

# Grade inflation: a 'dilution of student worth'

By ROBERT REVELEY  
Of the Emerald

If you jump for joy whenever you "ace" a course, you'd better stop patting yourself on the back and prepare for a shock: almost one-third of the grades awarded at the University during a recent three-term period were A's, according to the current Academic Standards Committee (ASC) report.

Even more startling may be the disparity in grading practices among schools and departments at the University.

According to the report, the percentages of A's awarded ranged from 16.7 in the marketing, transportation and business environment department to a high of 81.5 in military science.

Only in business administration, journalism and liberal arts did the overall percentages of A's fall below 30. Departmental figures in liberal arts ranged from 16.8 per cent (nursing) to 56.8 per cent (women's studies).

The report calls the disparity "clearly unfair to students who enroll in courses where high grades are unusually hard to achieve." The ASC blames "those departments which have relaxed their standards rather than those which have maintained traditional standards."

**Most University** administrators agree grade inflation—the devaluation of the criteria by which the student's performance is judged—presents a serious problem, primarily for the student.

Journalism school Dean John Hulteng believes grade inflation and disparity in grading create a "dilution of student worth."

The ASC agrees: "Grade inflation penalizes better students because a premium grade effectively no longer exists in many classes."

Dean James Kelly, whose Community Service and Public Affairs' faculty awarded A's to 59.6 per cent of its students, says, "People are giving away grades. I find it difficult to believe that 60 per cent of the students in this school are doing excellent work."

Disparate grading practices

create problems for students who are competing for scholarships. "People in departments and colleges with easy grading policies will pick off all the scholarships," says Stoddard Malarkey, associate liberal arts dean.

Major Michael Vasey, assistant professor of military science, is one instructor who believes the issue is exaggerated. Vasey feels that 81.5 per cent of the students in his department are in fact doing excellent work. He also believes that "an A in our department means as much as anywhere else."

**Donald McCarty**, director of the University's Career Planning and Placement Service, also dismisses the phenomenon as basically insignificant, at least as far as prospective employers are concerned. McCarty says most employers are unaware of the facts surrounding grading disparities and the recruiting process is relatively unaffected by grade inflation because "everybody's got the problem."

He also warns, however, that if a student has an excess of undifferentiated grades in a major field, there would be "some suspicion of the student's real ability" on the part of the recruiter.

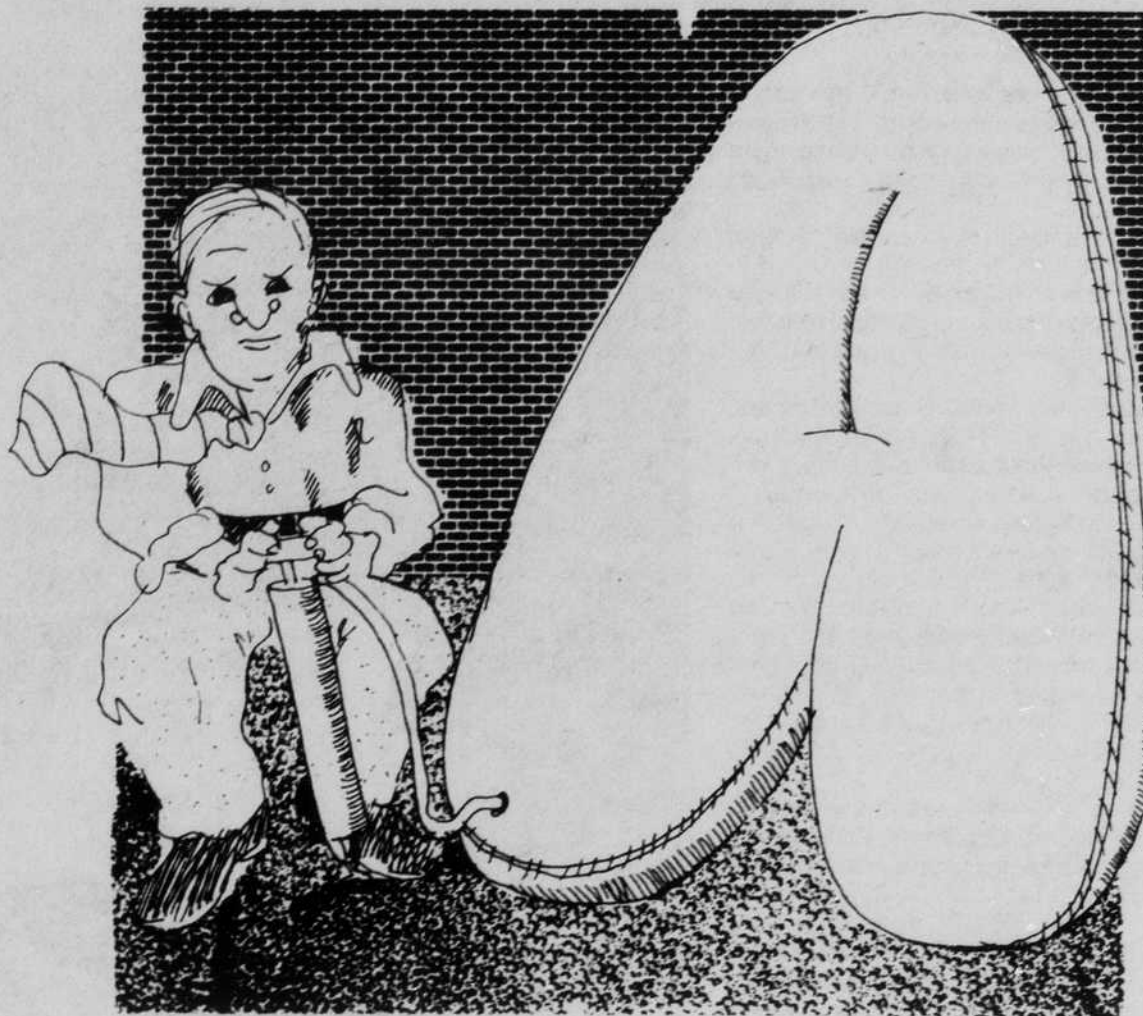
As McCarty suggests, grade inflation is a nationwide phenomenon and has been attributed to the general upheaval in educational practices which took place during the 60s. Many educators trace it to the rise in egalitarian sentiment and the heightened interest in alternate means of education during that decade.

More specifically, the problem has been blamed on the Vietnam war, during which many instructors were reluctant to expose male students to a possibly deadly draft by handing out low grades.

**Vasey, however**, says he has "heard everything attributed to Vietnam," and does not think it is a factor.

Spencer Carlson, University registrar, says the phenomenon of grade inflation and grading disparities developed here in the mid and late 60s and blames "a lack of common viewpoint on the part of the faculty."

Another University administrator feels the strong tradition of



Drawing by JoAnne Fahlgren

faculty power and the difficulty deans have in influencing their faculties are at the root of the problem at the University.

Student evaluations, which are used at the University in awarding promotions and tenure to faculty members, may also play a part in rising grade levels. Carlson sees "some relationship between expected grades and evaluations," but believes student evaluations are "not necessarily a factor."

What's a university to do?

Workable solutions to these problems seem as elusive as the causes. Universities across the country are, however, beginning to take steps to turn the situation around. Yale, for example, has reinstated the D grade, and the University's faculty senate has voted to do the same thing. The senate will also consider a motion next fall to bring back the F as well.

**University administrators** disagree on what else might be done to moderate the problem. Kelly sees the need for "explicit criteria for judging student performance." Without these criteria, he says, "the University's credibil-

ity is questioned."

Malarkey, however, sees difficulty in imposing a uniform formula. "Make public the grading patterns," he suggests. Such publication, he feels, would reveal any school or department that was out of line and exert pressure for corrective action.

Aaron Novick, dean of the University's graduate school says he "would like to see more consistency in grading practices. But how do you achieve it?" he asks.

One answer, he says, might be a separation of the teaching and

examination functions, each being handled by an independent staff.

Despite differences in opinion on how grade inflation and grading disparities are to be reversed, general agreement exists among University administrators that the problems will be acted on.

Education Dean Robert Gilberts sees "more conservatism in education," and Kelly believes that when the matter is closely examined, "What students are really after is a good education. If people get cheap degrees, they hate the school later."



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