

**A Position Paper:
Grades Distributions and Grading Practices in the
MSW Program of the Indiana University School of Social Work**

April 5, 2008

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On behalf of:

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Ad Hoc Subcommittee on Grades and Grading Practices
of the
MSW Curriculum Committee of the Indiana University School of Social Work

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In this paper, we hope to provide an overview of phenomena associated with collegiate grading practices and grade distributions in general and those of the Master of Social Work Program of Indiana University in particular. In addition, we will discuss implications of current practices as well as potential consequences of changes. Finally, we will offer recommendations for the MSW Curriculum Committee to consider.

Grade Inflation, Grade Compression, and Diminishing Academic Standards

Concern about issues of grade inflation and diminishing academic standards emerged during the mid-to-late 1960s. During the Vietnam era, some professors began to award higher grades to male students who would otherwise become eligible for the military draft. Students in and out of the anti-war movement also raised serious questions about the value and relevance of formal education and the meaning (or meaninglessness) of letter grades when the nation was involved in an unpopular war that was widely viewed as unjust and unjustified, when basic human and civil rights were denied to millions of African-Americans, and when women's status and potential for achievement were severely limited. During this time of social revolution and student rebellion, many professors essentially adopted an "all are above average" approach to grades.

The phenomena of grade inflation and lenient grading practices were exacerbated in the 1980s with the introduction and publication of end of semester, student evaluation of teachers/teaching (SETs) rating systems. Grade inflation increased as the use of SETs expanded and gained prominence in personnel evaluation. Although some professors seem able to assign low grades and still receive high SET ratings, in general, a positive correlation exists between grades and SET ratings. On average, professors who assign higher grades tend to receive better student evaluations.

As competition for students has increased, universities have become more "student as consumer" oriented. As academic programs have increasingly emphasized the importance of SETs and other measures of consumer satisfaction, average GPAs have increased, standard deviations have decreased, and the proportion of A grades has increased while the proportion of C or lower grades has decreased. In addition, the assignment of W and I grades increase and most colleges now permit students to retake courses to improve their GPA.

Furthermore, students often gravitate to courses taught by instructors who grade generously and/or reflect high SET scores. A similar gravitational pull also occurs among academic disciplines. Programs with a reputation for modest expectations and lenient grading tend to attract students away from those reflecting high expectations and rigorous grading.

Indeed, there is solid evidence of differential grading practices and distributions among different academic disciplines and professions. "Grades tend to be higher in the humanities than in the natural sciences, where objective standards of measurement are enforced more easily"

(Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002, pp. 5-6). For example, in November 1995, the Registrar of IUPUI submitted a report to the campus Grade Inflation Committee regarding grading patterns among different schools. Derived from that report, Table 1 reveals that the School of Social Work awarded grades in a more generous manner than most departments. Only Labor Studies, Allied Health, Military Science (in Fall 1994), and the Honors Program awarded higher grades—as indicated by average GPAs in the Fall semesters of 1993 and 1994. All other professional schools awarded lower average grades.

Table 1: IUPUI Registrar's Report: Grading Patterns among IUPUI Schools (November 7, 1995)		
School	Fall 1993 Average GPA	Fall 1994 Average GPA
Medicine	2.489 n= 216	2.674 n= 139
Science	2.505 n = 12109	2.495 n= 12622
Education	2.679 n= 1632	2.943 n= 1595
Liberal Arts	2.689 n=14616	2.682 n = 13377
SPEA	2.764 n= 1488	2.732 n= 1479
RHIT	2.834 n= 264	2.770 n= 287
Journalism	2.862 n= 190	2.832 n= 187
Engineering & Tech	2.872 n= 5171	2.815 n= 4759
Business	2.883 n= 3268	2.810 n= 3692
Herron	2.957 n= 1903	2.934 n= 1874
Aerospace	3.025 n= 4	4.000 n= 2
Music	3.133 n= 569	3.215 n= 708
Dentistry	3.193 n= 723	3.092 n= 804
Physical Education	3.198 n= 1739	3.156 n= 1619
Nursing	3.255 n= 2609	3.264 n= 2466
Military Science	3.350 n= 111	3.940 n= 128
Social Work	3.406 n= 493	3.416 n= 483
Labor Studies	3.422 n= 67	3.531 n= 52
Allied Health	3.500 n= 2202	3.560 n= 2510
Honors	3.841 n= 27	3.847 n= 17

In December 1995, the Registrar prepared a report comparing undergraduate letter grade distributions for the fall semesters of 1990 and 1994 for IUPUI schools. Table 2 reflects the results of that report.

Table 2 suggests that that the faculty of the IU School of Social Work at IUPUI awarded a much greater proportion of A grades (in both 1990 and 1994) than did the campus at large (about 17% more in 1990 and about 23% more in 1994). In 1990, about 87.8% of social work grades were some form of A or B. In 1994, it rose to 91.3%. In 1990 and 1994, only 7.5% and 6.4% respectively of social work grades were some form of C. And, in those years, only 2.7%

and 1.7% respectively were grades of F. As Table 2 reveals, these percentages differ substantially from those in other professional programs.

Table 2: Final Grades Awarded Undergraduate Students Enrolled in Undergraduate Courses Summarized In Percentage Terms By The School Which Offered The Course (Fall 1994 and Fall 1990)						
	Year	A	B	C	D	F
Allied Health	1994	63.1	31.7	4.9	0.2	0.1
Allied Health	1990	54.8	38.0	6.5	0.6	0.0
Business	1994	28.8	38.0	24.1	5.2	4.1
Business	1990	21.1	37.8	28.9	7.6	4.6
Dentistry	1994	33.3	45.5	17.9	3.0	0.2
Dentistry	1990	37.0	46.4	13.8	2.1	0.7
Education	1994	49.6	29.3	4.8	0.5	16.4
Education	1990	41.1	34.6	7.6	0.9	15.9
Engineering &Tech	1994	31.6	36.5	21.3	4.7	6.0
Engineering &Tech	1990	30.9	37.1	20.9	5.0	6.2
Herron	1994	37.7	36.4	16.0	3.6	6.4
Herron	1990	30.3	40.7	18.3	4.4	6.2
Journalism	1994	31.6	44.9	11.2	3.7	8.6
Journalism	1990	27.1	43.9	18.6	2.7	7.7
Liberal Arts	1994	27.5	36.9	21.9	5.4	8.7
Liberal Arts	1990	24.5	37.0	24.9	6.1	7.5
Music	1994	62.9	18.8	5.5	3.8	9.2
Music	1990	52.3	27.6	9.9	3.0	7.2
Nursing	1994	43.1	44.2	11.2	0.6	1.1
Nursing	1990	26.5	47.6	21.7	2.4	1.9
Physical Education	1994	50.0	31.5	10.9	1.6	6.1
Physical Education	1990	49.4	30.6	11.7	2.6	5.6
Restaurant Hotel	1994	31.4	35.5	19.9	7.3	5.9
Restaurant Hotel	1990	36.8	34.0	14.0	9.4	5.8
Science	1994	26.0	29.5	26.0	6.4	13.1
Science	1990	23.4	30.1	29.3	6.7	10.4
SPEA	1994	24.7	42.0	21.8	6.2	5.4
SPEA	1990	22.4	38.7	27.0	5.8	6.2
Social Work	1994	56.2	35.1	6.4	0.6	1.7
Social Work	1990	45.4	42.4	7.5	2.0	2.7
Campus Total	1994	33.2	34.6	19.9	4.6	8.1
Campus Total	1990	28.5	35.5	23.1	5.3	7.7

As Table 3 suggests, evidence for the presence of “grade inflation” is overwhelming (Juola, 1980; Kuh & Hu, 1999; Levine & Cureton, 1998; as cited by Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002, p. 4). “Rojstaczer (2004), Johnson (2003), Rosovsky and Hartley (2002), and Levine and Cureton (1998) provide statistical evidence of grade inflation at virtually every public and private institution nationwide” (Caplan & Gilbert, 2007, March). See Table 4 for national average undergraduate GPAs for public and private colleges and universities.

Table 3: Grade Inflation from 1960 to 1997*		
Author(s) and Years studied	Sample size	Findings
Arvo E. Juola 1960-1978	180 colleges (with graduate programs)	From 1960 to 1974 the average GPA increased half a grade point (0.432). From 1974 to 1978, a leveling of grade inflation was detected.
Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton 1967, 1976, 1993	Data from survey of 4,900 undergraduates at all institutional types	Grades of A- or higher grew from 7 to 26 percent. Grades of C or below fell from 25 to 9 percent.
George Kuh and Shouping Hu 1984-1987; 1995-1997	52,256 student surveys from the Colleges Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) at all institutional types	College grades increased over time in every institutional type on the average from 3.07 to 3.343

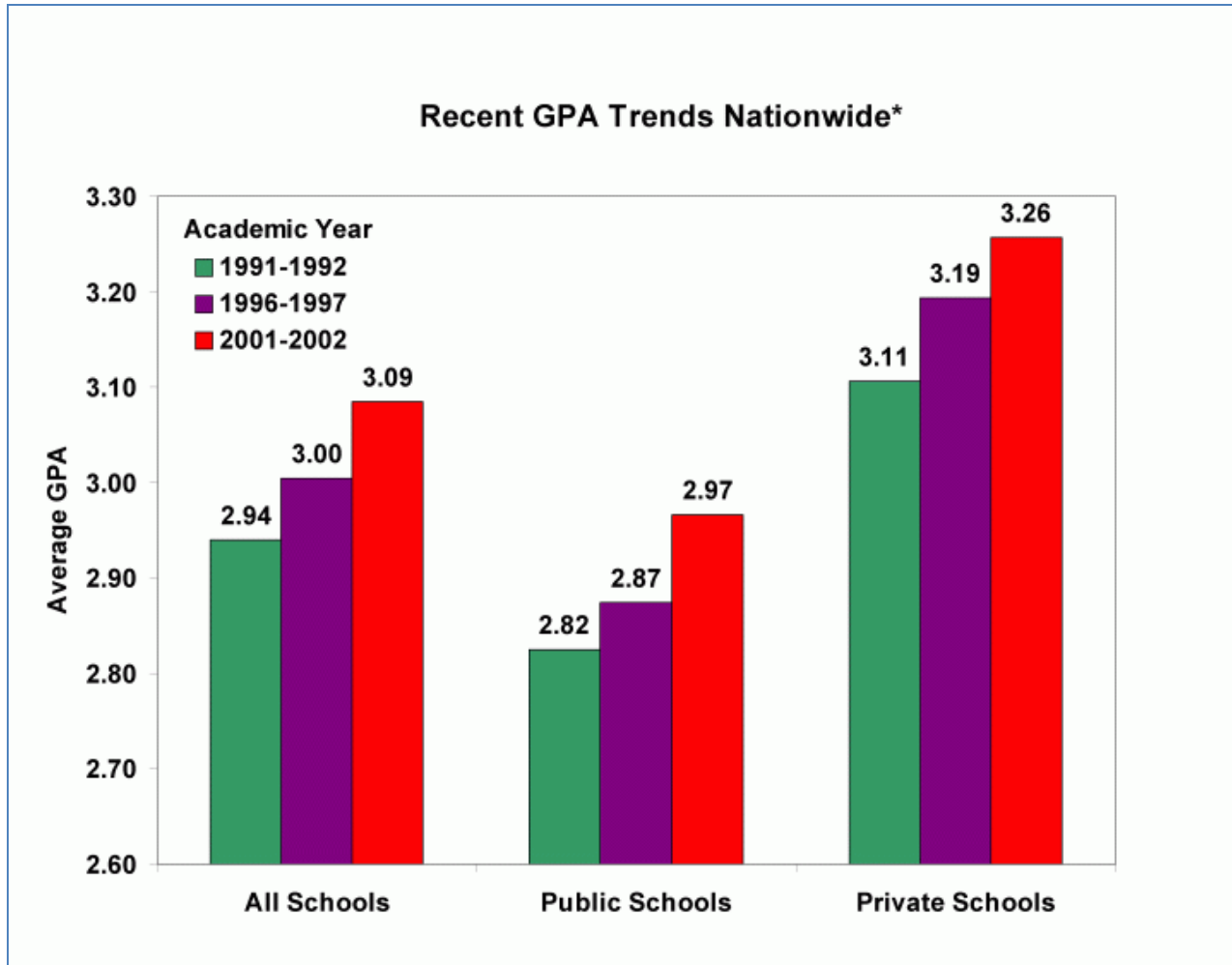
*From: Rosovsky, H., & Hartley, M. (2002). *Evaluation and the academy: Are we doing the right thing? Grade inflation and letters of recommendation*. Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences, p. 4.

Princeton University’s class of 1973 reflected a median GPA of 3.08 while its 1997 class reflected a median GPA of 3.42 (Archibold, 1998; as cited in Kuh & Hu, 1999). In the spring semester of 1997, 36% of all undergraduates at the Bloomington campus of Indiana University received grades of A and reflected an average GPA of 2.98 (Indiana University Office of the Registrar, 1998; as cited in Kuh & Hu, 1999). In 1983, the average GPA at IUB had been 2.76 and “A grades constituted less than 28% of **all** grades”(Kuh & Hu, 1999, p. 297)—presumably including those of graduate students as well as undergraduates.

Although existence of “grade inflation” is well-documented, faculty in the MSW program of the Indiana University School of Social Work might also be concerned about the parallel phenomenon of grade compression. When faculty assign most students grades of A or B while rarely assigning grades of C, D, or F, grade compression results. Such compression raises moral and ethical issues related to the gatekeeping role of professional schools and the honesty and integrity of the grading process.

We have yet to obtain grade distributions for Indiana University MSW students over recent years. However, we were able to locate distributions for certain semesters during the mid-to-late 1990s. As Table 5 reveals, of 8437 letter grades assigned in the MSW program at IUPUI during the period 1994-1998, 96% were some form of A or B. Slightly more than two percent of the were some form of C, D, or F. During that period, 73.6% of the 8437 letter grades were some form of A while only 26 of the 8437 (0.3%) were grades of F. In addition, 477 (about 5.6%) were assigned grades of Incomplete or some form of Withdrawal. Presumably, some of these I and W grades were assigned generously, thus furthering inflationary tendencies. During that same period, the average GPA per semester or term ranged from 3.550 to 3.829.

Table 4: Recent GPA Trends Nationwide*



*Average undergraduate GPA for Alabama, California-Irvine, Carleton, Duke, Florida, Georgia Tech, Hampden-Sydney, Harvard, Harvey Mudd, Nebraska-Kearney, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina-Greensboro, Northern Michigan, Pomona, Princeton, Purdue, Texas, University of Washington, Utah, Wheaton (Illinois), Winthrop, and Wisconsin-La Crosse. Note that inclusion in the average does not imply that an institution has significant inflation. Data on GPAs for each institution can be found at the bottom of this web page. Institutions comprising this average were chosen strictly because they have either published their data or have sent their data to the author on GPA trends over the last 11 years. (Last update, March 17, 2003). (Rojstaczer, 2004)

Table 6 reveals the average GPA by MSW course during the fall 1995 and spring 1996 semesters. Please recognize that the MSW curriculum is currently quite different from what it was during the 1995-1996 academic year. Nonetheless, we hypothesize that the average GPA in MSW courses remains in the range of 3.7 to 3.9.

In recent years, the problem of grade inflation and grade compression has caught the attention of the wider public, state legislators, and regional collegiate accreditation bodies. As a result, most universities—particularly those that are state sponsored—have begun to address the issue of “grade inflation.” For example, in early 1994, the Indiana University Board of Trustees issued the following resolution:

WHEREAS, there are diverse views concerning the significance of grade inflation in parts of the University; and

WHEREAS, the assessment of student learning and the assignment of letter grades are the responsibility of individual faculty members; and

WHEREAS, the Board of Trustees intends to stimulate discussion among the faculty on grading policies;

NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT:

1. The faculty of every department or division shall, for the guidance of new faculty and the mutual understanding of all, discuss regularly the practice and standards of the departmental faculty in the assessment of student performance, including academic expectations and the awarding of letter grades. A written summary of the discussion shall be filed in the office of the Dean of Faculties or Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs.
2. The summary shall be filed on or before January 1, 1997.

Table 5: Average GPAs and Letter Grade Distributions for IU at IUPUI MSW Students for Selected Semesters												
Program	Year	Sem.	Avg GPA	GPA Grades	A	B	C	D	F	I	W	WX
MSW-IUPUI	1994	Fall		1386	970	252	14	0	1	12	31	
MSW-IUPUI	1995	SUM 1	3.707	215	165	47	1	0	0	3	0	2
MSW-IUPUI	1995	SUM 2	3.550	297	190	93	11	0	3	2	4	3
MSW-IUPUI	1995	Fall	3.673	1135	815	304	13	0	3	10	20	43
MSW-IUPUI	1996	Spring	3.740	860	683	164	10	1	2	23	10	25
MSW-IUPUI	1996	SUM 1	3.697	261	203	52	2	3	1	19	3	4
MSW-IUPUI	1996	SUM 2	3.755	184	152	25	7	0	0	7	2	2
MSW-IUPUI	1996	Fall	3.670	1212	881	301	24	3	3	26	5	14
MSW-IUPUI	1997	Spring	3.638	865	622	212	27	0	4	17	18	15
MSW-IUPUI	1997	Fall	3.699	1105	832	242	30	1	0	28	21	32
MSW-IUPUI	1997	SUM 2	3.829	178	158	20	0	0	0	10	2	1
MSW-IUPUI	1998	Spring	3.645	739	538	176	14	2	9	21	13	29
Totals				8437	6209	1888	153	10	26	178	129	170
Percentage					73.6%	22.4%	1.8%	0.1%	0.3%	2.1%	1.5%	2.0%

Table 6: Average GPA by MSW Course (Fall 1995 & Spring 1996)	
Course (all sections combined; single section courses excluded)	Average GPAs by course: Fall 1995 & Spring 1996 Semesters Note: A=4.0; A-=3.7; B+=3.3; B=3.0; B-=2.7; C+=2.3; C=2.0
S500	3.872(n=130)
S510	3.797(n=130)
S511	3.462 (n=131)
S520	3.399(n=94)
S530	3.822(n=97)
S541	3.712 (n=149)
S542	3.766 (n=147)
S540	3.649(n=157)
S600	3.904 (n=34)-Fall and 3.853 (n=123)-Spring
S621	3.589 (n=82)
S631	3.665 (n=139)
S643	3.741 (n=139)
S644	3.728(n=133)
S645	3.831 (n=125)

Note: As you consider the above figures, please recognize that the average college GPA (pre-MSW program) of *applicants* to the MSW Program at IUPUI in the 1994-1996 era was approximately 3.13, and the average college GPA of persons *admitted* to the MSW program at IUPUI was about 3.27.

In August 1994, an IUPUI Committee on Grade Inflation was formed. The IUPUI Registrar provided the committee and the campus community with relevant data (Grove, 1995, December 7, 1995, October 25; Hill & Grove, 1994, June 21). The IUPUI grade inflation committee analyzed grading data for IUPUI campus schools and departments, and for the campus as a whole. Based on their analysis of the data, the committee suggested that:

. . . the four largest schools (Liberal Arts, Science, Engineering & Technology, and Business) have mean GPAs that range from 2.5 to 2.8. . . . Some of the smaller programs as well as those with a strong performance oriented assessment component grade somewhat higher. This higher grading could well be caused by better motivated and higher quality students.

The grade distribution for Fall 1994 at IUPUI reflects a 55% A/B rate. This figure is based on a population that includes nearly eleven thousand P/S or W grades. With those eliminated from the sample space, the A/B rate increases to about 67%.

Representative data on grade distributions suggest that the A/B rate is 47% for 100-level courses, 57.5% for 200-level courses, 66% for 300-level courses and 68% for 400-level courses. (Orr et al., 1995)

The campus committee also suggested that grade inflation at IUPUI was related to the following factors:

1. There is an indirect (inverse) relation between student retention and grade inflation.

2. The stretching (expanding) of the grade scales creates more A and B grades.
3. Competency based assessment (in which progress for advancement requires 100% mastery of certain skills) contributes to grade inflation whenever such assessment is incorporated into the overall grading structure.
4. Highly competitive admission standards for some schools create a skewed student population. In other words, students at good schools should get better grades as a whole than would students at more "mediocre" schools.
5. A reluctance to "require" faculty to force the average grade in a class to be a C may eventually result in C no longer being a viable grade.
6. Older students perform better, especially if they are competing against more traditional students.
7. There is a gender bias that can contribute to grade inflation. Female students generally perform better in class than male students.
8. An increased number of and/or a relaxing of standards for course withdrawals enables students whose course performances have been less than average to avoid receiving a letter grade of C or below.
9. Lack of knowledge on the part of professors concerning good student assessment strategies can lead to the assignment of a disproportionate number of A and B grades.
10. Progression standards: freshman level courses tend to filter out weaker students.
11. Part-time faculty grade more leniently because they may not have ever been taught how to assess students correctly.
12. FX and Other Grade Replacement policies permit students to keep their graduation GPA index high.
13. Self-imposed pressure by schools that want their students to be acceptable to and accepted by prestigious graduate schools may result in their faculty developing more lenient grading policies.
14. Need for students to get good jobs with GPA-oriented firms can lead to actions on students' part to do whatever they can to get the highest grades possible. Since graduate employment history is also a measure of a program's quality, schools may take actions similar to those identified in item 13 to enhance their students' employability prospects with the more prestigious firms.
15. Probation rules encourage students to get good grades (or withdraw from classes in which they are doing poorly) if they are to avoid dismissal.
16. Changes in teaching philosophies that make learning more experiential.
17. Professors get better student evaluations if they grade more leniently.
18. An emerging student attitude is that the payment of tuition "guarantees" decent grades. (Orr et al., 1995)

In a similar vein, the Mankato State University Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (Schiming, 2007) published the following list of possible "causes" and "implications" of grade inflation:

1. **Institutional pressure to retain students.** The easiest way to maintain enrollment is to keep the students that are already on campus. The professors,

departments, colleges, and even entire universities may implicitly believe that giving their students higher grades will improve retention and the attractiveness of their classes and courses. With students seeing themselves more as consumers of education and more eager to succeed than to learn, the pressure on institutions to provide more success can be persuasive (Cole, 1993, January 6).

2. **Increased attention and sensitivity to personal crisis situations for students.** The most obvious example was the Vietnam War era. Poor grades exposed male students to the military draft. Many professors and institutions adopted liberal grading policies to minimize the likelihood of low grades. Some sources cite this period as the genesis of recent grade inflation as the students of that era are now professors.
3. **Higher grades used to obtain better student evaluations of teaching.** In an increased effort at faculty accountability, many colleges and universities mandate frequent student evaluations of faculty that often end up being published or otherwise disseminated. These same evaluations play an increasingly important role in tenure and promotion decisions. Faculty members who find themselves in such situations may attempt to 'buy' better student evaluations of their teaching by giving higher grades.
4. **The increased use of subjective or motivational factors in grading.** Factors such as student effort, student persistence, student improvement, and class attendance count in favor of the students who possess these desirable characteristics. This tends to skew grading patterns upwards.
5. **Changing grading policies and practices.** The increased use of internships, contract grading, individual study courses, group work within courses, a liberal withdrawal policy, generous use of the incomplete grade, and the ability to repeat courses to improve a grade can all contribute to grade inflation.
6. **Faculty attitudes.** A faculty member who believes that grades are a vehicle to please students rather than to recognize and reward performance will tend to give higher grades. Similarly a professor less willing to distinguish superior work from good or average work will tend to impart an upward bias to grades. One source places most of the blame for grade inflation on the shoulders of faculty who have failed in their traditional role of gatekeepers (Goldman, 1985). The implication here is that it is easier to give a good grade than a bad grade for the instructor.
7. **Content deflation.** For large public universities, the temptation might be to lower both the expectations and demands in individual courses. A fairly liberal admissions policy, a large number of non-traditional students, and a large number of working students all tempt professors to lower their expectations by reducing the number of textbooks, the amount of writing, and the amount of homework in the course. The goal may be laudable in responding to the particular needs of a specific student body but the result may be inflated grades.

8. **Changing mission.** It is also possible that, as some institutions de-emphasize the teaching mission in favor of the research or service component, some faculty may be unwilling or unable to spend their time on grading and evaluation. This lack of attention to grading and evaluation could result in a weakening of standards. (Schiming, 2007)

Implications

The persistence of grade inflation in the last twenty years or so in American higher education has had some important implications. Some of these are:

1. A cheapening of the value and importance of both a college degree and academic honors.
2. The lack of consistent and accurate information to potential employers about the skills of a university's graduates. Consequently, employers place more emphasis on the work experience of college students in the hiring process. This forces students to work more at a job and study less in college.
3. The lack of honest responses to individual students about their academic strengths and weaknesses.
4. A continuing upward spiral of grades built on weakening standards as individual faculty members have little or no incentive to fight the prevailing trend.
5. With the value of a given letter grade or even a college degree devalued by the perception of grade inflation, there will be more pressure placed on faculty and institution to assess in other ways the performance of their students. Indeed, one can see the current trend for classroom assessment by external authorities as an attempt to obtain again meaningful feedback on the quality of student performance. If outsiders do not trust the grades on the transcript, they may require other demonstrations of student learning.
6. There is at least some anecdotal evidence that there is increasing disparity between the average grades in various disciplines and that students are avoiding disciplines with the reputation for more rigorous grading standards (Shea, 1994, January 5). (Schiming, 2007).

The relationship between grade inflation and students' evaluation of teaching has been fraught with controversy for the last 30-40 years. As grade inflation became a controversial and public issue in the 80s and 90s, some educational theorists and researchers conducted observational studies that found positive correlations between grades and SET ratings. However, different authors interpreted the results in different ways at different times in different situations. This may be explained, in part, by the nature and time-frame of the cited research studies and the sociopolitical context and economic context of universities during different eras. The Franklin study (Franklin, Theall, & Ludlow, 1991, April) is one such effort. Their study examined students' ratings of faculty over a five-year period (approximately 1985-1990) in a single university. Although they found positive correlations of .20 to .40 between grades and SETs, they suggested that these findings could (and should) be explained by other factors. They concluded that their study "failed to find that grades (whether given or expected) play a

dominant (emphasis added) role in student evaluations of faculty” (Franklin et al., 1991, April, p. 2).

Academics concerned about grade inflation, diminished academic standards, and “advancing corporatism” used observational studies to argue that increasing “grading leniency” explained much of the positive correlation. Those less concerned about grade inflation, tended to argue that the “teacher effectiveness theory” (i.e., effective teachers secure high ratings regardless of expected or actual grades) and “student variation” (e.g., interest in the subject or motivation) explained the positive correlations between grades and SETs. These latter hypotheses found favor among good teachers who received good ratings and among administrators who were desperately seeking to find ways to recruit, retain, and maintain or enhance the satisfaction of their “customer-students” and simultaneously find some “measurable” way to assess faculty performance. We might also hypothesize that even if the positive correlations between grades and SETs do not “really” exist, many faculty BELIEVE they do and, presumably, some adjust their behavior accordingly.

Despite the diverse viewpoints among academics (many of whom had vested interests in either the grading leniency or the effective teaching argument), the overwhelming majority of studies have found significant positive correlations between grades and SETs. Johnson (2003) described and summarized 60 such correlation studies. He observed that “a preponderance of these report positive correlations between student grades and student evaluations of teaching” (p. 10).

Interestingly, a few studies have found a negative correlation between expected grade and workload. That is, the more student ratings of workload increased, (e.g., “I had to work hard in this course”), the lower they expected their grades to be. This challenges explanations of the grade-SET correlations based on both the teacher effectiveness and student variables theories. If students anticipate a need to work harder in a particular course, might we reasonably predict that they will therefore expect to perform better in that course? If students are motivated to work hard and do so, would they not expect to receive higher grades?

Indeed, there is a longstanding positive correlation between “time-on-task” (i.e., time studying outside of class) and actual student grades. This finding has been confirmed in numerous studies over the years. Nonetheless, some students apparently believe that they will earn lower grades in courses where they have to work hard. We wonder if these findings might suggest that some students have had so many “easy” courses in which they have received “high” grades that the idea of having a “challenging course” in which they have to work and study hard engenders an expectation of a lower grade.

Part of the confusion about the correlation between student grades and SETs among academics may result from the design and limitations of observational studies. Simple correlation studies can not readily “tease” out all the potential variables. Therefore, many professors and administrators within the academy cannot reasonably accept findings based on correlations alone. We respect and appreciate that position. However, studies that involved experimental control or manipulation of variables (e.g., expected and actual grades) could and did provide more clarity to the situation. Some older studies (Blunt, 1991; Chacko, 1983; Vasta & Sarmiento, 1979; Voeks & French, 1960; Worthington & Wong, 1979) suggested as much.

More recently, the sophisticated DUET (Duke Undergraduate Evaluation of Teaching) study (Johnson, 2002) provided additional evidence.

Data collected during the DUET experiment provides a unique glimpse into the causal nature of student grades on teacher-course evaluations. Although any number of extraneous factors may act to influence both grades and SETs, the analysis of the DUET data suggests that there is a direct effect of grading policy on SETs beyond what can be explained by such extraneous factors.

A unique feature of this analysis was that two student responses were obtained for each student-course combination. The first response was obtained while students were still taking their courses and before they had received their final course grades. The second response was collected after students had completed their courses and after they had received their final course grades. By contrasting the two responses obtained from each student, highly significant, substantively important effects of student grade were discovered on all of the DUET items. These findings corroborate the findings of earlier grade manipulation studies and a preponderance of correlation studies. Because the design of the DUET experiment effectively eliminated the possibility that unobserved environmental factors were responsible for these effects, the results from this analysis provide conclusive evidence of a biasing effect of student grades on student evaluations of teaching.

From a policy viewpoint, the findings of this study are important. As an increasing number of universities use student evaluations of teaching in administrative decisions that affect the careers of their faculty, the incentives for faculty to manipulate their grading policies in order to enhance their evaluations increase. Because grading policies affect student enrollment decisions and the amount students learn in their courses, the ultimate consequence of such manipulations is the degradation of the quality of education in the United States. (Johnson, 2002, p. 16)

In a recent book on the topic of grade inflation, Johnson (2003) suggested that a major reason that grading inequities persist is because their consequences are misunderstood. The author asserts that grading inequities are perpetuated by the following *myths*:

1. Student grades do not bias student evaluations of teaching.
2. Student evaluations of teaching provide reliable measures of instructional effectiveness.
3. High course grades imply high levels of student achievement.
4. Student course selection decisions are unaffected by expected grading practices.
5. Grades assigned in unregulated academic environments have a consistent meaning across classes, departments, and institutions. (Johnson, 2003, p. 9)

Assumptions Underlying an IUSSW Position on MSW Grades and Grading

We assume that *clients* of social work services—*not students*—are the ultimate and primary consumers and constituents of our educational programs. Unlike academic programs

dedicated primarily to personal development or the acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake, we believe that academic programs that prepare students for professional social work practice bear a distinct moral and ethical obligation to the individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and constituencies served by their graduates. We believe that social work educational programs must work actively to minimize the risk that their graduates will harm (or fail to help) others and maximize the likelihood that they will help the people they serve.

We assume, therefore, that is the responsibility of faculty and administration to ensure that each MSW student at Indiana University (1) has an *opportunity to learn* the knowledge and skills necessary to provide professional social work services at both the foundation and the advanced levels; (2) is *fairly and rigorously tested* regarding their knowledge and skills at both the foundation and the advanced levels; and (3) reflects a low probability of causing harm to others and a high probability of providing safe, ethical, and effective professional social work services to individuals, families, groups, organizations, and/or communities.

We assume that the social work licensing exam does not absolve MSW administration and faculty from their moral, ethical, and (probable) legal responsibility to determine that all their graduates can demonstrate basic professional competencies associated with their area of study. In the IUSSW MSW Program this may well mean that a defined set of basic foundational competencies/abilities are taught and tested within the foundation curriculum and a defined set of concentration competencies/abilities are taught and tested within each of the concentration curriculums. Regardless of the form of testing, we believe that students who cannot demonstrate expected foundation and concentration competencies should not receive passing grades and should not receive a diploma. The risks to our *primary* consumers—the clients that our graduates serve—are simply too great.

Some university programs might argue that grade inflation is not a real problem because all or almost all of their students are, in fact, “outstanding talents” because admissions criteria are highly selective. In such programs, high average grades may therefore be viewed as a natural result of the large number of highly qualified applications and rigorous selection processes. We cannot reasonably apply such an argument to the IUSSW MSW Program. We do not believe that our students' high average grades in the MSW program are primarily the result of their exceptional intelligence, extraordinary talents, or their excellent academic preparation in high school and college.

Indeed, we hypothesize that a significant proportion of our enrolled MSW students do not or cannot demonstrate basic academic competencies (e.g., study habits, reading and comprehension skills, writing skills, research and scholarship skills, critical thinking and logical reasoning skills). We assume that these basic academic skills are necessary for the development of professional social work foundational and concentration competencies. We further believe that if we admit underprepared applicants, we (the IUSSW MSW program and its faculty) have an obligation to (1) offer remedial learning opportunities for them to acquire basic academic skills and/or (2) fairly and rigorously grade and fail those who do not or cannot develop these essential skills. As noted above, we assume that certain academic skills are necessary for the development of professional social work competencies.

We believe that most such failures should occur during the first and/or second semesters of the foundation curriculum. We believe that students who do not acquire and cannot demonstrate basic academic and professional social work competencies can and should be identified and failed no later than the end of the second semester of the foundation curriculum. In this regard, we believe that full time faculty and MSW administrators bear a greater burden of responsibility than do part-time instructors in fulfilling our professional gate keeping functions. We believe that whenever possible full-time MSW faculty or MSW administrators should assume direct or indirect responsibility (e.g., through mentoring or “lead-teaching”) for assigning or endorsing unsatisfactory grades.¹

We believe that when programs admit a substantial proportion of academically underprepared students, content deflation almost always results—especially when unsatisfactory and failing grades are rarely assigned. Professors tend to feel obligated to remediate students who have not developed basic academic skills or acquired basic general knowledge. As a result, the nature of the course changes, academic expectations decrease, and better prepared students feel frustrated over the review of basic material they had learned long ago. In other words, the “targeted” student audience shifts from the good and superior students to the fair and marginal students. The quantity and sophistication of assigned readings tend to decline, the lectures and learning activities become more basic, and the performance expectations tend to diminish.

We hypothesize that grade inflation in the IUSSW MSW program involves both the assignment of too many unearned grades of A and B, too many W and I grades, and too few grades of C, D, and F. We believe that students who do not or cannot demonstrate basic foundational and concentration competencies should not receive Master of Social Work diplomas from Indiana University.

Although we assume that most professors and associate faculty want to be liked by their students, we believe that grading patterns in the IU MSW program are at least as much the result of culture and systemic processes as they are the result of individual professors’ practices. Although we do not currently have an IUSSW grading data set that allows us to compare the grade distributions of part-time with those of full-time social work faculty, we hypothesize that, on average, part-time instructors tend to have less rigorous academic expectations of their students and assign grades in a more generous manner than their already generous full-time colleagues. If such differentials exist, mentoring of part-time by full-time faculty may serve to ameliorate them—at least partially—and especially if full-time faculty assume direct or indirect responsibility for grade assignments.

We assume that the emphasis on students’ evaluation of teaching for the purposes of personnel evaluation, promotion, and tenure tends to encourage and perpetuate current grading patterns. We assume the culture of “students as primary consumers” and “purchasers of services” (i.e., customers) contributes as well.

¹ At this point (Spring 2008), approximately 50% of all MSW courses offered on the IUPUI campus are taught by part-time faculty. Ideally, gatekeeping functions would be directly fulfilled by full-time faculty teaching foundation curriculum courses. Given the disproportionately low ratios of full-time faculty to MSW students or full-time faculty to MSW courses, we do not see how this could occur in the foreseeable future.

We also assume that the frequency and nature of student grade appeals, where professors must “defend” their grade assignments and “prove their innocence,” discourages fair, impartial, and rigorous grading. Indeed, we believe that students who seek to appeal a grade or file a grade-related grievance should be required to meet some standard of “probable cause.” We think that before an appeal or grade-related grievance is pursued by a committee, the complaining student should be required to provide evidence that the professor “probably” made an error in calculating a grade, “probably” violated school or university standards, or “probably” failed to follow course syllabus guidelines. Absent such “probable cause,” we believe that the professor should not be required to defend the legitimacy of any student’s grade.

Despite the systemic and cultural pressures to award unearned grades of A and B, we strongly believe that it is a fundamental moral and ethical obligation of both full-time and associate faculty to grade students’ work fairly, rigorously, and accurately. We believe that awarding A grades for average or satisfactory work represents a form of dishonesty that damages both students and the professor and, most importantly, increases the likelihood that our ultimate consumers (i.e., social work clients) will receive unethical, ineffective, or harmful services.

We believe that some of our current MSW students find it difficult to receive honest, fair, constructive, and critical feedback without experiencing, and often expressing, extreme emotional, social, and behavioral reactions. Some professors may attempt to prevent or postpone such reactions by providing neutral or positive feedback to students regardless of their performance. We wonder whether our own failure to provide fair, direct, critical feedback might represent a form of dishonesty that deprives students of information needed to grow and learn. When assigned fairly and honestly, grades can represent a form of constructive feedback. When students believe they are entitled to, and then actually receive, outstanding grades—even as they perform at satisfactory, average, or good levels of performance—they can easily maintain distorted views of themselves, their knowledge, and their abilities. Having received so many ‘A’ grades, they may view the quality of their professional competence as excellent, outstanding, or exceptional when, in fact, the reality is far different.

We concur with Johnson’s conclusion that:

1. Differences in grading practices between instructors cause biases in student evaluations of teaching.
2. Student evaluations of teaching are not reliable indicators of teaching effectiveness and account for only a small proportion of the variance in student learning from student to student and course to course.
3. High grade distributions cannot be associated with higher levels of student achievement.
4. Differences in grading practices have a substantial impact on student enrollments, and cause fewer students to enroll in those fields that grade more stringently.
5. Grading practices differ systematically between disciplines and instructors, and these disparities cause serious inequities in student assessment. (Johnson, 2003, p. 237)

Possible Approaches to Grading Practices in the Indiana University MSW Program

We suggest that faculty teaching courses in the MSW program might proceed to address the challenges associated with current grading practices in a variety of ways, and at different levels or degrees of change. For example, MSW faculty could adopt one of the following approaches:

1. **Do Nothing:** Define the phenomenon as acceptable, inevitable, or as too challenging or intractable to address.
2. **Do Little:** Define the phenomenon as a problem. Educate associate and full-time faculty about the nature and extent of the problem, and encourage them to grade more rigorously and to expand the range of their grade distributions.
3. **Do More:** In addition to #2, require all faculty members to participate in a “grading workshop” or seminar—perhaps sponsored by the IUPUI Office of Professional Development—and expect the MSW program to produce, publicize, and use statistical information about grading patterns throughout the IUSSW MSW program. In particular, the program should produce:
 - a. Students’ transcripts that reflect their grades as well as the average grade in the section and/or course in the form of an Expanded Grade Context Record, as used by IU Bloomington (McConahay & Coté, 1998).
 - b. Statistical reports that both summarize students’ course evaluation ratings and present information about mean, median, range, and standard deviation of grades assigned in each course and course section.
 - c. Statistical reports of individual professor’s and aggregated grading patterns at the end of each semester/term and year.
 - d. Statistical reports of grading pattern comparisons of various kinds (e.g., earlier versus later student cohorts, foundation versus concentration courses, part-time students by full-time students, full-time faculty by associate faculty, etc.) at least once per academic year.
4. **Do Much:** In addition to #3, adopt an MSW program-wide policy about grading practices and grade distributions. Expect (require):
 - a. All MSW faculty members to assign grades according to a common grading rubric (see Appendix A) and a common grading distribution. For example, the program might adopt a grading rubric similar to one promulgated by the Foundation for Critical Thinking (2004) and establish a particular mean or median (or a range of means or medians) and/or a percentage range for each letter grade for all required MSW foundation and concentration courses. Reduce the number of W and I grades by requiring professors to follow Indiana University policies regarding their assignment
 - b. Administration to protect and insulate faculty from anticipated consequences associated with transitioning from a grade-inflation to a grade-normalization culture. For example, administration and faculty (e.g., peer and peer review committees) should:
 - i. Recognize the limitations of personnel evaluations based primarily on students’ evaluations of teachers and teaching effectiveness.

- ii. Require students to meet a “probable cause” threshold for pursuing grade appeals or grade-related grievances. Faculty should not have to “defend” any of their assigned grades—unless a student can present tangible evidence that a professor “probably” made a mistake in grading, or engaged in an unfair grading practice.
- iii. Hold professors accountable for compliance with the grading policy. Do so through the annual review process.

Implications

If the IUSSW MSW program chooses to implement a grading fairness and integrity policy, faculty and administration should be aware of the potential systemic effects. If we take serious steps to increase grading integrity, we can predict several mid-to-long-term positive outcomes (e.g., higher quality graduates, an enhanced reputation within the university and academic circles, as well as among the local, regional, and state professional communities). However, we can also predict several challenging and some potentially negative effects. For example, we can anticipate that more rigorous grading will probably:

1. Lead to a dramatic jump in the number and percentage of unsatisfactory or failing students in the MSW program (unless there is a substantial decrease in the number of underprepared students admitted to the program).
2. Have a differential, negative effect on students in certain programs (i.e., evening, weekend, and perhaps advanced standing and child welfare) and on those students who attempt to work full-time while undertaking their studies.
3. Lead to a spike (at least initially) in the number of student grade appeals and grievances, as well as in complaints from the offices of the chancellor and various vice-chancellors, and from members of the community, legislators, and, of course, parents and grandparents.
4. Lead to at least some legal action by one or more (probably graduating) students who argue that they had every right to expect that the previous de facto policies and practices on grading would continue throughout the entirety of their educational program. (This could be mitigated by clear, advanced communication, and consistent application of changed policies and practices. If policies and procedures are inconsistently applied, the risk of legal action increases.)
5. Lead to a decrease in the number of applicants and enrollees who might previously have chosen the IUSSW MSW program because of its reputation for open admission and lenient grading. Eventually, we might attract greater numbers of better qualified applicants—but that would be well into the future. In the near term, we may anticipate lower MSW student enrollments along with a concurrent reduction in monies tied to enrollments
6. Lead to lower SET ratings (at least during the transition period) and a need to interpret or explain them to administration and other stakeholders.
7. Result in other, unanticipated consequences.

We should also recognize that the probability of success in increasing grading fairness and integrity through voluntary means alone is low. Absent strong consensus, faculty approval of a formal policy, and administration agreement to provide close oversight and to prepare regular

grade distribution reports, the factors, forces, and incentives to maintain the current grading practices will overpower most voluntary attempts at correction.

A systemic approach could help support faculty and administration under a new grading fairness and integrity policy. For example, to improve the quality of our MSW applicant pool, applications for admission to the MSW program could include a “writing test,” a “general knowledge test,” a “logic test,” a “critical thinking essay test,” or a simple “problem-solving test.” The program might require that applicants take the GRE. Adding modest application requirements could lead to a better—although probably a smaller—applicant pool. Materials about the program could include a rationale for and description of the university academic integrity policies and the MSW grading policy. Students admitted to the MSW program could sign statements that they understand the grading policy and agree to conform to standards of academic integrity and professionalism. Teaching contracts with part-time faculty could include a statement of the grading policy, instructions concerning its application, and an agreement to comply.

Recommendations

The Ad Hoc Committee on Grades and Grading recommends that the Indiana University School of Social Work MSW Curriculum Committee take strong action to increase the fairness, rigor, and integrity of grading practices within the MSW program. We suggest that the program adopt the **DO MUCH** approach described above and subscribe to a premise that we expect the average MSW student to perform at a “good” (B) level. We expect that the most common grades will be in the B range (B-, B, B+)—perhaps in the range of 40-45%. Given the modest academic qualifications of some of our enrolled students, we also expect that the percentage of students receiving grades of C and C+ will increase substantially in the next several years—perhaps to 25% while the percentage of unsatisfactory grades (C-, D, F) will increase to the 10-15% range. We also anticipate that the percentage of superior/excellent grades (A-, A, A+) will decrease to the 25-30% range.

In order to achieve these targets, we recommend that the MSW program adopt a policy which requires each instructor teaching a required MSW foundation or concentration course to follow a common grading rubric—perhaps similar to one promulgated by the Foundation for Critical Thinking (2004)—and produce grade distributions that *reflect an average GPA of between 2.9 and 3.1*. Our recommended policy also limits the percentage of A+, A, and A- grades to 25-30% in each required foundation and concentration course. We also recommend that all MSW instructors follow scrupulously the IU policy on the assignment of W and I grades. They should be assigned only in extraordinary circumstances.

At this point, we recommend that pure elective courses remain exempt from the grading policy. In addition, the MSW grades and grading policy should include provisions and procedures for exceptions or waivers when needed in unusual circumstances. We suggest that such exceptions or waivers be requested of the MSW Program Director and the Chair of the MSW Curriculum Committee for their review and consideration. If they both view the request as reasonable under the circumstances, then it should be approved.

In essence, these rubrics reflect a position that A grades reflect *Excellence*. Excellent scholarly products and academic or professional performances are substantially superior to the

“good,” “the competent,” or the “satisfactory.” They are unusual, exceptional, and extraordinary. Criteria for assignments are not only met, they are exceeded. Excellence is a rare phenomenon. As a result, relatively few MSW students earn A grades.

We believe that in a graduate level educational program of social work, grades of B signify *good* quality scholarly products and academic or professional performance. Grades in the B range reflect work expected of a conscientious graduate student in a professional program. Criteria for assignments are met in a competent, thoughtful, and professional manner. However, the criteria are not exceeded and the quality is not substantially superior to other good quality products or performances. There is a clear distinction between the *good* and the *excellent*. We expect that many, perhaps most, MSW students will earn grades in the B range—reflecting the *good* work expected of competent future helping professionals.

Grades of C and C+ signify work that is *marginal* in nature. The scholarly product or professional performance meets many but not all of the expected criteria. The work approaches but does not quite meet the standards of quality expected of a graduate student in a professional school. *Satisfactory* in many respects, its quality is not consistently so and cannot be considered *good*. We anticipate that a significant minority of MSW students will earn C and C+ grades.

Grades of C- and lower reflect work that is *unsatisfactory*. The product or performance does not meet several, many, or most of the criteria. The work fails to approach the standards of quality expected of a graduate student and a future MSW-level professional. We anticipate that in the early years following implementation of the grading fairness and integrity policy, a significant percentage of MSW students will earn unsatisfactory grades of C-, D, and F.

Glossary of Terms

Content Deflation: “Students receive the same grades as students in the past but with less work required and less learning” (Schiming, 2007). In colloquial terms, content deflation involves “dumbing-down” subject matter and lowering academic expectations.

Criterion Referenced Grading: “Criterion-Referenced grading measures performance against defined criteria, so as many students as successfully meet criteria may achieve 'A's” (University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education, 2005).

Grade Compression: The distribution of grades becomes more narrow—resulting in nondiscrimination among certain levels of performance. Grade compression tends to coincide with grade inflation. Instead of an A-to-F grade distribution that approximates the normal Bell curve with C (or perhaps B) serving to indicate satisfactory or average performance, the distribution becomes skewed so that the de facto grade range becomes A-to-B with an odd C, D, or F.

Grade Deflation: The assignment of the same, or lower, grades for levels of academic performance which previously resulted in higher grades; a leveling or decrease in average grades during a time when there is an increase in academic performance. (The period between 1955 and 1965 may well have been a time of grade deflation—as the average quality of incoming college students increased while the average grades remained the same).

- Grade Inflation: The assignment of higher grades for levels of academic performance which previously resulted in lower grades; an increase over time in average grades without a commensurate increase in academic performance.
- Grade Normalization: Process by which assigned grades are “normalized” across sections and/or courses within an educational program thereby decreasing students’ conclusion that one professor teaching a section of the same course (or a comparable course) assigns lower grades than another. Also, decreases the likelihood of litigation due to unfair and inconsistent practices.
- Norm Referenced Grading: “Norm-referenced grading measures performance relative to other students; consequently only a few students receive 'A's regardless of how many others successfully complete assignment” (University of Lethbridge Faculty of Education, 2005).

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Appendix A

College-Wide Grading Standards

Foundation of Critical Thinking

The text below defines the outlines of the standards for the grades of A, B, C, D, and F. These standards are suggestive of common denominator academic values and must be contextualized at two levels: at the department level (to capture domain-specific variations) and at the course level (to capture course-specific differences).

High Level Performance

High level performance implies excellence in thinking and performance within the domain of a subject and course, along with the development of a range of knowledge acquired through the exercise of thinking skills and abilities.

A level work is, on the whole, not only clear, precise, and well-reasoned, but insightful as well. Basic terms and distinctions are learned at a level which implies insight into basic concepts and principles.

The A-level student has internalized the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject and demonstrates insight into self-evaluation.

The A-level student often raises important questions and issues, analyzes key questions and problems clearly and precisely, recognizes key questionable assumptions, clarifies key concepts effectively, uses language in keeping with educated usage, frequently identifies relevant competing points of view, and demonstrates a commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in the subject, as well as marked sensitivity to important implications and consequences.

A-level work displays excellent reasoning and problem-solving within a field and works consistently at a high level of intellectual excellence.

The Grade of B

The grade of B implies sound thinking and performance within the domain of a subject and course, along with the development of a range of knowledge acquired through the exercise of thinking skills and abilities.

B level work is, on the whole, clear, precise, and well-reasoned., but does not have depth of insight. Basic terms and distinctions are learned at a level which implies comprehension of basic concepts and principles.

The B-level student has internalized some of the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject and demonstrates competence in self-evaluation.

The B-level student often raises questions and issues, analyzes questions and problems clearly and precisely, recognizes some questionable assumptions, clarifies key concepts competently , typically uses language in keeping with educated usage, sometimes identifies relevant competing

points of view, and demonstrates the beginnings of a commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in a subject, as well as some sensitivity to important implications and consequences. B-level work displays sound reasoning and problem-solving within a field and works consistently at a competent level of intellectual performance.

The Grade of C

The grade of C implies mixed thinking and performance within the domain of a subject and course, along with some development of a range of knowledge acquired through the exercise of thinking skills and abilities.

C level work is inconsistently clear, precise, and well-reasoned; moreover, it does not display depth of insight or even consistent competence. Basic terms and distinctions are learned at a level which implies the beginnings of, but inconsistent comprehension of, basic concepts and principles.

The C-level student has internalized a few of the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject, but demonstrates inconsistency in self-evaluation.

The C-level student sometimes raises questions and issues, sometimes analyzes questions and problems clearly and precisely, recognizes some questionable assumptions, clarifies some concepts competently, inconsistently uses language in keeping with educated usage, sometimes identifies relevant competing points of view, but does not demonstrate a clear commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in a subject, nor consistent sensitivity to important implications and consequences.

C-level work displays inconsistent reasoning and problem-solving within a field and works, at best, at a competent level of intellectual performance.

The Grade of D

The grade of D implies poor thinking and performance within the domain of a subject and course. On the whole, the student tries to get through the course by means of rote recall, attempting to acquire knowledge by memorization rather than through comprehension and understanding.

The student is not developing critical thinking skills and understandings as requisite to understanding course content. D-level work represents thinking that is typically unclear, imprecise, and poorly reasoned. The student is achieving competence only on the lowest order of performance. Basic terms and distinctions are often incorrectly used and reflect a superficial or mistaken comprehension of, basic concepts and principles.

The D-level student has not internalized the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject and does poorly in self-evaluation. The D-level student rarely raises questions and issues, superficially analyzes questions and problems, does not recognize his/her assumptions, only partially clarifies concepts, rarely uses language in keeping with educated usage, rarely identifies relevant competing points of view, and shows no understanding of the importance of a commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in a subject.

The D-level student is insensitive to important implications and consequences. D-level work displays poor reasoning and problem-solving within a field and works, at best, at a low level of intellectual performance.

The Grade of F

The student tries to get through the course by means of rote recall, attempting to acquire knowledge by memorization rather than through comprehension and understanding. The student is not developing critical thinking skills and understandings as requisite to understanding course content.

F-level work represents thinking that is regularly unclear, imprecise, and poorly reasoned. The student is not achieving competence in his/her academic work. Basic terms and distinctions are regularly incorrectly used and reflect a mistaken comprehension of, basic concepts and principles.

The F-level student has not internalized the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject and regularly misevaluates his/her own work. The F-level student does not raise questions or issues, does not analyze questions and problems, does not recognize his/her assumptions, does not clarify concepts, does not use language in keeping with educated usage, confuses his/her point of view with the TRUTH, and shows no understanding of the importance of a commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in a subject.

The F-level student is oblivious to important implications and consequences. F-level work displays incompetent reasoning and problem-solving within a field and consistently poor intellectual performance. (Foundation for Critical Thinking, 2004)

[This article is adapted from the resource: Critical Thinking Basic Theory and Instructional Structures (Paul & Elder, 2000)]