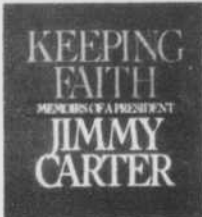


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Stopping the grade spiral

Profs debate how to pop ballooning grade averages

This is the final part of a two-part look at grade inflation — why it is decreasing and how it has prompted changes in grading systems.

The question that usually arises in any discussion of grade inflation is — what can be done to stop it?

University faculty members questioned had no hard-and-fast answers, but they do know what doesn't work.

John Gage, director of composition for the English department, says some colleges impose a maximum percentage for each letter grade, but he says this isn't a solution.

"The result is that everyone ignores it and it makes them more adamant about their own ideas," Gage says.

Alan Kimball, honors college director, says when he worked at Stanford University, the administration recommended professors give 15 percent A's, 35 percent B's and 50 percent C's and below. He says these are good guidelines to follow, but they do not take into account individual cases where higher percentages are justified.

Some departments have experienced less grade inflation because their standards are easier to define. Theodore Palmer, head of the mathematics department, says inflated grades in math classes that are prerequisites for other classes will hurt students in the long run.

"If you give a student in Math 201 a passing grade when he doesn't deserve it, you're not doing him any favor because he won't be prepared for 202," says Palmer.

It's easier to be objective in a math course because there is seldom any question whether a student has solved a problem correctly, he adds.

Gage sees little grade inflation in the composition department for similar reasons.

Composition instructors meet to discuss grading standards as part of their training, he says. These meetings are necessary to ensure that sections in composition, a University-wide requirement, reflect similar standards.

In the social sciences and humanities objectivity is more difficult, says William Davie, philosophy professor.

In a course like philosophy, "you're not really expected to get the stuff wrong." Instead, how well the material is understood makes the difference in which letter grade is assigned.

Some professors say they're confused about the whole grading system.

"I don't understand the grading system. I never have. I only understand three kinds of performance," says Kimball. He describes these as superior, satisfactory and unacceptable or A-C-F in letter grades.

Some professors view the A as the only



Graphic by Shawn Bird

really important grade.

"I don't worry about the difference between a B and a C. I'm concerned with preserving the integrity of the A," says James Klonoski, political science professor. "The question I ask is — 'Is A work today what A work was 20 years ago?' — and I think it is."

Davie criticizes the standard curve allowing only the top 10 percent to achieve an A. "I like to think an A is so special, but not so special that there

should only be 10 percent" in the A range.

Kimball says there are two ways to grade on a curve. One way is to do the grading and then discover what the natural curve of the class is, and the other way is to impose a curve by manipulating the class into a standard grade distribution.

Professors can only justify imposing a curve in a very large class where they have to grade anonymously, says Kimball. Large classes lend themselves to standard curve gradation, Orbell adds.

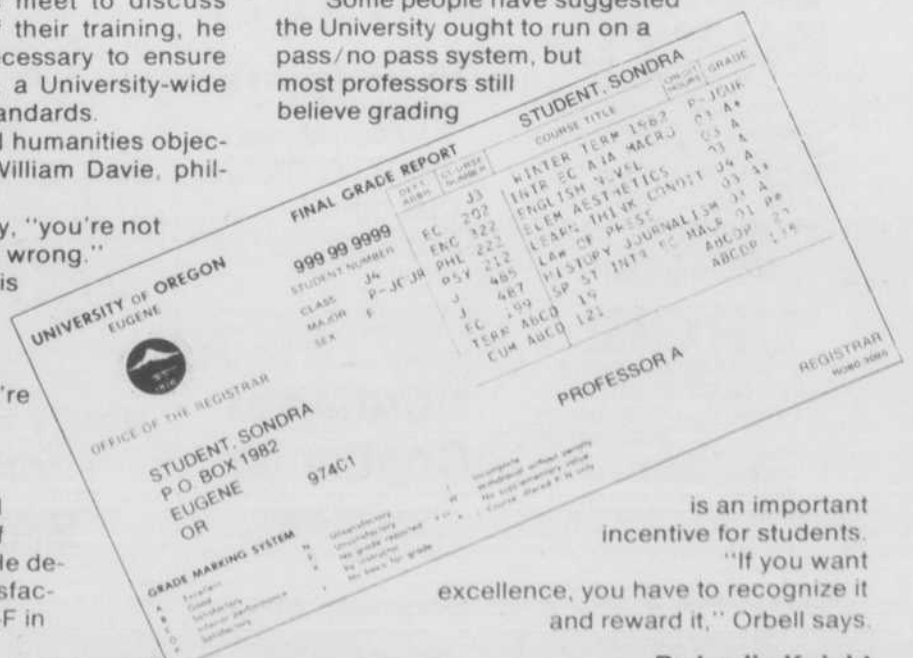
One result of grade inflation is GPA's are no longer taken seriously. Gage says students sometimes inflate their own grades by manipulating their transcripts.

Students sometimes only take courses they know they can do well in to ensure their GPA will be high.

Gage, who is a member of the committee for Phi Beta Kappa, says GPA's are no longer a major factor in selection for Phi Beta Kappa. The committee looks instead at the course roster for an indication of depth and variety.

Kimball agrees GPA's are not an accurate tool for comparison of student achievement. "How do you compare the student who took physics and got a C to the one who didn't take it?" he asks.

Some people have suggested the University ought to run on a pass/no pass system, but most professors still believe grading



is an important incentive for students. "If you want excellence, you have to recognize it and reward it," Orbell says.

By Leslie Knight

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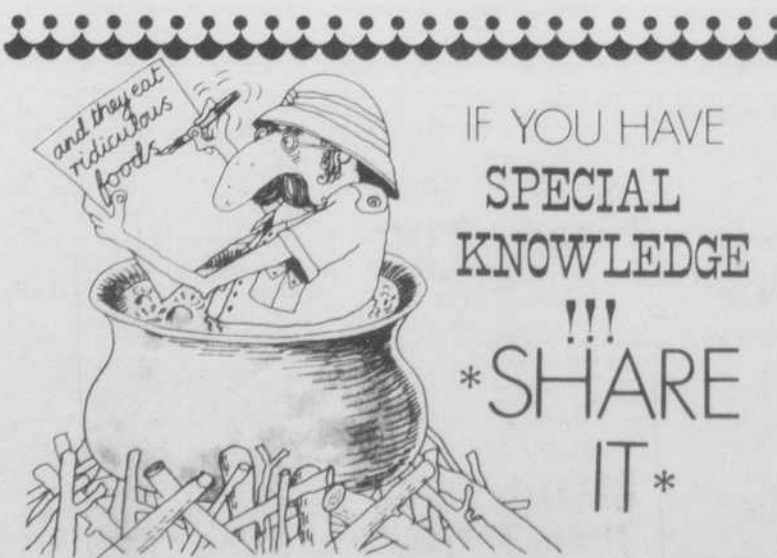
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IFC votes confidence in Hill

The Incidental Fee Committee approved a vote of confidence Thursday for committee chairer

Bart Hill although he and vice chairer Betzy Fry voted against it.

The committee also approved an amendment to the confidence vote saying no committee member can make a statement for the committee for publication or broadcast without prior authorization from a majority of the IFC. Without prior authorization, the members must say their remarks are their own opinion, the amendment adds.

The vote of confidence came as a result of Hill's request to fellow IFC member Jeff Nudelman that a vote be held because of reported dissension within the committee.

The committee approved the vote of confidence 5-2 with Hill and Fry dissenting.

The amendment was passed on a 4-3 vote, with Holmes, Shrauger, Ritterband-Mason and Braun supporting it.

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