

 (Stacy Yurishcheva/Emerald)

Inflating Grades: Why it's easier than ever to get an A

Will Campbell — February 27, 2017 at 6:00 am

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In 1980, an average student at the University of Oregon earned a 2.6 GPA. Last year, the average student received a 3.13.

UO Students are receiving better grades without evidence that they are performing at a higher level, a phenomenon in higher education termed grade inflation. For the past six years, the university Faculty Senate has not addressed this because faculty and administrators can't agree that it is a problem.

The newest swing at the issue comes from the president of the Oregon Association of Scholars, Bruce Gilley, who is a PSU political science professor. He sees the dangers of grade inflation and is attempting to bring the issue to light for all Oregon universities in a new report detailing grade inflation statistics.

According to a report by OAS, released on Feb. 20, all Oregon public universities, except for Oregon State University, have a higher average GPA than the national average.

"The average college student in Oregon today is receiving a B+ grade, which means that there is little meaningful distinction between excellent average students ... This compression of grades prevents employers, parents, graduate schools, and public agencies from acquiring meaningful information on a student's attainments in college," Gilley commented in an OAS press release. 

The Emerald has compiled the last three years of grading distributions into a search engine, called the Emerald Grade Tracker, which displays grading habits of professors and classes. Find out what grades your professors are giving [here](#).

To combat grade inflation, Gilley recommended in the press release to include the class' average grade on every student's transcript. This was a change that Ian McNeely, the associate dean of UO's College of Arts and Sciences, proposed in 2011.

In 2009, when McNeely became chair of the Undergraduate Council, the university-wide body that oversees undergraduate education, he became

familiar with grade inflation.

He decided to look into the grading culture at UO. He talked to at least five committees around campus, met with deans and the UO president, held town hall meetings and eventually published a blog in May 2010 to create a wider conversation for UO faculty about grading trends.

McNeely used a UO report from 2006 of the university's grade statistics as evidence for grade inflation. The report found that between 1992 and 2004, the percentage of A's awarded went up by about 10 percentage points — 31.3 percent to 41.6 percent—and the percentage of A's and B's together went up by seven points — from 65.6 percent to 72.6 percent.

McNeely published a report the next month with three proposals to take action against inflation.

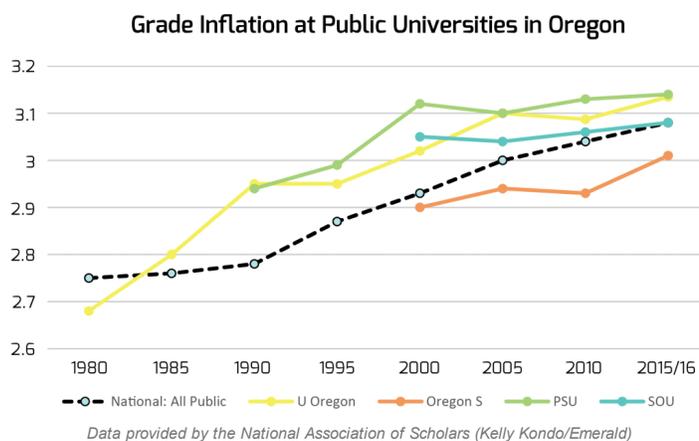
The report states that McNeely proposed each department develop specific grading standards, or "collaborate and decide on their own general description on an A, B, C grade, and so on," he said.

He and the undergraduate council also wanted each department to evaluate the grading habits of its professors. That way department leaders would be able to safeguard against inflation.

McNeely's third proposal suggested that students' transcripts show what percentage of the class received the same grade. "So that would almost be an incentive for professors not to inflate grades because then it might look bad on a student's transcript," he said.

The first proposal passed in the senate, but McNeely said that not every department complied. The other two proposals failed on the senate floor.

Currently, McNeely is unaware of any administrative initiatives to combat grade inflation, he wrote in an email to the Emerald.



McNeely referred to his undertaking from 2011 as "the hill I died on," in an interview with the Emerald. He said grade inflation has not been discussed in the Faculty Senate since.

McNeely said the discussions following the proposals, although they failed to change policy, spurred conversation about grades among faculty.

Alison Schmitke, in the Department of Education Studies at UO, now holds McNeely's former position as undergraduate council chair. She said the council has not held much conversation about grade inflation since McNeely, but it's not off any of the faculty's radar.

Schmitke is more interested in the path to the grade, rather than the actual mark. She teaches two education classes at UO. In those classes, she has students revise their work, which is more work for everyone, she said, but allows students to earn an A if they must.

"I don't think people learn from [grades] anyway. I think they learn from revision. I think they learn from feedback," she said. "But then there are some classes that have 500 students; how do you do that?"

A factor in national grade inflation is whether an institution or professor should be able to give an A+, which can boost a student's GPA above a 4.0.

Schmitke used to give A+ grades to some students, but stopped when she realized that they didn't ask because they wanted to perform better or learn, but rather to influence their GPAs.

"I felt like I was feeding the beast in terms of this need to get an A+," she said. "It feels competitive that [students] need to have the best possible grades."

Madison Moskowitz, a junior political science major holding a 4.0 GPA, said a competitive GPA will improve her chances of being accepted to a graduate program. Moskowitz hopes to attend an Ivy League school after her time at UO.

"I think it's kind of crazy that the political science department gives A+s, but other departments don't. And there are entire universities that don't give A+s," she said, "so my GPA is inflated compared to theirs, but I still want my GPA to have some gravity behind it."

McNeely is looking to help students like Moskowitz whose GPAs may seem undervalued compared to their peers' inflated marks. Despite his concern, it has been difficult for him to make any substantial impact on grading at UO.

McNeely said that grade inflation is like Halley's Comet — it pops up for discussion in the UO Faculty



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(Stacy Yurishcheva/Emerald)

Senate, and then it disappears for a long time.

"We don't want students to take classes specifically because they're easy classes," McNeely said. "We want them to take classes that are going to be academically rewarding and help them on the path of success."

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The most simple question is: how does it benefit professors to encourage grade inflation? Obviously, they are, given the reality and the fact that they do not want to address it. Don't they realize that 'everyone' (students, administrators, grad schools, and potential employers) knows this is going on, and just discount the integrity and rigor of a UO education? It is kind of baffling. I have never been faculty, but when I was in college (back in the dark ages), an 'A' was a big deal, requiring hard work and superior brain power. AND, it was very self-affirming, as well.

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Will Campbell

Will Campbell is an associate news editor at the Emerald. He wakes up early to watch soccer.

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