A's. Those students who choose not to perform at acceptable levels are assigned D's or F's as appropriate.

During my first class session, I state unequivocally to students that learning requires a lot of hard work and such is the case for my courses. I also discuss my grading standards in terms of university policy. I then engage students in the questioning exercise discussed above. I share with students my preference for always erring on the side of providing them with the opportunity for too much learning as opposed to too little. Lastly, I discuss with the students one of the basic tenets of education at any level - if expectations are set high, the performance of students will rise accordingly. Do all students subscribe to this line of thought? Obviously not, but what a joy it is to work with those who do. These students reinforce my passion for teaching and are the major reason that I have devoted my career to higher education.

Higher education is defined and judged by its graduates. Rigorous academic standards are the key

to high quality college graduates. Individual faculty can set and maintain high standards in their own courses. However, given the current situation of reduced rigor and inflated grades that exists on many campuses, faculty acting individually often do so at their own risk in terms of career advancement. Therefore, faculty, administrators, and students must work together to institute broad-based changes, such as those discussed above, to reverse the tendencies for reduced rigor and grade inflation.

Those of us teachings at “respectable” colleges are quick to strongly condemn diploma mills and

bemoan their negative impact on the reputation of higher education. However, if meaningful changes are not made in terms of the reduced rigor and grade inflation that characterize much of the course work on our campuses, then all of higher education will more and more resemble diploma mills, institutions more interested in, and committed to, FTE's and the short-term bottom line than learning and scholarship.