

GRADE INFLATION AT CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

1990 -- 2005:

A FIRST LOOK

A STUDY BY THE COUNCIL OF CHAIRS
Spring, 2006

Committee:

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**APPROVED BY THE
COUNCIL OF CHAIRS
20 March 2006**

I. INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the Fall, 2005, semester, Provost Harry Hellenbrand entitled his message to the campus "Great Expectations: Student Preparation, Graduation Rates, and Academic Standards." On the latter subject, he wrote: "Preparation for a new semester is also an opportune time for faculty to review their grading practices. The University's Fall 2004 grade distributions indicate that in more than 30 instructional departments/programs, the combined totals of grades A through B- assigned in lower division courses represented 50% or more of all grades. Many factors may be influencing this pattern. However, many of our current institutional concerns about graduation rates, assessment, and becoming a more learning-centered university should make us think."

He added: "We must have high standards, make them clear to students, and enact these standards while assisting students in their efforts to reach them. This is very hard work; but it is just the work that can continue to make CSUN distinctive, as President Koester implied in the Convocation last week. We do not burnish the image and idea of a learning-centered university if students are led to believe that we have low expectations about how much is learned, and how well."

The Provost also made it clear that grading is the prerogative of the faculty, not the administration: "I am not telling faculty how to grade and what to teach. The academic health of the institution depends on faculty being independent when they teach and evaluate students. But the health of the university also depends on each of us making sure that classroom practices, like grading, do not have the unintended consequence of signaling low expectations."

As a consequence of the Provost's message, the Council of Chairs decided that perceptions of grade inflation was one of the topics it wished to pursue during the current academic year. The Council appointed a committee to study the issue and prepare a report for the Council. The Committee consists of Professor Peter Nwosu, Chair, Department of Communication Studies, Professor James Sefton, Department of History, and Professor Shirley Svorny, Chair, Department of Economics.

II. METHODOLOGY

The Committee is apparently the first faculty committee at any time in the last 25 years to study the issue of grade inflation at CSUN. At least, the Committee could find no evidence of prior timely campus studies. There is a significant national literature on the subject of collegiate grading practices. However, the Committee did not consult that literature. Because our work is, as the title indicates, "a first look," we did not think it crucial to seek comparisons with other institutions, or to invite CSUN into an ongoing national philosophical and statistical debate. Put succinctly, we framed our questions as follows: What are we doing, why are we doing it, and are we satisfied?

Thus our resource material is local, and represents both quantifiable and unquantifiable data. The quantifiable data consist of the University's grade distribution

reports, which have been prepared every semester for decades, following receipt of final course grades by Admissions and Records. These reports came to us upon request from the office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Resources and Planning. Historically, the semester reports were prepared in the Office of Institutional Research, and the reporting format was not always consistent through the years. For that reason, the Committee requested Academic Resources to prepare the data consistently for us according to specific categories, so as to facilitate comparisons over the period of the study.

A further word about the University's grade reports is warranted. The common practice has been to tabulate grades according to developmental, lower division, upper division, and graduate levels of instruction, and to report those tabulations at the university, college, and department level, showing (usually) both whole numbers and percentages. Thus the circulation of these reports has been downward through Academic Affairs to the college level. Below the college level the trail is less clearly marked. Different deans may have handled them differently. Some chairs remember receiving them over the years, others do not. Their use at the department level is certainly not consistent. One thing seems very clear to the Committee, however. The data in the reports is terra incognita to most faculty. And we believe many faculty will be surprised at the contours of the academic terrain.

The Committee also learned that the University prepares a grade distribution report in which grades are tabulated for each individual class and reported for every faculty member separately by name. The Committee did not utilize this report in any way, or even request access to it. We saw our function not as the review of individuals but as the identification and evaluation of more anonymous and broader patterns at the campus, college, and department levels.

In addition to this quantifiable data, the Committee also had to take cognizance of many faculty perceptions regarding the academic preparation of students coming to CSUN, student expectations and desires, student behavior regarding grades, the focus on graduation rates, the use of class evaluation forms, employment security, and other concerns. These issues are part of the universal faculty vocabulary concerning the teaching experience at CSUN, and while different faculty voices will speak of them in different tones of emotion and concern, we cannot ignore them in a discussion of grading patterns. Such issues as these will form part of our evaluation of the data, and our suggestions for action.

The phrase "grade inflation" means different things to different people, and it often has a negative connotation. Some individuals may see it as a vague and general sense that grades have gotten too high, for reasons not always clear. Others think in more concrete terms, requiring specific statistical measures to determine that pre-established percentages or boundaries have been exceeded. The Committee has adopted a middle position. Our working concept of grade inflation has two components: first, a significant, sustained rise in like grades given to a specific population (e.g., the grade of A assigned in lower division courses in department X) over a period of five years or more; second, a rise greater than would be expected based on improvements in student preparation and

ability. This definition, while not perfect, suffices for "a first look," and indeed, recognizes certain realities. There are no catalog definitions of grades other than the customary "Excellent," "Very Good," "Average," "Below Average," and "Failing." There are no university percentages for the number of specific grades allowed, or target grade averages to be achieved. And grade inflation will always have a substantial element of subjectivity about it.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The data as reviewed by the Committee consists of three series of tables, as follows:

Series A (6 pages), consisting of University and College Level Grade Distributions, reports, by percentage, the grades given in upper division and lower division courses (tabulated separately) for the Fall Terms of 1990, 1993, and each Fall Term from 1995 through 2004.

Series B (38 pages), consisting of Department Level Grade Distributions, reports the same data as Series A but for each department separately.

Series C (10 pages), consists of a reformatting, by the Committee, of selected data in Series A and B, to facilitate study of comparative grade distributions. This series shows the grade distributions for each department, arranged by college, for the first and last years of the study period. The last year is always Fall. The first year is usually Fall 1990; however, since some departments did not yet exist, and others got combined or reorganized, the first year may be later than 1990.

The data call for caution on several points. First, changes are often more significant over a longer interval than a shorter one. The Committee therefore requested data back to 1990 in order to study longer trends. To have focused only on the most recent three or four years would have given a misleading impression. Second, changes are often more significant at lower levels than higher. Departments show trends more clearly than do colleges and the university as a whole. The Committee therefore believes that careful review of distributions at the department level is vital to seeing the complete picture. Third, departments vary in enrollments from less than 50 to more than 5000, which makes certain comparisons difficult. The same percentage of a specific grade in two very different populations means very different things.

At the University level, in Fall 1990, 29% of the 56,706 upper division grades were A or A-. In Fall 2004, the figure was 36% for 60,473 enrollments. When all grades A through B- are combined, the percentage rose from 64% to 68% over fourteen years.

The University figures for lower division show comparable increases but lower percentages. In Fall 1990 there were 21% A and A- grades for 60,558 enrollments. In Fall 2004 the figure was 28% for 54,496 enrollments. The combined percentage of A through B- rose from 50% to 55% in fourteen years.

The change from year to year is slow and steady, ranging from zero to 1%, which means that if one focuses only on the last three years and only at the University level, the differences seem insignificant. However, the data provide other avenues of measurement. In 1990, the upper division grades were 29% A range, 34% B range, and 21% C range. By 2004 they were 36%, 32%, and 18%. Cs and Bs have dropped while As have risen. In lower division the same trend is present, from 21% A, 29% B, and 24% C to 28%, 27%, and 19%.

These trends deserve careful reflection. In 2004, in both lower and upper division, the University gave more As than any other grade. Indeed, in 2004 all but a very few departments awarded more As than Cs. It would appear that C work is becoming B, and B work is becoming A. D work is almost non-existent at 3% to 6% for all levels and all years. Another measurement is the percentage for A through B- combined, which rose from 50% to 55% in lower division and 64% to 68% in upper division -- in other words, faculty are saying that half to two-thirds of our students are better than average.

At the College level, we are dealing with smaller populations and, presumably, more commonality among the constituent departments. However, the trends are much more revealing than for the University as a whole. Analyzing the upper division patterns first, we find that of the eight colleges, six increased their percentages of A/A- grades from 1990 to 2004, while two decreased. The two decreases were by small amounts, whereas the six increases were larger, and in two instances particularly significant.

The combined percentages of A through B- closely mirror these patterns. The two colleges that dropped in As dropped exactly the same in A through B- combined. Where the amount of increase in As was highest, so also was the amount of increase in the combined percentage. The upper division B range grades are also of interest. Of the eight colleges, one had an increase in Bs over the study period, two remained the same, and the other five dropped. In all cases but one, a drop in Bs accompanied an increase in As. When A through B- grades are combined, the eight colleges ranged from 50% to 76% in 1990, and 49% to 84% in 2004. In other words, as As increase, Bs drop, and the increase in the combined percentage represents C grades that have become Bs.

Lower division grades, reported at the College level, show comparable patterns but some variations in ranges. Six of the eight colleges gave more As in 2004 than in 1990, while two decreased. Three of the six showed significantly more As, whereas the decreases were comparatively much smaller. The B grades show the same clear connection to the As: where the As increase, the Bs decrease in all such colleges except one. The combined A through B- percentages confirm these patterns. Every college except one showed an increase in this combined figure over the study period. The range among the eight colleges was broader, however, being 35% to 69% in 1990 and 31% to 77% in 2004.

Data at the department level show wide variations but also many consistent patterns. Some departments, throughout the study period, have had percentages around 30% for combined grades of A through B-. Others have consistently been at 60% or higher. In Fall, 2004, upper division distributions showed 53 departments/programs with combined

grades of A through B- at 50% or higher. Some were at 80% or more, and most had been above 50% for at least five years. These departments range across the entire University and represent small, medium, and large enrollment counts.

Lower division departmental data shows the same variations and patterns. In Fall, 2004, lower division figures showed 38 departments/programs at 50% or more for combined grades of A through B-. Since some of these departments did not offer lower division courses in the early years of the study, long-term comparisons are more difficult.

However, it does appear that while upper division grades have remained more consistent over time, lower division grades have been rising somewhat more quickly and significantly. Out of the 38 departments/programs just mentioned, 36 of them showed an increase in their lower division combined A through B- percentages between 1996 and 2004. The average gain was 8 percentage points. However, thirteen departments showed gains between 12 and 22 percentage points over a period of eight years. These gains are much larger than any found at the college or university level. The 36 departments accounted for a total of 35,073 out of the University's 54,496 lower division enrollments in the Fall of 2004. Expressed differently, 64% of the University's lower division enrollments in the Fall of 2004 occurred in departments where grades had been rising, in some cases significantly.

We studied developmental courses separately. These distributions show, for all reading, writing, and math courses combined, an average CR grade of 67% in 1990 for 2359 enrollments, 67% in 1996 for 3926 enrollments, 80% in 2001 for 4682 enrollments, and 91% in 2004 for 3671 enrollments. As would be expected, the CR percentages in math courses have always run lower than those in reading and writing.

We believe the data, taken as a whole, clearly suggest that the CSUN faculty has a reason to be concerned about grade inflation, and has had for some time. In light of significant variations across the campus, we cannot characterize the problem as a whole as being mild, moderate, or severe. However, we do believe that careful review of the data at all academic levels is imperative.

IV. FACTORS OF INFLUENCE

Many CSUN students are truly excellent, and faculty see daily evidence of this in our classrooms. Students accomplish outstanding things in the face of adversity of all kinds. We recognize and applaud them for academic honors they have earned, and when they show evidence of progress in learning and understanding. That progress also reflects faculty interest in how students learn, and in methods of improving classroom presentations. These faculty efforts we also recognize and applaud.

Some faculty, therefore, may argue that what gets labeled as grade inflation is really a matter of students being better prepared for college work, or performing better once they are here. Yet there is also a substantial amount of "street talk" among faculty concerning observed deterioration in core university-level skills of reading, writing, critical reasoning, and analytical thinking. We believe the argument on behalf of simple

student improvement, by itself, is not compelling, and the patterns we have seen suggest the presence of other influences.

To search for a single, clear explanation of grade inflation is an exercise in futility. CSUN is a complex institution, with many threads and patterns woven into its academic tapestry. No single factor will explain the entire picture, and each different factor will apply to some areas and not to others. For that reason, we prefer to provide, as a guide for consideration at all academic levels, a list of factors of influence. All of these, we believe, have played some part in the evolution of our historic grading practices, and we believe they are all still present. It is for the faculty, in department and college discussions, to determine how the interplay of these factors may have produced the data relevant to a given academic area.

Here are some explanations, offered without ranking, that have been suggested as possibly causal:

- University emphasis on graduation rates, contributing to a hurried academic atmosphere and pressure not to delay student graduation.
- Inadequate emphasis on academic standards and preparation in University messages to prospective students and their families.
- Increased reliance on part-time faculty, many of whom also teach at other institutions, especially two-year colleges. Every year since 1998, lower division courses have had more part-time faculty than full-time. In Fall 2005 the count was 904 part-time sections to 566 full-time.
- Our traditional (thus far) use of course evaluation forms in RTP actions, leading to concern by junior tenure-track faculty and lecturers about the effect of low grades on student ratings, and therefore on continued employment.
- The increasing tendency of students to complain about grades.
- Increased use of scantron exams (the usage here being the campus vernacular for "easy") particularly in large classes, thus emphasizing memorization rather than critical thinking and writing.
- Competition among departments to maximize enrollments in lower division GE courses, leading to a desire not to seem too tough.
- University identification and reporting, by course and section number, of classes with low grades.
- Peer pressure from other faculty who assert that low grades mean the instructor must be doing something wrong.

- Desire to avoid losing class enrollment in light of continued administrative threats to strictly enforce minimum class sizes.
- Acquiescence in student complaints that classes are too hard due to conflicting time pressures.
- Willingness to match academic expectations of two-year colleges due to competition with them for lower division students.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe it is time for the University to begin a process of review and evaluation of grading practices and grade inflation at specific, consistent intervals. The Council of Chairs, by taking up the subject, has initiated the process. The present Committee has specific suggestions for consideration by the University, the colleges, and the departments. We believe that in three years, the Council of Chairs should revisit the subject and evaluate changes and progress over that time period. "What are we doing, why are we doing it, and are we satisfied?" will still be useful questions to ask.

The consequences of failure to engage in regular review are more significant than any discomfort the process may occasion. We jeopardize the University's reputation, we send students the wrong messages, and by our major role in teacher training, we fail to model effective techniques of grading. Indeed, we may lead students to believe that Freshman Year at CSUN is no more difficult than at a community college.

It is not necessary that grade distribution data should become public for these perceptions to circulate. Consider the following: a Freshman with a 3.0 high school grade average begins his/her university experience with developmental math, developmental writing, and two GE courses taught in departments with A-to-B- averages of 65%. It is quite possible that this student's initial CSUN grade average will be well over 3.0, perhaps as high as 4.0. Such scenarios certainly have the potential to become a student conversation piece. The University would do well to study this by tracking cohorts of selected students.

The benefits of regular review are significant. We strengthen our goal of becoming more learning-centered. We enhance our position in the context of assessment and its central components of academic quality, student engagement, and shared values. We improve our preparation for accreditation. We improve our reputation among employers, who expect us to hold the line on grades. We improve student learning outcomes through higher faculty expectations. We clearly differentiate ourselves from community colleges by enhancing the quality of lower division instruction, thereby attracting more good students. We enhance our long-term goal of making CSUN a destination campus.

The Committee believes that the key to review of grading practices and grade inflation is with individual faculty and departments, because grading is faculty business. We do not favor University-imposed statistical mandates, formulas, or percentages. We

favor self-reflection, self-analysis, and self-correction. However, we believe this cannot occur except in an environment free of penalty, whether real or perceived, for having high academic standards.

To that end, the University should review its messages on graduation rates to make it clear that maintenance of academic standards has the highest priority. The University should also review its messages and policies on recruitment and admission of students to emphasize academic standards for both high school graduates and community college transfers. The University should review its practice of identification of courses with low grades to ensure that the result is not pressure to raise grades.

At the college level, Deans should ensure that the Provost's message about course evaluations in RTP actions is carried directly to Chairs and faculty. The Provost has repeatedly said that he prefers to guide his tenure and promotion decisions with peer evaluations rather than those of students. In light of this policy, it serves no useful purpose for departments to measure individual faculty rankings against a department average or target. Indeed, it might be well to return course evaluations to their original purpose of personal faculty feedback and eliminate their use in RTP entirely.

Colleges should review all mandates to keep class enrollment high, in order to ensure that these mandates do not become messages to attract students through lowered expectations. If the colleges are going to increase the use of large classrooms, then they must ensure that the burden of numbers does not contribute to lowered standards. The colleges should also review policies and practices with regard to the advertising of specific courses on billboards, websites, etc., to ensure that these advertisements do not give the impression of low expectations. In general, the colleges can play a vital role by encouraging and facilitating the sharing by their constituent departments of concerns and issues regarding grading.

Actions at the department level will be critical. As an association of scholars engaged in a common subject matter with a distinct population of students, the department is the workshop wherein are forged the links between individual faculty expectations and shared academic values. If there are to be any common grading standards, the department is where they should be developed. If there are to be any definitions of grades more expansive than those found in the catalog, the department is where they should be written. If there are any requirements or expectations associated with future student employment, the department is where they will best be understood. With respect to these issues, each department is different and experiences the impact of our identified factors of influence in different ways. For that reason, the Committee does not suggest the adoption of common standards or definitions, but only that department faculties may find merit in considering them.

In two areas, however, the Committee does believe that more direct and specific action is desirable. In light of the perception that "scantron exam" is common student vernacular for "easy," departments should explore whether, and how, their own grade distribution data may suggest a causal link between forms of examination and grade inflation. The second area is part-time faculty. Here, departments should ensure that

part-time faculty are fully but supportively supervised, fully cognizant of academic expectations, and fully assisted in distinguishing their teaching at CSUN from their teaching at other institutions. This is all the more crucial in light of constantly escalating numbers of part-time faculty, especially in lower division.

In conclusion, the Committee returns to the Provost's Fall 2005 message, in which he assigned high academic standards a key role in progress towards graduation. He wrote: "A sincere explanation of one's high expectations and of how the course and the University are designed to assist students in reaching them, if they assume responsibility for doing so, is a powerful message." The Provost directed his words to faculty as individuals, because it is the faculty as individuals who daily encounter the challenges. And so the Committee urges all faculty to reflect on their grading practices, both individually and in dialogue with colleagues, so that we can all move towards an answer to the question, "Are we satisfied?"

VI. DISTRIBUTION OF THE REPORT

Our Report, in full, consists of the text plus the fifty-some pages of quantitative data we employed. We believe that the Report should be read by all faculty. To facilitate this, we have arranged the data in the interest of simplicity and importance. Each Department will therefore receive for distribution the text of the Report plus a departmental appendix. The appendix will consist of the University distribution, the appropriate College distribution, and the specific Department distribution. Since upper division, lower division, and developmental grades are reported separately in the data, there will be only six tables (seven if there are developmental courses) for each department. The tables will appear in the same format as in Series A and B (described in Section III of the Report) showing data from 1990 through 2004. In printed form, this would be no more than three sheets. Each departmental appendix will also include the comparative data we have described as Series C in Section III of the Report. This will consist of summary data for each department, arranged by college, and will not be extensive.

This distribution will make available to each faculty member the data necessary to evaluate his/her grading practices in light of the department, college, and university data. It will also facilitate and simplify the discussion of departmental grading practices over the entire 14-year period of the study, which the Committee believes is important. Finally, it will provide sufficient comparative data to enhance faculty understanding of our campus grading practices while still maintaining the spirit of collegial discourse.