

There's nothing wrong with grade inflation

Grades don't matter anyway. Here's why.

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By [Mark Oppenheimer](#) March 4

The first grade I got as a clueless, sweater-vest-wearing Yale freshman in 1992 was a C-plus. As a typically self-regarding 18-year-old, I felt the only thing to do was to complain during my professor's office hours. He listened as I pleaded my case, then patiently explained that, although the grade stood, he was certain that I would do better next time. "Thanks," I said, defeated. "I just didn't think I'd be a C student in college."

"Don't worry," he said, smiling. "You won't be." The man had no particular faith in my abilities; he simply knew there was no longer any such thing as a C student.

By the early '90s, so long as one had the good sense to major in the humanities — all bets were off in the STEM fields — it was nearly impossible to get a final grade below a B-minus at an elite college. According to a 2012 [study](#), the average college GPA, which in the 1930s was a C-plus, had risen to a B at public universities and a B-plus at private schools. At Duke, Pomona and Harvard, D's and F's combine for just 2 percent of all grades. A Yale report found that 62 percent of [all Yale grades](#) are A or A-minus. According to a 2013 article in the Harvard Crimson, the median grade [at Harvard](#) was an A-minus, while the most common grade was an A. The result is widespread panic about grade inflation at elite schools. (The phenomenon is not as prevalent at community colleges and less-selective universities.) Some blame students' consumer mentality, a few see a correlation with small class sizes (departments with falling enrollments want to keep students happy), and many cite a general loss of rigor in a touchy-feely age. [Writing in The Washington Post](#), a co-author of the 2012 study pointed out that, during the Vietnam era, "flunking out meant becoming eligible for the draft."

Yet whenever elite schools have tried to fight grade inflation, it's been a mess. Princeton instituted strict caps on the number of high grades awarded, [then abandoned](#) the plan, saying the caps dissuaded applicants and made students miserable. At Wellesley, grade-inflated humanities departments [mandated](#) that the average result in their introductory and intermediate classes not exceed a B-plus. According to [one study](#), enrollment fell by one-fifth, and students were 30 percent less likely to major in one of these subjects. Yale and Harvard, while making noises about grade inflation, have never instituted tough rules to stem it.

It's time to give up the fight against grade inflation. I have taught at Stanford, Wellesley, New York University, Boston College and Yale, and I used to be a grade-inflation warrior. I liked to think of myself as a rigorist; liked having a range of grades at my disposal; and I liked the joy my students found when they actually earned a grade they'd been reaching for. But whereas I once

thought we needed to contain grades, I now see that we may as well let them float skyward. If grade inflation is bad, fighting it is worse. Our goal should be ending the centrality of grades altogether. For years, I feared that a world of only A's would mean the end of meaningful grades; today, I'm certain of it. But what's so bad about that?

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It's easy to see why schools want to fight grade inflation. Grades should motivate certain students: those afraid of the stigma of a bad grade or those ambitious, by temperament or conditioning, to succeed in measurable ways. Periodic grading during a term, on quizzes, tests or papers, provides feedback to students, which should enable them to do better. And grades theoretically signal to others, such as potential employers or graduate schools, how well the student did. (Grade-point averages are also used for prizes and class rankings, though that doesn't strike me as an important feature.)

But it's not clear that grades work well as motivators. Although recent research on the effects of grades is limited, several studies in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s measured how students related to a task or a class when it was graded compared to when it was ungraded. Overall, graded students are less interested in the topic at hand and — and, for obvious, common-sense reasons — more inclined to pick the easiest possible task when given the chance. In the words of progressive-education theorist Alfie Kohn, author of "The Homework Myth," "the quality of learning declines" when grades are introduced, becoming "shallower and more superficial when the point is to get a grade."

Even where grades can be useful, as in describing what material a student has mastered, they are remarkably crude instruments. Yes, the student who gets a 100 on a calculus exam probably grasps the material better than the student with a 60 — but only if she retains the knowledge, which grades can't show.

Meanwhile, I've taught humanities subjects for 15 years, and I still can't say very well what separates a B from an A. What's more, I never see the kind of incompetence or impudence that would merit a D or an F. And now, in our grade-inflated world, it's even harder to use grades to motivate, or give feedback, or send a signal to future employers or graduate schools.

We need to move to a post-grading world. Maybe that means a world where there are no grades — or one where, if they remain, we rely more on better kinds of evaluation.

Employers, faced with crushes of applicants with A averages, already depend on other factors in evaluating them. According to a 2012 study by the Chronicle of Higher Education, GPA was seventh out of eight factors employers considered in hiring, behind internships, extracurricular activities and previous employment. Last year, Stanford's registrar told the Chronicle about "a clamor" from employers "for something more meaningful" than the traditional transcript. The Lumina Foundation gave a \$1.27 million grant to two organizations for college administrators working to develop better student records, with grades only one part of a student's final profile. Some graduate schools, too, have basically ditched grades. "As long as you don't bomb and flunk out, grades don't matter very much in M.F.A. programs," the director of one creative-

writing program told the New York Times. To top humanities PhD programs, letters of reference and writing samples matter more than overall GPA (although students are surely expected to have received good grades in their intended areas of study). In fact, it's impossible to get into good graduate or professional schools without multiple letters of reference, which have come to function as the kind of rich, descriptive comments that could go on transcripts in place of grades. Right now, students end up being evaluated twice: once with an inflated and meaningless letter grade, then again by teachers asked to write letters of recommendation.

In 2013, Forbes interviewed career-services directors at four top schools: Brandeis, NYU, the Rochester Institute of Technology and Purdue. They said employers want a GPA of 3.0 or even 3.5. But again, that standard would include almost every Harvard student — which suggests that GPAs serve not to validate students from elite schools but to keep out those from less-prestigious schools and large public universities, where grades are less inflated. Grades at community colleges “have actually dropped” over the years, according to Stuart Rojstaczer, a co-author of the 2012 grade-inflation study. That means we have two systems: one for students at elite schools, who get jobs based on references, prestige and connections, and another for students everywhere else, who had better maintain a 3.0. Grades are a tool increasingly deployed against students without prestige.

Since the elite schools clearly won't fix their grading scales, the rest should ditch grades, moving toward more nuanced transcripts with comments.

Right now, some institutions already teach students well without grades — they are rarified, expensive places, such as St. Ann's, a private school in Brooklyn; Hampshire College; and Yale School of Medicine. Rachel Rubinstein, a literature professor and dean at Hampshire College, who helps train new faculty members to use its system of evaluating students, said that it takes her a full two weeks after the term ends to finish writing comments, which run about a half-page, single-spaced, per student. “It's not like writing a recommendation, where you frame everything as a positive,” Rubinstein says. “They can be very frank.”

Students can compare evaluations from different classes, too, “read across all of them, see what they need improvement on.” And when they graduate, they — and employers or grad-school admission offices — get far more than a printed page of grades. “Our transcripts are kind of a beast — it's like reading 25 recommendation letters,” Rubinstein says.

The trouble is that, while it's relatively easy for smaller colleges to go grade-free, with their low student-to-teacher ratios, it's tough for professors at larger schools, who must evaluate more students, more quickly, with fewer resources. And adjuncts teaching five classes for poverty wages can't write substantial term-end comments, so grades are a necessity if they want to give any feedback at all.

But perhaps the small, progressive colleges can inspire other schools to follow, as they have in, say, abolishing the SAT as an admissions requirement — once it was a few schools like

Hampshire, now it's hundreds more. A change in grading would be even harder. It would mean hiring more teachers and paying them better (which schools should do anyway). And if transcripts become more textured, graduate-school admission offices and employers will have to devote more resources to reading them, and to getting to know applicants through interviews and letters of reference — a salutary trend that is underway already.

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When I think about getting rid of grades, I think of happier students, with whom I have more open, democratic relationships. I think about being forced to pay more attention to the quiet ones, since I'll have to write something truthful about them, too. I've begun to wonder if a world without grades may be one of those states of affairs (like open marriages, bicycle lanes and single-payer health care) that Americans resist precisely because they seem too good, suspiciously good. Nothing worth doing is supposed to come easy.

Alfie Kohn, too, sees ideology at work in the grade-inflation panic. "Most of what powers the arguments against grade inflation is a very right-wing idea that excellence consists in beating everyone else around you," he says. "Even when you have sorted them — even when they get to Harvard! — we have to sort them again." In other words, we can trust only a system in which there are clear winners and losers.

Even in my Yale classrooms filled with overachievers, most of whom want to learn for the sake of learning, some respond well to the clarity of a grade. And it's true that if all schools got rid of grades tomorrow, the immediate result would be to worsen inequality: I'd give rich comments to my Yale students, while my overworked peers at cash-strapped state colleges would give a sentence or two to each of their hundreds of pupils.

But grade inflation, and thus grades' diminishing importance, is real. The question is whether we can see in this trend something better.

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