Changing the Grading Culture at the University of Oregon

The Problem
Recognizing that grade inflation is a problem nationally, the 2005 Undergraduate Council (UGC) undertook a systematic analysis of UO grading trends to determine whether there is evidence of grade inflation here. The study covered the full period for which electronic grade data were then available (1992-2004) and focused on individual undergraduate courses that were large and had been taught over the entire period (http://tiny.cc/brPcR). Four time points were sampled (1992, 1996, 2000, and 2004) and the difference between the percentages of A’s, B’s and so forth awarded in each course between one year and another was determined. Aggregate results were obtained by averaging the % changes within schools or colleges, within each of the three disciplinary areas of CAS, and for the University as a whole. The results show that from 1992 to 2004, for the University as a whole,

- The proportion of A’s increased by 10%
- The proportion of A’s and B’s together increased by 7%
- There are differential increases in grades across the UO, with variation by school/college and CAS division
- These changes appear to be the result of grade inflation since other measures of student academic achievement did not change substantially over the same period: SAT scores of incoming students showed only a modest increase in the math portion of the test and no change in the verbal section.

UO vs other universities: Since the UO data were derived from the grade distributions of individual courses within a subset of UO courses, they were not directly comparable to national data, which are typically based on overall institutional undergraduate GPAs (data that are publically available). We therefore calculated the overall GPAs for UO undergrads during the study period and found a 5% increase between 1992 and 2004 – the same as the national average for this period (http://www.gradeinflation.com/).

Grade inflation leads to grade compression: One of the destructive consequences of grade inflation is grade compression – which occurs because there is a ceiling for grades (A or A+). The bulk of grades become clustered in the A and B range, with these results:

- It becomes difficult or impossible for faculty, or readers of transcripts, to distinguish passable work from good work, and good work from outstanding work
- Students’ expectations of grades become unrealistically high

The meaning of grades is not well-understood: Very few official statements exist at UO to help students understand the purpose of grades or the University’s grading philosophy, and there is little or no guidance on grading given to new faculty. The only University-wide statement on grades is the definition of letter grades in the UO catalog: A, Excellent; B, Good; C, Satisfactory; D, Inferior; F, Unsatisfactory (no credit awarded).

- A common assumption among students is that grades reward effort or good intentions rather than performance. Some students believe that merely showing up and doing minimal work deserves an A or at least a B
- There is uneven use of grades by individual faculty and among academic units
- Many students are aware of differences in grade distributions across departments/majors and evidence suggests that some students respond to these differences by steering clear of courses, departments, and majors where grading is considered rigorous
- Grading practices can influence students’ evaluation of instructors, which can influence promotion and tenure decisions, and may steer instructors away from candid, realistic grading

The UGC’s conclusion is that grade inflation/compression at UO is real and is harmful: The fundamental meaning and value of grades has been lost, transcripts are less useful, and our overall culture of grading is unhealthy.

Possible Solutions
The UGC examined strategies for combating grade inflation that have been implemented at other universities in the US and Canada. However, there is little published evidence on the effectiveness of various solutions.
• One exception is Princeton’s highly publicized (and successful) effort to combat grade inflation by capping at a departmental level the percentage of A’s; however, we feel that this solution is overly draconian and do not recommend implementing it at UO
• Although other strategies have not been systematically evaluated, anecdotal evidence suggests that some of them, such as providing contextual information on transcripts (e.g., at Indiana University, Columbia, U. British Columbia and McGill), show promise in combating grade inflation and encourage students to take courses that challenge them

Proposed Solutions
The UGC decided in 2008-2009 to take several steps to improve the UO’s grade culture, including educating incoming students on the meaning of grades, and proposing a series of University-level changes in order to clarify grading practices within and between units.

Educating incoming students: In 2008-2009, the UGC worked with the Office of Undergraduate Studies as well as the larger community of academic advisors and student affairs staff to implement several key changes beginning with orientation of the 2009-2010 freshman class. Specifically, we used IntroDUCtion in Summer 2009 to explain to new students (and their parents) how UO grading criteria differ from the ones they may have encountered previously – namely that UO grades describe performance on specific assignments, not effort or good intentions. This message is being reinforced through FIGs and through residential experiences during the freshman year.

Proposed University-level changes: The UGC recommends that UO explore implementation of three campus-wide solutions, but feels strongly that we need to hear comments and suggestions on these proposals from the larger campus community. The proposals are described below, with the hope that they will be discussed and debated by all UO faculty and students:

1. Each department and undergraduate program should discuss its grading practices and formulate a rationale for them that will be available to their faculty and students, as well as the rest of the university academic community, through the department/program website
   ▪ Departments should also discuss the degree to which grade inflation threatens to compromise their evaluation practices and, if appropriate, develop discipline-specific ways to address inflation

2. Instructors of record should receive a report of the grade distributions in their undergraduate courses, plus the average grade distributions in other courses that are considered comparable by their departments. These summaries would not be publicly posted, but the information would allow instructors and department chairs to examine individual grading practices in relation to the following:
   ▪ An individual’s own practice in the same or similar courses over time
   ▪ The department’s practice in comparable courses offered that term (if any)
   ▪ The department’s practice in comparable courses offered over time

3. Grades reported on transcripts should be accompanied by contextual information that indicates the frequency with which students in those courses earned higher or lower grades. This contextual information provides a way for transcript readers to more effectively evaluate grades in a grade-inflated environment. Several different kinds of context information are in use (e.g., mean grade, median grade, and percent A-range grades). The UGC proposes adopting this general approach and deciding later the specific information to be reported. To preserve confidentiality, the context would not be reported for courses with low enrollments (e.g., <20 students).

The UGC also recommends that UO publicize its efforts to combat grade inflation in order to minimize the potential negative effects on students (e.g., acceptance of our students into post-graduate programs). This would likely include a statement on all transcripts describing our commitment to addressing grade inflation at UO.

For more information or to comment on this proposal, contact the UGC through the council chair (Ian McNeely; imcneely@uoregon.edu, 346-4791).