

University Council on Teaching
Report and Recommendations on Grade Inflation/Grade Compression at Boston College
April 2009

Introduction

The University Council on Teaching was asked by the Provost to look into grade inflation and grade compression at Boston College and to make recommendations as to any actions that might be warranted. Grade inflation is a complex national issue at all levels of education and clearly not restricted to Boston College (Figure 1, pages 5-6). This said, there is no question that overall average grades and the number of A grades at BC has steadily increased during the last decade. The average grade of the graduating class in May 2007 was over 3.4. The number of A and A- grades increased from 32.4% in 1993-94 to 45% by 2000 and to 50% by 2007-08. Fifty percent A & A- grades make it very difficult to distinguish exceptional work by students. If current trends continue, grade compression will further exacerbate this problem and grading will lose its efficacy as an educational tool. In addition, there is a great deal of grading disparity between departments and schools at BC (Figure 2, page 7). This can create fairness issues and give students from a department with inflated grades a greater likelihood of graduating with honors or receiving other benefits associated with high grades than students in departments with lower grades.

The UCT views the continuing rise of both average grades and the percentage of A grades at BC as a problem, particularly when coupled with the fact that only 47% of graduating seniors indicated in a recent survey that faculty “frequently” provided them with intellectual challenge and stimulation. The academic quality of BC’s incoming freshmen has been rising steadily, and yet the combined SAT scores of incoming classes have been increasing at a lower rate than the average GPAs of those classes at graduation. It may be inferred that rather than raising their academic challenges and expectations for our students, BC faculty have been responding instead by simply raising grades. Our students may not perceive an intellectual challenge in their courses because, at least in part, grading no longer provides an incentive or guidance for rising to the challenge. However, we recognize there is a complex interrelation between grading and pedagogy. Boston College needs to consider taking a new look at what we are expecting of our students – and how and if these expectations relate to grade inflation. Is grade inflation a sign of a larger systemic problem related to teaching? We recognize that taking action about grade inflation without considering its relation to pedagogy is likely an incomplete solution. However, we offer the following recommendations as immediate steps that can be taken to heighten awareness of the problem at BC and to promote discussions of the issue across the campus.

Recommendations

To help control, if not reverse, the trend in grade inflation and compression at Boston College, the UCT makes the recommendations below. We recognize that these recommendations, if implemented, are but a first step in addressing the problem. However, we feel these recommendations can be undertaken easily and at little cost. While we do not view them as total solutions to the problem, we believe they should help to bring awareness to the issue on campus. These recommendations are not new and in many ways are similar to recommendations previously made by the Honors Subcommittee of the A & S Educational Policy Committee (EPC) in 2005-06. However, to our knowledge those recommendations were never enacted.

1. Provide data on grades to the faculty, chairs, and deans.

It is clear to the UCT that there is a lack of knowledge about grades and grading standards among faculty members and even by department chairs. “How do I stand relative to my peers?” is a question often heard. Or, “I’m not the problem.” The first step is to provide data on current course grades to faculty and chairs. Therefore, we recommend that at the end of each semester the registrar provide the following data to faculty with copies to chairs and deans.

- The enrollment in each course taught.
- The average and median grade in each course taught.
- The distribution of letter grades expressed in terms of both the number of students and the percentage of total students obtaining each grade category in each course.
- The overall averages of these statistics for the department and for the school. (If a faculty member is teaching in more than one department or school, provide both.)
- For comparison, the overall averages of these statistics for the department or school for some prior benchmark year, e.g., Academic Year 2003-2004 might also be provided.

(Older UCT members recall when most of this information was routinely provided to faculty, chairs, and deans.)

The A&S EPC report referenced above suggests that since grades are now submitted online, the numbers for each course could be provided instantly to faculty after the grades are entered but prior to their final submission and password approval. In this way faculty members could instantly see their grade distribution for each course before final submission. The UCT supports this idea, but realizes that it may take more time to implement than simply providing summaries at the end of the semester.

2. Initiate wide discussion of grades and grading norms at BC.

- Deans should ask each department to initiate discussions about grades and to establish its own grading norms. Norms could be set either as median course grade-point averages, or as percentages of students who receive various letter grades, or both. Departments might also choose to consider differences between larger (perhaps >15) and smaller courses. It is further suggested that deans ask departments to submit a brief report on these discussions and norms in writing. Once guidelines are established, they should be communicated to all faculty in the department including part-time faculty. (In several instances, the UCT found that newer faculty particularly welcomed discussion of grading norms since they had little idea of how their colleagues graded.)
- Each school should establish its own grading norms, perhaps under the guidance of an *ad hoc* committee or their EPC’s. The Law School has already done this and has established by faculty consensus general course average guidelines for both larger and smaller classes.
- Faculty obviously need the flexibility to deviate from norms. However, if a faculty member deviates from norms set by the department, that faculty member should be held accountable to departmental chairs and asked to explain the reasons for the deviation. Likewise, chairs of departments with grades

significantly above those set by their schools should be asked to explain these deviations to their deans. The Deans, in turn, should periodically review grade distributions in their school with the Provost's Office.

- Faculty should be asked to reflect on their grade distributions and their student evaluations as part of the annual review process each year.

Are These Measures Necessary?

A variety of arguments have been made at BC and across the country as to why we should not be worried about grade inflation. The UCT discussed these arguments, but did not find them persuasive. We considered, for instance, the argument that because grade inflation is a national phenomenon, Boston College would be hurting its students relative to those from other schools if we tighten grading standards. However, given the high rate of A's in the country, grades from many schools are becoming increasingly meaningless as an evaluation tool for graduate school admissions, fellowships competition, employment, etc. Some schools, such as Princeton, have adopted a policy of reducing the percentage of A's on a university-wide basis to a fixed percentage over time (from 47% to 35%)¹. Interestingly, they report that as fewer A grades were given, acceptance of Princeton students into graduate schools has actually increased. Reed College has a strong anti-grade inflation policy and an average GPA of 2.9, yet Reed also has an unusually high rate of students going to graduate Ph.D. programs and winning prestigious awards (i.e., Fulbright & Rhodes Scholarships), despite their grading policy². Since it is known that an A means a great deal at such schools, more weight is thus placed on those obtaining this grade. Medical School and Law School admissions offices already use national services that rate the grading standards of undergraduate colleges and discount their GPAs accordingly. Thus, as long as any revision of BC grade policies is recognized by these services, there should be no negative impact on our students applying to these graduate programs, and in fact, there should be a positive impact for our better students. If in the future a substantial revision of grading practices at BC were to take place, it might be appropriate to consider adding an indication of this to student transcripts or attaching a letter explaining this to transcripts. To help readers of transcripts interpret grades, some colleges such as Dartmouth and Cornell³ add the median grade and enrollment in each class to the transcript, as well as publishing these numbers on-line. The UCT, however, is not ready to recommend that such measures be implemented at BC at this time.

The UCT also considered the argument that rising GPAs merely reflect the rising quality of our incoming freshmen. As noted above, it is the case that the combined SAT scores for our incoming students have been steadily increasing over the past twenty years, and so have the GPAs at graduation of each class. Even if the rate of increase for both were the same, this would

¹ From "Is it Grade Inflation, or Are Students Just Smarter?" New York Times, Week in Review section, by Karen Arenson, April 18, 2004. (Available at URL <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/04/18/weekinreview/18aren.html?ex=1083306836&ei=1&en=08681ec0cfdc2544>)

² Ibid

³ From Bar, T, Kadiyali, V., Zussman, A., "Quest for Knowledge and Pursuit of Grades: Information, Course Selection, and Grade Inflation," The Johnson School Research Paper Series # 13-07, Cornell University, 2007. Available at The Social Science Research Network Electronic Paper Collection at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1019580>.

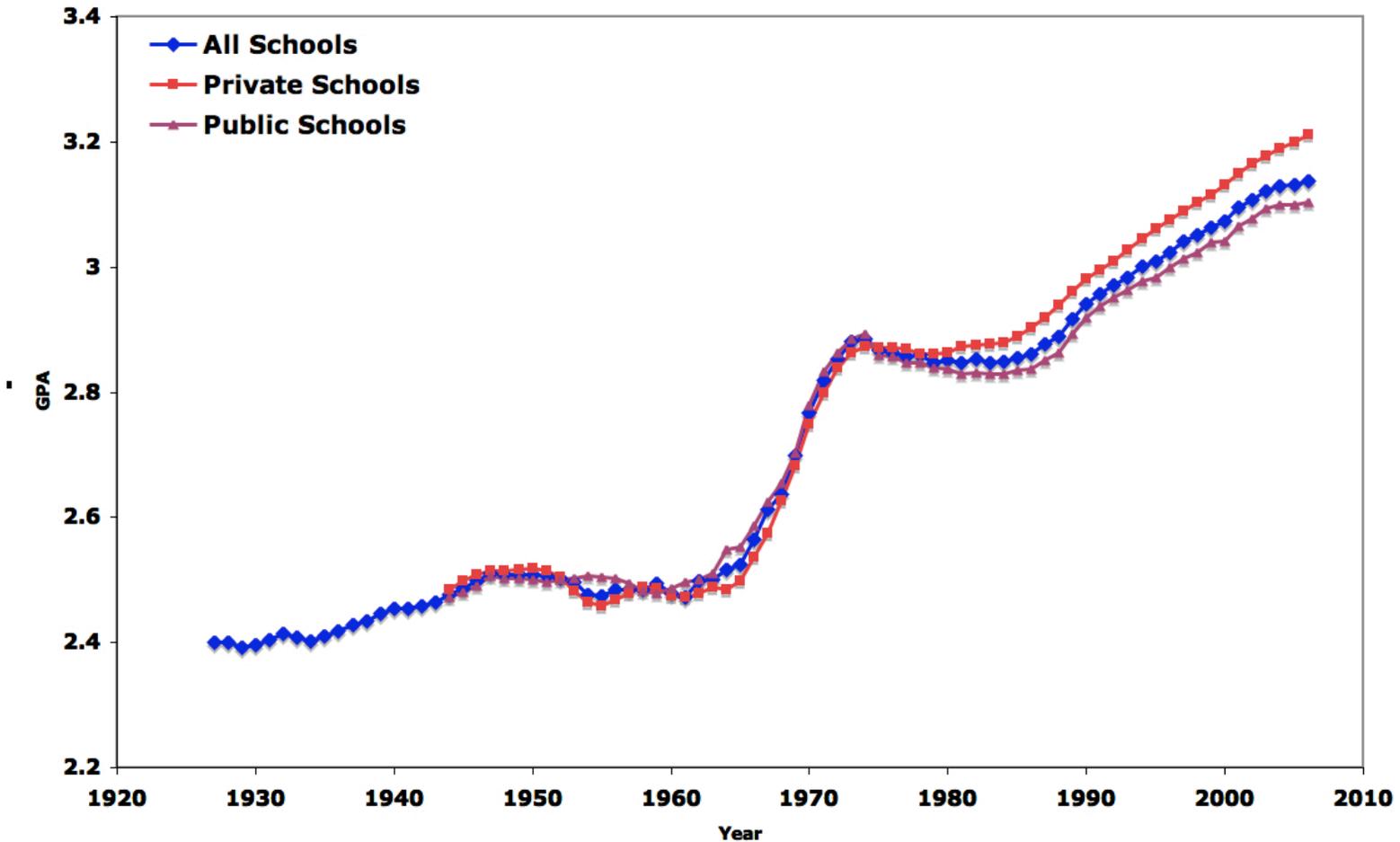
imply that the academic expectations and demands of BC faculty have remained static, while our students have gotten steadily better. In fact, however, the rise in GPAs appears to have been greater than the rise in entering SAT scores, suggesting that faculty expectations are not just static but declining — not a formula for an intellectually-challenging campus environment.

The argument that faculty lack incentives to be more rigorous in grading was also considered. More rigorous grading is thought to invite more student complaints. Also, faculty fear that students may rank them lower on course evaluations. This is thought to be particularly a concern for non-tenured and part-time faculty. However, the assertion that less rigorous grading yields better course evaluations is not supported by careful empirical studies. Faculty that challenge students and hold the line on grading have some of the highest student evaluation ratings. It is obvious that the students respect these faculty members. If there were general standards of grading established by departments and schools, poor evaluation ratings of faculty on the basis of grading would not be an issue.

Closing statement

To control grade inflation and compression, all levels of the University from individual faculty members to departmental chairs, school deans, and the Provost's office need to work together on this problem. The UCT recommends the simple steps above be taken as a first effort in addressing this issue at BC. We hope that by making everyone aware of the problem, providing solid grade-distribution data, and encouraging enlightened discussion on this topic, the University will be able to slow the upward spiral of grades and achieve a broader grade distribution.

Undergraduate GPA Over Time, Nationwide, 1927-2006



The above graph is a composite of 80 years of undergraduate grading in the US. Schools represented are listed below. This work would not have been possible without the help of many people including registrars, institutional assessment staff, archivists and random people who decided to search on the web and send me data. Thanks to all, Stuart Rojstaczer, stuart.ros@gmail.com.

Figure 1

Schools Represented

Alabama 1991-2006	Middlebury 1988-2005
Appalachian State 1968-2006	Minnesota 1963-1997
Auburn 1924-2006	Nebraska-Kearney 1990-2006
Carleton 1974-2004	North Carolina – Greensboro 1988-2006
Central Florida 1976-2006	North Carolina - Chapel Hill 1967-2006
Central Michigan 1977-2006	Northern Iowa 1976-2006
Colorado 1989-2006	Northern Michigan 1991-2006
Cornell 1990-2006	Ohio State 1980-2006
CSU-East Bay 1980-1999	Penn State 1975-2006
CSU-Fullerton 1976-2005	Pomona 1944-2006
CSU-San Bernardino 1965-2006	Princeton 1971-2006
Dartmouth 1989-2006	Purdue 1976-2006
Duke 1932-1960, 1969-2001	Stanford 1968-1992
Florida 1989-2006	Texas 1986-2006
Furman 1951-2006	Texas A&M 1985-2006
Georgia Tech 1972-2006	U Washington 1974-2001
Georgetown 1974-2006	UC-Irvine 1982-2002
Georgia 1974-2004	UCLA 1927-2004
Hampden-Sydney 1988-2006	Utah 1961-2006
Harvard 1985-2005	UW-La Crosse 1977-2006
Harvey Mudd 1973-2006	UW-Madison 1938-2006
Hope 1969-2006	UW-Oshkosh 1990-2005
Houston 1988-2006	Western Washington 1990-2004
Kansas 1984-2004	Wheaton 1984-2006
Kent State 1967-1998	William & Mary 1986-2005
Kenyon 1956-2006	Williams 1953-1999
Messiah 1990-2006	Winthrop 1987-2005

Figure 1

**Comparison of Total A- and A Grades by School,
and by High and Low Department in 2008F
and same department in 2000F**

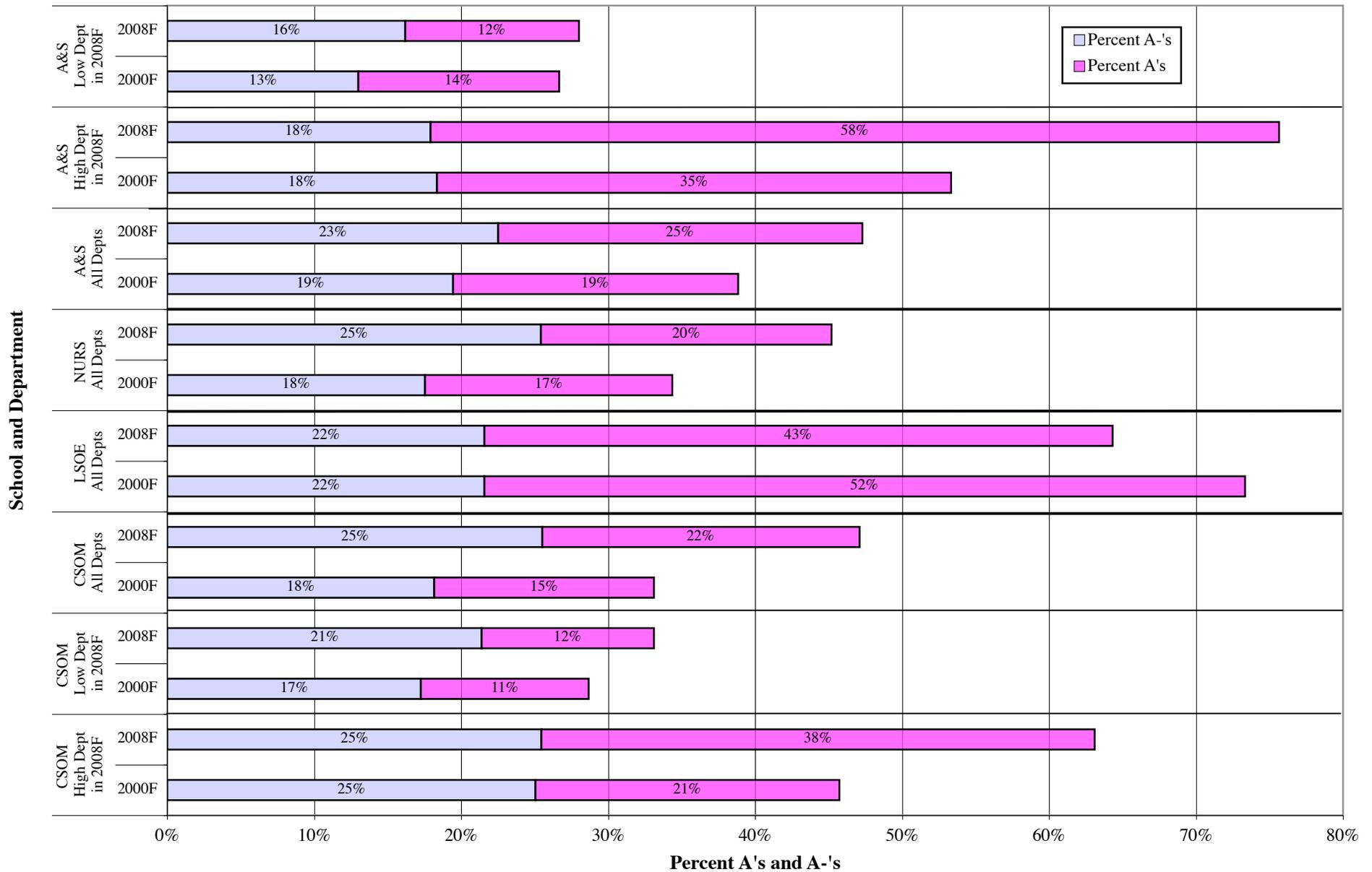


Figure 2