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Mediated Learning

A Newsletter by and for the Instructors of The University of Montana

High School Grade Inflation and the College Instructor

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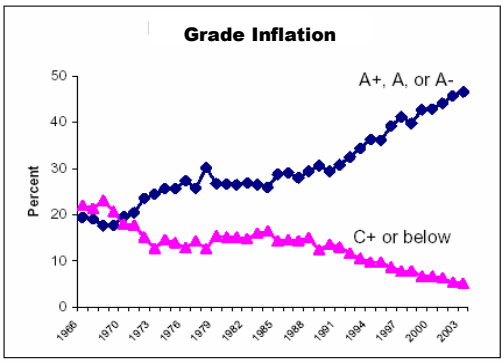
The high school grade point average for college freshmen has reached yet another record high. The percentage of this year's entering class earning an A– or higher average in high school is now at 47 percent, and only five percent of students earned a C+ average or lower. In other words, nearly all of our freshman students had a high school grade average of B or above, and about half had an A average. Moreover, the amount of work students do to earn quality grades continues to decline. Two of three entering freshmen report studying six hours per week or less in their senior year.

The rate of change of grade inflation in high school is dramatic. When the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA began their freshman survey in 1966, there were nearly equal numbers of freshmen with C+ or lower averages as with A– or higher (see the chart below). A burst of grade inflation in the early 1970s separated the two types of students, and in about 1990, the C grade average began a rapid decline, accompanied by a steep rise in A grade averages. If present trends continue, the C average will become obsolete in only a few more years.



The academic climate in high school today is very different than when we went to school. The majority of college instructors graduated from high school in or before about 1990, the point in time at which the rate of change of grade inflation began its spectacular rise. Therefore, most of today's college instructors have no direct experience with what it is like to be asked to work so little and still be awarded superior grades. This results in difficulties in assigning grades in college courses, especially since some students believe that college instructors are unfairly demanding when they apply the common standard of requiring two hours of work outside of class for each hour in class. The rule of thumb for college is about 30 hours per week of study outside of class, which is in sharp contrast to what our freshmen experienced in high school. The vivid disconnect between high school and college requirements often causes conflict and leads college instructors to become unsure about appropriate grading practices. This leads to the question: How can college-appropriate grading criteria be established?

(See INFLATION, page 3)

Inside this Issue

Teaching Profile: Harry Fritz, Department of History

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Professor Harry Fritz

History professor Harry Fritz can trace the turning point of his career back to a series of summer afternoons. In 1983, as a faculty member at The University of Montana, Fritz decided to read every piece of literature he could find on Lewis and Clark's expedition. The idea was to sell an article on the famed explorers.

The resulting paper he wrote has been the basis for his life's work, including a book that's being published in March, classroom lectures and a Web site that will soon market his research. "I've been milking that article ever since," Fritz said. "I take it to classes. I give talks about it...in many respects it's the most important thing I've ever done."

"He's a very good lecturer," said Bryan Thornton, manager of The Bookstore and coordinator of the project. "He's probably one of the most popular that we've had at the university in my long tenure."

Fritz, chairman of the history department and staple of the UM community, has been teaching on campus since 1967. His roots in the city extend even farther. Fritz was part of the last class to graduate from Missoula County High School in 1956, when it was the only high school in town, located at what is now Hellgate High School. He delivered newspapers on campus when students could still drive up the 600 block of University Ave., where the Lommasson Center is located, and park around the Oval.

Fritz earned a degree in chemistry at Dartmouth in 1960, and returned to Montana, where his interest in history was first sparked by reading an article on what would become his favorite historic figures: Lewis and Clark. "I thought, 'my God, they came right through Montana,'" he said.

Fritz enrolled in at UM to earn his masters in history. From there he traveled to Washington University, in St. Louis, where he earned his doctorate. In 1967 he joined UM's faculty to teach American History from the period spanning from the Revolution to the Civil War. "I was replacing someone I'd taken courses from," he said.

Over the years, Fritz's course content has extended to include topics such as Military History and Montana History, which was previously taught by Ross Toole. When Toole died in 1981, hundreds of students were registered for his fall class. Fritz put together a series of guest lectures to keep it going. To start he only gave two of the lectures—one on Lewis and Clark and another on Custer's Last Stand. "By 1984, I was the department's Montana historian," he said. "I didn't know anything about Montana history when it all started."

Fritz served in the House of Representatives in 1985 and 1987 and he served in the Senate in the 1991 and 1993 legislative sessions. This election year is the first in his tenure that he hasn't taught a class on the History of the Presidential Election. "I got turned off by the 2000 election," Fritz said. "It's not political anymore. It's all about money and advertisements."

He doesn't rely on specific teaching techniques in the classroom, but tries to present material in as interesting of a way as possible. "I expect students to want to learn," he said. "I assume they are alert and inquisitive." But each President's Day, Fritz's methods become more unique. To celebrate Abe Lincoln's birthday, he dons a top hat, beard and black tux to become the famous president. He travels to elementary schools and middle schools across the nation to teach children about Lincoln's life as part of the Montana Committee for Humanities Speakers Bureau. This is his 39th year in the act. "I do it in first person," Fritz said. "I tell a bit about when I was born, why I became a lawyer, and so on."

A photo of Fritz dressed as Lincoln will appear on his new Web site, www.lewisandclarktrails.com, constructed by the UM Bookstore and Spectral Fusion. When it is finished this spring, it will sell Fritz's book, "The Lewis and Clark Expedition," CD's of his lectures and a map of the explorer's route that Fritz constructed in conjunction with another former UM professor. "He's a very good lecturer," said Bryan Thornton, manager of The Bookstore and coordinator of the project. "He's probably one of the most popular that we've had at the university in my long tenure."

Inflation

(Continued from page 1)

At a minimum, grades should reflect the *relative* quality of student work in a class. Students who do superior quality work should be rewarded with higher grades than their peers. We must not lose sight of our responsibility to our best students. Relative grading standards can be established by giving grades according to a statistically normal distribution, where most students receive the average grade and smaller numbers of students earn grades different from the average. However, "grading on the curve" is infrequently used today except in very large classes. Disadvantages include unfairness to classes with large numbers of high-achieving students and the atmosphere created where students are competing with one another for a limited number of high-quality grades. Nonetheless, a relative grading standard is always used to some degree, and our integrity in awarding the best students the best grades must be never be compromised.

The other side of the general dichotomy in grading principles is an *absolute* grading standard. The fundamental premise of this standard is to decide in advance on a set of criteria for earning a given grade. This standard resolves the problems with competition among students and classes with high or low numbers of high-achieving students, but it also introduces what may be the most difficult problem for college instructors: How does one establish an absolute standard? Doing so requires writing instructional objectives, developing an appropriate taxonomy of these objectives, and providing students with the opportunity for self-assessment.

An instructional objective is a written statement that describes what students are supposed to be able to do after studying a small section of course material. Typically, an objective includes a description of a concept that students are supposed to understand and some indication of the performance level at which they are supposed to achieve on an exam or other evaluative measure. Writing such objectives allows an instructor to clarify what students should accomplish while studying and provides a more independent method for establishment of grading standards. If we clearly know what we expect of students, it is more straightforward to decide whether they have met the standards for a given grade.

A single concept or skill can be "understood" at a number of levels. Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives is the most well-known framework used to describe the level of complexity at which an objective is expected to be met. The simplest level is knowledge, the recall of information. This is usually kept to a minimum in college courses, although all disciplines have a fundamental set of facts and principles that must be memorized. The second and third levels are comprehension and application. Most college exams test students at these levels. Comprehension questions require demonstrating an understanding of information, and application questions generally are those that require solving a novel problem. Higher-order objectives, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, are frequently assessed with essays, projects, and reports.

Finally, we must give students a chance to practice meeting our instructional objectives at the taxonomic level of achievement appropriate for the topic. This generally means assignment of homework of some sort, accompanied by feedback. Students should have the opportunity to assess themselves on exam-like questions before they are evaluated for grading purposes.

Since high school grade inflation is apparently reaching a point where students are essentially assessed at only two levels, A or B, college instructors must take the lead in establishing reasonable criteria and setting appropriate standards for achievement across the entire five-level A through F scale. By doing so, we will reward those students who work the hardest and learn the most, while providing all students with clear standards to be achieved and feedback on their progress toward such achievement.

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The Center for Teaching Excellence

The Center for Teaching Excellence at The University of Montana was established in July, 1999 when it received approval from the Board of Regents. The Center is administered out of Academic Affairs.

The University of Montana