

Your Turn

by Robert E. Mittelstaedt Jr.

It's Not About Grades

I first wrote about grades 35 years ago for an opinion piece that appeared in the *Wharton Journal*. I was an MBA student reacting negatively to a peer proposal for a pass/fail grading system. I preferred the chance to achieve high marks, which I believed would earn me a premium in the job market. My conclusion went something like this: "If my good grades get me an extra \$1,000 a year, and baloney is \$1 a pound, I could buy a lot of baloney—which is how I would describe this proposal."

As a dean, 35 years later, I once again find myself asking questions about grades, although now I am worried that they might not be reflective of actual achievement. The subject of grade inflation has been in the news a great deal lately as various reports allege that universities have permitted an inexorable climb in GPAs over the last 30 years. One discussion of this topic can be found on www.gradeinflation.com.

My own philosophy about grades has evolved over the years as I moved through the educational system from student to teacher. I must confess that the high marks I received at Wharton were far from automatic earlier in my life. I finished near the top of my class at a public high school in a state not known for high educational standards. As a freshman engineering student at Tulane University, where standards *are* high, I received a C in Calculus 101 and a D in Calculus 102. Taking those grades as a "message"—I needed to spend more time studying calculus—I retook

the 102 course in summer school. I earned an A.

I later realized that if I had not repeated the course and learned the subject correctly, I might not have finished engineering school. The math requirements only got harder. I had to have the foundation to proceed.

Within my public confession lies my philosophy. We do no favors for students by "giving" them good grades. Instead, we provide a tremendous service if we hold them to high standards that will prepare them to succeed in life. It is for this reason that the trend toward grade inflation worries me. I think we are missing an opportunity to honestly evaluate performance in a way that helps students.

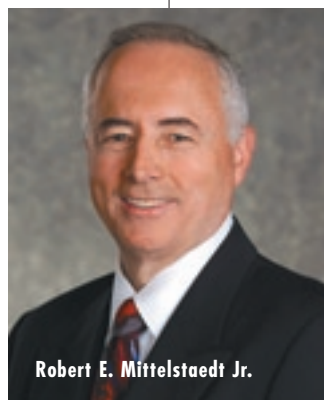
Grades are messages, not merit badges. If students are not performing to high standards in their classes, we should evaluate them accordingly. Otherwise, we are hurting them, not helping them.

When an MBA alumna came back to visit recently, she told a department chair that she had thought her C in statistics was fine when she received it because it got her through the course. However, a couple of years later, her job required her to apply some statistics. At that point she realized she didn't have the skills she truly needed on the job. She found herself seeking help and wishing she had worked harder in class.

I've heard other stories from students emphasizing the need for

rigor in grading. In particular, students complain about group projects where individual contributions are not well evaluated, allowing some students to earn high grades as free riders. Honors students sometimes tell me that higher grades are earned across too broad a band, with significant differences in performance from the top to the bottom of the same letter grade. If students share these observations, don't we as educators need to re-evaluate our grading systems?

Part of the problem is that schools offer little consistency in the



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WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR NEXT AIRLINE FLIGHT TO BE STAFFED BY PILOTS WHO WERE PASSED AND CERTIFIED ONLY BECAUSE THEY BEGGED FOR GOOD GRADES?

way they determine grades. At Arizona State University's W.P. Carey School of Business, an internal study revealed that grade assignments are made in distinctly different ways across departments and by individual faculty. Even within departments respected by faculty and students for high standards, there is variance.

This variance complicates what is already a tricky situation any time we try to formalize grading procedures. If we ask a committee to determine what constitutes acceptable performance by course and discipline, some faculty will perceive the analysis as everything from unnecessary to unfair. At the same

time, students perceive any intervention by the administration as an attempt to deflate grades, which is not the issue.

Faculty give all sorts of excuses for refusing to toughen up grading policies. My favorite one is, “The students will trash me in the evaluations if I make the course too rigorous.” We asked one of our faculty to run an analysis of MBA grades. She found no statistical correlation between grades and the overall evaluation of the faculty member. We are still evaluating this question for undergraduates.

If we are not rigorous in our courses, we are dishonest as educators, and we are doing a disservice to our students. A competitive world will hold them to high standards. Even if the experience is painful, it is better for students to learn to perform at a high level in university rather than in life.

Moreover, think of how unnerving it would be if grade inflation affected other areas of our lives. Do you want your physician to tell you everything is fine (you get an A), or that you are putting your life at risk if you don’t get your cholesterol down (you really deserve a D)? And consider the disastrous consequences if other professions were filled with people who had not learned hard lessons in school.


Would you like your next airline flight to be staffed by pilots who were passed and certified only because they begged for good grades? Would you like to know that they didn’t practice instrument approaches in fog because they had too much to do while they were in school? Similarly, would you like your business taxes to be prepared by an accountant who skipped over

the material on accelerated depreciation, saying, “I can get the grade I need without studying that stuff”?

The pedagogy experts tell us that individual teachers cannot change the system. They argue that a single university should not buck the trend and take extreme action alone. Unless everyone deals with rigor and grades simultaneously, we only put our students and our institutions at a disadvantage.

I have a simple answer. Get over it. Do what you know is right. It is up to each of us to ensure that all students get personal performance messages about their demonstrated knowledge on a particular subject. What students do with the message is up to them.

Shortly after I arrived at ASU two years ago, I was visited by one of my former Wharton students. He told me a course I had taught more than 20 years ago had changed his life. That’s what we should want as feedback—not evaluations from students in school this semester, but testimonials from successful alumni who appreciate the fact that we held them to rigorous standards and helped them learn.

Let me repeat: Grades are messages, not merit badges. The sooner we reconnect grades to demonstrated learning, the more our students will achieve in life. That’s what I learned, beyond the course material, from my calculus teacher 40 years ago. I am still grateful. 

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