

Issues in Earth Science

“Topics for Debate”

Issue 6, May 2016

## Grade Inflation at UW-Madison:

by

Mark Cook, PhD.



Much commentary has appeared on grade inflation at institutes of higher education. Stuart Rojstaczer has been carefully keeping track of grade changes in higher education

since the 1920s (<http://www.gradeinflation.com>). While the update is expected in March 2016, the latest data showed that in public schools of higher education, grades increased an average of 5.6% between 1991-2007. Raw data provided shows a University of Wisconsin Madison increase of 7.4%.

Some suggest we should limit the number of As, others that we are failing to challenge students. After 32 years “professing” at UW-Madison, my subjective experience suggests that students are better today than ever before. Back in the 1980’s rarely did we expect a student to be able to stand before their peers and give a seminar without fainting. Today, students are articulate and confident. In an introductory class, my co-instructor and I worried that grades were starting to “inflate.” We added a rigorous scientific paper assignment for 20% of the grade. Each year we had to add more demands on the paper just to keep the grades from bunching toward the top. Twenty-five years ago, peer-reviewed scientific literature was for graduate students only. Now, we have first-year students wading through dozens of complex scientific papers, critically evaluating the validity of scientific works on issues such as antibiotics, genetically modified organisms, and the use of animals for research and animal agriculture, and defining a position on these works using hard science. Clearly our expectations have risen, but it seems these modern students are up to the task. Yes, we seem to be giving more As and Bs than twenty years ago, but we are also demanding more.

In my attempts to understand if I am getting softer or the students are getting better, I turned to some other data collected by our university every year. I do remember that when I went to my freshman orientation in 1974 the speaker said, “Look to your left and look to your right, one of you will not be here in 4 years.” Looking at the data between 1991-2007, to be consistent with Roistaczer’s last study period, I found an indication that students entering this university have changed. During the period examined, ACT and SAT scores for the average entering student increased 10.3 and 7.2%, respectively<sup>1</sup>. On top of that, the ability of a student to complete their college education in a timely manner (4 years) has risen 67%. I can only conclude, at least at UW-Madison, that grades have not inflated, but the level of education and the quality of the student has improved, as have our expectations. Yes, we should continue to increase our expectation of students, but I’m beginning to believe that rising expectations may be no match for the quality of today’s student.



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<sup>1</sup> Editor's note: Over the same time period, the national average ACT score increased by 2%. The average score of entering freshmen at many smaller state schools has declined as more high school graduates choose to attend college.

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**Dr. Mark Cook, PhD.** is a professor of Animal Sciences at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. He has been teaching there for over 30 years, with research interests in gut inflammation and reducing the use of antibiotics in animal agriculture. He holds over 200 worldwide patents and has started 5 companies based on his research.

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Image Credit: Russ Colson

## **Seed Thesis for Issue 6: Grade Inflation and Quality of Learning**

by Russ Colson

This spring, a colleague at my university told me that the median grade for all courses taken at U.S. colleges and universities is an 'A'.

Really? The median grade? Meaning that more than half of people get the highest, exceptional, grade?

Then, my wife Mary told me that nearly everyone gets 'A's in middle and secondary schools, that grades lower than 'A' typically indicate incomplete work.

Among students applying for the honors program at my university, many of them have a high school GPA of between 4.1 and 4.5.

Out of 4.

Crazy? Kind? Pointless? Harmful?

What do you think?

Dr. C.

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