

Conceptual Difficulties in Establishing Whether There is Grade Inflation
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Review of the literature

- many studies suggests grade inflation is a problem
- but for every finding of grade inflation there is a corresponding article refuting the charge
- there is considerable conceptual confusion over what constitutes 'grade inflation'

Conceptual Difficulties

- committee resisted statistical analysis without conceptual clarity
 - lies, damn lies, and statistics
 - the finding that grades are higher at one time over another, or in one faculty over another, is not in itself sufficient to prove inflation

inflation

- it is not enough to demonstrate that grades have gone up
 - better prepared students
 - better prepared instructors
 - better assessment practices
 - changes in grading scales
- need to demonstrate "an increase in grade point average without a concomitant increase in achievement" (Bejar and Blew, 1981).
 - but extremely difficult to document achievement other than through reference *to* grades
 - studies of inflation therefore often seem to confuse dependent and independent variables

possible comparisons

- comparisons over time
- comparisons between faculties
- comparisons between similar faculty at different institutions

comparisons over time:

comparing apples & oranges

- grading systems have changed over time, making comparisons over time inappropriate

- Old system = A,B,C,D,F
- New system A+ A A-, B+ B B-, C+ C C-, etc.

Student Perceptions of Grade Equivalents

1985	2005
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A = excellent • B = respectable • C = satisfactory • D = scraping through • F = failure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A+ = excellent • A = respectable • A- • B+ = satisfactory • B • B- = scraping through • C+ = failure

higher grades (inflation) may not indicate changes in the actual distribution of grades

- grade **compression** vs. grade inflation
 - inflation = change in labels
 - compression = actual change in distribution
- but even change in distribution need not imply erosion of standards
 - shift from norm-reference to criterion-reference grading
 - emergence of clearer criteria for professional faculties (KSAs)

comparisons between faculties

- quality of students recruited may vary
 - different faculties = different entrance quotas
 - post-degree programs vs fresh out of high school
- for post-degree programs, comparison needs to be with *senior* courses in other faculties
 - students seeking to become teachers more likely to be successful *students*
- quality of teaching may vary
- model of assessment may vary: norm referenced grading vs criterion referenced grading
 - professional faculties are more likely to adopt criterion referenced grading, tied to professional standards (KSAs), and mastery models of learning
 - traditional departments may insist on continuing to norm reference grades, arbitrarily limiting achievement and lowering grade point averages

- *could try* comparing our students' performance in ed courses with their performance in other faculties

- studies on other campuses found education grades 0.10 grade points higher than those earned by the same students at the same time in other departments

- but is 0.10 a worrisome difference?
- would we not *expect* students to do better in their professional courses than in courses unrelated to their careers ?
- we would expect instruction and assessment to be of higher quality in an education faculty?

- competition for scholarships, graduate studies, jobs, etc. requires consistency with other faculties of education in Alberta and nationally

- but what if we really *are* better than another university?

real issues & potential solutions

• consistency between sections

- student grades should not be dependent upon whose section students are in
 - can be addressed by
 - posting grade distributions within the faculty
 - close collaboration between horizontal groups
 - including course grade mean on student transcripts

• pressure on instructors for higher grades

- can be addressed through
 - changes to course evaluation process
 - workload issues
 - marker training
 - changes to student orientation

• student obsession with grades

- PSI and PSII grade conversion table out of step with rest of university
- students become obsessed grieving over lost marks rather than focused on learning
- increased competitiveness -- reject group work and peer learning as threat to high grades
- recommendation: revert to 2001 conversion

- setting the bar to professional standards

- UofL graduates widely recognized as worthy of employment -- we therefore meet the bar
- standard setting activities?
- research comparisons with other campuses?