

**THE EFFECTS OF GRADE INFLATION ON  
COLLEGE-BOUND STUDENTS**  
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In the same way a snowball begins as a single snowflake, grade inflation begins with a single undeserved increase in a grade. While this single increase in a grade seems harmless, it can have drastic effects on the future of a student. Because of grade inflation, the student may begin to rely on the cushion that it gives and forego studying. Since the student is no longer studying, the amount and quality of the knowledge that should be acquired are lessened. Consequently, the student will not be able to reach his potential. Furthermore, as the student begins to form poor study habits, or the lack thereof, the student is being placed in a situation where failure in college is inevitable. Along with this inevitable outcome, the student will lose the scholarships that were bestowed upon him. Once the scholarships are gone, the student may be forced to drop out of college because of financial implications. In Georgia, the same goes for the well-known HOPE scholarship, in which a student must maintain an average of at least a 3.0 grade point average (GPA) in order to remain eligible. Therefore, widespread and frequent grade inflation is the problem that produces ill-prepared college-bound students, which causes the students to lose scholarships, such as the HOPE scholarship, perhaps ruining their chances at a successful life. Primarily, this problem lies in the hands of low-status schools where students are less challenged and less academically competent and, therefore, more likely to be given a helping hand through grade inflation.

In an academic world striving ever forward in the endless pursuit of knowledge and truth, one hindrance has shackled the leg of this world to a heavy-laden ball. This hindrance is grade inflation, which Scanian defines as "an increase in grade point average without an associated increase in overall student ability" (Hunt and Gardin 19). According to Felton and Koper, "[g]rade inflation is widely recognized as a problem in higher education in the United States" (561); this is to say that it is a well-known fact in the academic world. However, even though this practice is

widespread and commonly utilized, many outside of the academic world do not know of its existence or, if they do, see it as being not detrimental to the pursuit of knowledge; hence, the lack of attention and seemingly overabundant disregard of its use. In spite of this fact, many studies have gathered “evidence in support. [of] creeping grade inflation at the high school level” (Weissberg, Owen, Jenkins, and Harburg 171). In a study in 1990, Ramist and Weiss “found that mean SAT scores declined from the period prior to 1973 through 1985-1988, but the mean high school average for the same period remained [the same]” (Weissberg, Owen, Jenkins, and Harburg 171). In another study in 1995, Ziomek and Svec “divided the average American College Testing Program (ACT) composite scale score for 5,136 high schools into deciles and compared changes in those scores over a 5-year period with changes in mean high school averages” (Weissberg, Owen, Jenkins, and Harburg 171). Additionally, since it “is a curriculum-based test, a significant disparity between scores on such a test and high school grades invites the conclusion that grades and actual ability in the academic subjects assessed do not parallel each other” (Weissberg, Owen, Jenkins, and Harburg 172). Over a range of years, the mean scores of the ACT were consistent; yet, during those years, the mean GPA in high school did not remain the same, seeing as they increased (Weissberg, Owen, Jenkins, and Harburg 172). On top of the increase in the average GPA in high schools during those years, “the percentage of students who earned grades in the lower ranges of the grade scale decreased, and across all ACT decile categories, the grade inflation phenomenon was most dramatic for high school averages of 80 and better” (Weissberg, Owen, Jenkins, and Harburg 172). According to the study by Ziomek and Svec, the reason that grade inflation was the greatest for the grades of B-minus and greater could perhaps be that students whose grades are borderline “A’s” or “B’s” receive help from their teachers or professors who round-up the grade to the nearest whole number. For example, a grade of 89.5 would be rounded-up to a 90. This practice, although it is not looked at in this way, is the simplest form of grade inflation, and it is a problem according to Kamber and Biggs, who state that

When an A is awarded for what was previously B-level work, the system loses its capacity to recognize the superiority of what had been A-level work. To avoid this

unhappy consequence, some [teachers] try to hold the line on A's, while being more generous with other passing grades. But this strategy is self-defeating. When B's, for example, are awarded for what was previously C-level work, then the only way to differentiate what was previously B-level work is to award A's to that work—which then deprives the system of its capacity to recognize A-level work. (32)

As it is quite evident in the prior statement, when teachers or professors round-up grades, they are essentially defeating the purpose of a grading system, and, when they attempt to solve this problem by decreasing the number of "A's," the outcome remains the same. While many would see the aforementioned example as nothing more than a teacher or professor helping a student who attempted his best in a course, the fact is that the student did not earn the grade. As a result, grades can be slowly increased in all areas to produce a false report, and that false report could be sent to universities and colleges of the student's choice. Then, the student may be given scholarships that he did not earn and may get into a college or university in which he is not prepared.

According to a study commissioned by the Georgia General Assembly, students who have an average GPA of at least a 3.0 (a "B" average) in core-curriculum high school courses will be awarded the HOPE ("Helping Outstanding Pupils Educationally") College Scholarship (McCrary et al. 1). According to the same study,

In November 1992, Georgia voters approved a constitutional amendment creating the Georgia Lottery for Education. Ticket sales began seven months later. By the end of its first year of operation, the Georgia lottery recorded a record-breaking \$1.1 billion in sales. Since that time, annual sales have increased steadily, with total lottery-funded educational expenditures approaching \$4 billion at the end of fiscal year 2000. (McCrary et al. 1)

As McCrary and others point out, the Georgia Lottery allows the state to give enormous amounts of money for educational purposes. During the years of 1993 through 2000, the "Lottery for Education Fund" has allowed almost 500,000 students to attend college (McCrary, Condrey, Moore, Cornwell, Mustard, Hamilton, Tanner, and Fleury 1). In addition to giving money for tuition, the HOPE Scholarship provides money for obligatory

fees, such as lab fees, and books (McCrary et al. 31). When the HOPE Scholarship was established, “[it]’s public college scholarship program was need-based as well as merit-based” (McCrary et al. 31). However, to prevent students from receiving the HOPE Scholarship by increasing their GPA through relatively easier elective courses, “[a] move to a completely merit-based system [was] underscored by the requirement that only core curriculum courses be included in calculating high school GPA” (McCrary et al. 31). Throughout its history, the HOP Scholarship has allowed students, regardless of race, gender, religious preference, and socio-economic status, to attend universities and colleges around Georgia.

In terms of who is more likely to receive help from grade inflation, it is safe to assume that students in low-status schools, who come from poorer backgrounds, are more likely to be given a helping hand than those who are in high-status schools. Thus, it is only natural that class rank and status play a significant role in the future of a student. According to Lang, “Competitive colleges throughout the United States routinely indicate that along with courses completed and test scores, Class Rank and grade point average are among the top four determinants of whether or not a student will be accepted for admission” (36). In high school, students are assigned a class rank based upon their academic achievements in the various courses that they have taken. From where they place in their school, students have differing opinions about their futures in educational endeavors. According to a study in 1972, “the higher the rank, the more likely students will consider college” (Nelson 144). Moreover, Nelson reports that “rank uniformly affects aspirations” (146). Also, another factor that determines the opinions that students have about their futures is their high school’s status. According to Nelson, “attending a high-status school simultaneously raises scores on one predictor of aspirations (i.e. school status) and lowers scores on another predictor of aspirations (i.e. rank)” (144). By this statement, high school status is a better forecaster of whether or not a student is planning to attend college than rank, which still holds a significant impact on a student’s future plans.

According to Coleman, .an adolescent scoring in the middle intelligence range. will probably rank near the top of the class in a low status school where the competition is lean, and near the bottom in a high status school where the competition is intense.

These different positions are a function of the nature of ranking systems: no matter how many adolescents of varying intelligence attend a school, some will appear towards the top of the distribution and others towards the bottom. (Nelson 144) As Coleman points out, high-status schools are more academically challenging than low-status schools. Also, it is safe to assume that students in high-status schools get a better overall education than those in low-status schools.

Thus, although it is widely perceived as harmless, grade inflation can have many adverse effects on the future of a student. With the padding that grade inflation supplies, students will not have to study as much to receive a passing grade, defeating the entire purpose of education, which is to challenge a student (causing him/her to study) through many simple and complex disciplines in the hopes that they will develop critical and logical thinking skills. Furthermore, with a lax study habit, the student will predictably struggle through a more rigorous educational experience that college offers. Once the student's struggles cause him to lose the scholarships he has been awarded, such as the HOPE Scholarship in Georgia, the student may have to leave college because of a lack of money. Therefore, extensive grade inflation in high school can lead to failure in college. However, there is a misconception associated with grade inflation that needs to be addressed. Amid the numerous high schools in America, many use what is called a "Bonus Point Procedure" (Lang 41). In his research, Lang discovered that "the vast majority (71.7%) used some type of a Bonus Point Procedure" (41). Furthermore, according to Lang, this procedure involves augmenting the grade points received for an "A," "B," and so on, in specific courses prior to summing the grade points. These 'specific courses' usually include some combination of Advanced Placement courses, IB courses, and/or Honors courses. This is followed by dividing the total grade points by the number of classes to obtain a weighted average. (41) As it is described in the prior statement, most high schools place more weight on advanced, or more challenging, classes. Because of this, the students that take the advanced classes will have a higher overall GPA than those students who do not take them. However, those who are outside of the academic world may look at this "Bonus Point Procedure" as a cause of grade inflation. While this system may in fact inflate a student's GPA, it is only rewarding a student for taking a college-level course. Therefore,

because the student is taking a college-level course, a course that is above those offered at a high school level, it is only reasonable to weigh that course more heavily, which, as a result, increases a student's GPA.

Even though grade inflation seems to be treading along with no opposition, there have been attempts to quell its advances. According to Felton and Koper, "[i]n 1994, Dartmouth College began including on transcripts, along with a student's grade in a class, the median grade for all students in the class and the total enrollment" (563). However, while this may lead to a way to differentiate between the difficulty of class and a student's academic ability, it does not stop grade inflation, which is evident in the fact that Gardner found that "the average GPA at Dartmouth increased from 3.25 in 1994 to 3.33 in 2000-2001" (Felton and Koper 563). Furthermore, according to Bliwise, in 1995, to further research and perhaps eliminate grade inflation, Duke University created an "Achievement Index" or "AI" (Felton and Koper 564). As stated by Johnson, the creator of the index, the AI calculates a ratio based on a student's grade in a class, the student's relative position in the class and the relative difficulty of the class as indicated by the grade distribution in the class. A scatter point comparison of individual AIs and GPAs indicated that the AI did indeed differentiate between students who had high GPAs in relatively easy courses and those whose GPAs were based on more rigorous course work. (Felton and Koper 564). As seen in the previous statement, by using this grade index, grade inflation could somewhat be eliminated. However, "[a] controversial proposal to use the AI at Duke was rejected by a vote of 19-14" (Felton and Koper 564). While these attempts all failed, many continue to research ways to eliminate grade inflation.

One major cultural problem that obstructs the advances to eliminate grade inflation is the fact that self-esteem has been thrust into the curriculum of schools. According to Edwards, "[o]ne of the most publicized reasons for inflating grades is to build self-esteem" (541). Theoretically, if a student feels better about himself, then he will make better grades. Sykes, who agrees with this statement, writes that "[t]his is done ostensibly to create a pleasurable atmosphere in the classroom so teachers and students will think well of one another and consequently to raise achievement levels" (Edwards 541). Thus, when a student makes a high "B," such as a 89.5 (the grade that he

earned) and a teacher rounds the grade to a low “A,” such as a 90 (a grade the student did not earn), grade inflation has been utilized to improve the student’s self-esteem, which occurs more often in a low-status school where students come from relatively poorer backgrounds. Perhaps through grade inflation, teachers wish to give students in low-status schools a better chance at attending college, thus improving their futures. However, because many teachers have been taught or have adopted new teaching methods where self-esteem has become the main focus-which leads to a happy but more ignorant society-there has been a decline in American society intellectually. So, this harmful and seemingly overlooked problem known in the academic world as grade inflation has many dramatic effects, not only on the future of the single student, but the future of the entire country. In the end, grade inflation is a problem that must be remedied soon, or the future of America will be a bleak one.

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