10 October 1975, Volume 190, Number 4210

SCIENCE

Grade Inflation

College transcripts are becoming so crowded with A's and B's that chapters of Phi Beta Kappa are reported to be raising the minimum grade average required, to safeguard the honor society's traditional exclusivity. A case study of grades in one community college found that the proportion of the school's students receiving an A in the first semester rose from 9.7 percent in 1963–1964 to 12 percent in 1968–1969 and 21 percent in 1971–1972. A 1974 study of recent grading procedures in 544 colleges across the country found that a student receiving a poor grade can often take the course over. This held for any grade in 303 colleges, for D or F in 442, and for F alone in 295 out of the 544 schools. In 325 of the institutions studied, when a course was repeated, only the last grade was taken into account in computing the grade point average.

Grade inflation makes *no* sense in terms of either of the two prevalent positions toward grades, the progressive or the traditional. According to the progressive view, grades are at best unnecessary, at worst harmful. Students should study because of their interest in the subject, its value for their future career, or not study at all. Progressives argue that under the grading system students are treated like Pavlovian dogs—in need of frequent "reinforcement." Feedback, not reinforcement, is what the student needs. Teachers should write a detailed, thoughtful commentary on each paper or exam. The teacher's response to the student's work should be part of an ongoing educational process, not merely "a good grade on the final." In short, grading is degrading.

The traditional viewpoint is that to expect learning to be its own reward is to expect too much. While a student who loves a subject is likely to continue to love it and perform accordingly whether his work is assessed by a grade or through a written progress report, other students, to whom the subject matter is like a medicine that must be gotten down, or is a necessary step in a career ladder, need something extrinsic to encourage good performance. This is not just a concession to human nature; it is seen as valuable training in "life." A student who learns to work hard for a good grade is thought to gain a self-discipline that will later help him adjust to other tasks in the real world which he will dislike but must perform. A student who cannot learn to live with competition over grades, however he ranks, will find the much harsher competitiveness of adult life even more difficult to take. Finally, so long as selecting some people and rejecting others is inherent in many fields of activity, it seems preferable to base the sorting process on an explicit criterion rather than a subjective one. Grades are less subject to favoritism and paternalism than personal evaluations.

Whichever philosophy one subscribes to, neither provides a rationale for the kind of wishy-washy grading now on the increase. It has all the disadvantages of a grade hierarchy with few of its benefits. It does rank and label people, but does not give them clear performance cues. While theoretically a B– can be as clear a signal as an F or a D, and a B+ could eventually take on the meaning of a C, the various letters have just enough cultural and emotional resonance for student after student to be *mis*cued when A's and B's are appearing on nearly every paper. And with the narrowing of the grade range from A to B, the fact that some professors play the full field while others restrict themselves to the limited range heightens the arbitrariness of grading and the difficulties of grade average comparisons.

What is needed is open discussion leading to departmental or faculty-wide resolutions endorsing either a relatively standardized system of meaningful grades or the abolition of all grades—eliminating grade inflation one way or the other. At the least, each department should compile and circulate statistics that would indicate which professors are contributing most to skewing the grading curve upward (for example, that Professor X's grades are two sigmas higher than the department profile). Such publicizing of grade inflation may help to curb it. Meanwhile, neither students who have really earned their high grade averages nor those who have just had "sympathetic" teachers know what they got.—AMITAI ETZIONI, *Department of Sociology, Columbia University,* and *Director, Center for Policy Research, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York 10027*