

TO: All instructors of Freshman English
FROM: Freshman English Policy Committee
RE: Grade inflation

Most of us are aware that a grade inflation problem exists. Many of us have contributed to it; certainly all of us have felt the pressures that cause it. In the 1960's draft deferments were issued to male students who maintained satisfactory grade-point averages; and we were very much aware of the consequences of the loss of those deferments. Also in the '60's many English teachers were made aware, for the first time, that speakers of non-standard English had a right to their own language, as well as civil rights and rights to prosperity. More recently, we have felt pressures particularly at this university, from students for whom a high-grade point average is the only ticket to graduate or professional school. We have further felt the impact of student evaluations. And some of us have begun to accept and use teaching techniques, such as encouraging repeated paper revision, that have tended to inflate grades. Finally, we always face the problems arising when we get to know our students as people and, sometimes, friends.

as teachers of relatively small classes

A report recently released by the Faculty Senate Committee on Grade Inflation documents a rise, since the early 1960's, in undergraduate grade-point averages, both nationally and at UT, and presents us with some valuable insights into the scope of the problem. We do recognize that statistics such as these are often misleading. Many universities, for example, have recently begun to allow students who are not satisfied with a grade to retake the course and have recorded on their permanent records only the better grade.

Although we recognize that these statistics probably do not reflect with (absolute) accuracy the extent and gravity of the grade inflation problem, we think them significant and would like to share with you some highlights from the Faculty Senate's report:

• A survey of half of the country's 50 leading federally-funded research universities and institutes of technology revealed that between 1963-1974, the percentage of undergraduate A's more than doubled--from 16% to 34%--while the percentage of C's dropped almost as sharply, from 37% to 21%. The average GPA jumped from 2.49 to 2.94.

• During this same period, grades at UT mirrored the national patterns: the percentage of undergraduate A's here almost doubled, while the percentage of C's dropped by nearly one-third and the percentage of D's dropped by half.

In 1958, 14.5% of UT's senior class graduated with honors; in 1967, 14.0%. In 1977 35.1% of our seniors graduated with honors.

In UT's College of Humanities last spring, the distribution of undergraduate grades was as follows:

A 31%	D 3%
B 32%	F 3%
C 16%	CR 4%

These percentages were close to the norm of the 11 UT colleges surveyed. The lowest percentages of A's and B's were found in the College of Business Administration, which reported these figures:

A 15%	D 9%
B 29%	F 5%
C 31%	CR 3%

Of particular interest to us are the figures on grades in Freshman English during the period 1965-1975. Here is how grades were distributed, by percentage, in the first-semester Freshman English course (successively numbered 601a, 301, and 306):

	A	B	C	D	F	Other	Number of students
E601a							
Fall 1965	4	20	44	16	9	6	2111
Fall 1967	8	36	40	8	5	3	2068
E301							
Fall 1969	9	39	40	5	3	3	2851
Fall 1971	8	38	39	5	3	5	2295
Fall 1973	13	45	34	2	2	2	3086
E306							
Fall 1975	23	43	25	3	2	5	3006

new Note that during this 10-year period--a period which saw the national average SAT-Verbal score drop by 44 points--the percentage of A's almost sextupled (from 4% to 23%) while the percentage of B's more than doubled (from 20% to 43%). Note, too, that while only 24% of our students back in 1965 received a course grade of A or B, by 1975 the percentage had increased to 66%. All of these students who received grades indicating their work as "Excellent" or "Above Average" were required to take 306 or its equivalent because they had scored below a modest 550 on the ECT.

The grading system reflected in these statistics has ceased to function as an accurate indicator of student performance. We cannot pretend to teach responsible critical analysis and evaluation to our freshmen only to practice the opposite ourselves. We cannot grade as if effort or good intentions were synonymous with competence. We cannot evaluate appropriately the work of truly talented students in our classes by giving equal evaluations to the work of less accomplished ones.

The FEPC, like the Faculty Senate, wants to restore some meaning to our grading system. We do not see any value in lowering grades so our statistics will "look better." Nor do we think the answer lies in bell curves or heavy-handed scare tactics. We do think, however, that progress will be made if each of us makes clear to his students, and perhaps to himself as well, that a grade indicates a certain level of competence and that competence in writing requires the mastery of specifically defined skills.

Below are five specific recommendations that we would like to offer. Please give them careful consideration:

(1) Caution your students that the grades you award will be literally consistent with the university's published definitions of their meaning (If this is done early in the semester, when expectations are easiest to set, we are likely to win student respect for our professionalism.):

A = "Excellent"
B = "Above average"
C = "Average"
D = "Pass"
F = "Failure"

(2) Distribute to your students a list of the criteria you use in setting grades on themes. We suggest the following:

C paper: meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed; still, while generally competent, it is undistinguished in both thought and phrasing.

B paper: has the first three characteristics but also contains discriminating insights and reveals some stylistic dexterity in its transitions, sentence structures, and word choices; on the whole, it is significantly more than competent, and almost free of mechanical errors.

A paper: possesses, in addition to these qualities, distinctive polish and vigor; also, its thesis (when a thesis is called for) is sound, truly discerning, and thoroughly developed; its content is impressively rich; overall, it displays intellectual sophistication of a high order.

D paper: the treatment and development of the subject are rudimentary; organization is present, but neither clear nor effective; sentences are awkward, ambiguous, or marred by serious mechanical errors.

F paper: the treatment and development of the subject are thoughtless or superficial; the theme lacks discernible organization; the student shows no control over his/her materials; mechanical errors are frequent; the prose is garbled or stylistically primitive.

(3) If your policy is to assign a new grade to each rewritten (or revised) paper, explain to your students that you will average the new grade with the original grade in determining the grade that the student ultimately receives on that writing assignment. (This policy discourages hasty writing of the original paper; it also

reminds the student of the editing assistance he got from you prior to drafting the re-write.)

(4) Consider sharing with your students the highlights of the Faculty Senate report cited in this memo. Consider, too, the possibility of designing a writing assignment--e.g., a hypothetical Texan editorial--on the subject of grade inflation. (The more ~~conscious they are of the problem,~~ and the more thoughtfully they ponder the issues involved, the more likely they are to recognize the problems involved.)

(5) Finally, consider including in your final examination an objective section on grammar and mechanics. The committee member who proposed this recommendation explained her own practice as follows:

My sections of 306 receive two objective examinations: a mid-term and a final. In addition to grammar and mechanics, I include problems in syntax and prose style analysis. Each exam counts the equivalent of one essay; together, about 20% of the final course grade. I use the exams both to encourage weaker students to master the fundamentals and to provide two almost purely objective grades to average with the 8 or so essay grades.

Cordially,

The FEPC