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A Quest to Explain What Grades Really Mean

By TAMAR LEWIN

It could be a Zen koan: if everybody in the class gets an A, what does an A mean?

The answer: Not what it should, says Andrew Perrin, a sociologist at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. “An A should mean outstanding work; it should not be the default grade,” Mr. Perrin said. “If everyone gets an A for adequate completion of tasks, it cripples our ability to recognize exemplary scholarship.”

As part of the university’s long effort to clarify what grades really mean, Mr. Perrin now leads a committee that is working with the registrar on plans to add extra information — probably median grades, and perhaps more — to transcripts. In addition, they expect to post further statistics providing context online and give instructors data on how their grading compares with their colleagues’.

“It’s going to be modest and nowhere near enough to correct the problems,” Mr. Perrin said. “But it’s our judgment that it’s the best we can do now.”

With college grades creeping ever higher, a few universities have taken direct action against grade inflation. Most notably, Princeton adopted guidelines in 2004 providing that no more than 35 percent of undergraduate grades should be A’s, a policy that remains controversial on campus.

Others have taken a less direct approach, leaving instructors free to award whatever grades they like but expanding their transcripts to include information giving graduate schools and employers a fuller picture of what the grades mean.

Dartmouth transcripts include median grades, along with the number of courses in which the student exceeded, equaled or came in lower than those medians. Columbia transcripts show the percentage of students in the course who earned an A.

At Reed College, transcripts are accompanied by an explanatory card. Last year’s graduating class had an average G.P.A. of 3.20, it says, and only 10 percent of the class graduated with a G.P.A. of 3.67 or higher.

“We also tell them that in 26 years, only 10 students have graduated with a perfect 4.0 average —

and three of them were transfers who didn't get all those grades at Reed," said Nora McLaughlin, the registrar at Reed. "We wanted to put the grades at Reed in context to be sure that graduate schools, particularly professional schools where G.P.A. is very much an important factor, understand how capable our students are."

Especially in hard economic times, students worry that professors who are stingy with the A's will leave them at a disadvantage in graduate school admissions and employment. No wonder, then, that many students visit Web sites like RateMyProfessors.com when registering, perhaps to help them avoid tough graders.

Cornell's experience shows the impact — and the unintended consequences — that grading information can bring.

In 1996, Cornell's faculty adopted a "truth in grading" policy, and median grades were posted online starting in 1998. The policy called for median grades to be shown on transcripts as soon as student-records technology made that possible, but that did not happen until a full decade later.

And while the median grades were available only online, a study by three Cornell economists found a large increase in enrollment in courses with a median grade of A — further driving grade inflation.

"At least when the grades were only online, the main users of the information seemed to be students shopping around for easier classes," said Talia Bar, one of the three economists.

Ms. Bar said there is no consensus on the right way to grade.

"I might see a course of 200 people with a median grade of A as not right, but others might see it as good," she said.

But at least in the realm of theory, there is widespread agreement that providing extra context on transcripts is a good thing.

"It's generally recognized that an A by itself is not very meaningful," said Barmak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "Giving statistical context to assist recipients of a transcript in understanding the grades is definitely helpful."

But as a practical matter, it is not so easy.

"It's complicated, it's controversial, and it runs into campus political opposition from all sorts of directions you might not anticipate," Mr. Nassirian said, adding that transcripts with too much extra information can become unwieldy.

Studies of grade inflation have found that private universities generally give higher grades than public ones, and that humanities courses award higher grades than science and math classes.

Mr. Perrin's concern with grading standards began 15 years ago, when he was a teaching assistant at the University of California, Berkeley.

"I would grade papers, run the grades by the professor and then give them out, and long lines of students would appear outside my office to say I graded too hard," Mr. Perrin said. Now, at North Carolina, Mr. Perrin is convinced that grading problems are pervasive.

"Anything that uses G.P.A is unfair, because a given student can be penalized or rewarded in grading just because of the mix of professors or the strength of the schedule," Mr. Perrin said. "Some instructors grade harder than others. Some courses are harder than others, and some departments are harder than others."

The pending changes at North Carolina are the university's latest effort to improve its grading system.

Since 1967, when the average G.P.A. was 2.49, grade inflation at the university has been well-documented. In 2000, the faculty council heard a proposal to adopt a target average G.P.A. of 2.6 to 2.7, but the idea was dropped. A few years later, the faculty narrowly voted down an ambitious proposal for an adjusted G.P.A., called the "Achievement Index," that would reflect not only the students' performance in their courses, but also the rigor of those courses.

At U.N.C., the average G.P.A was 3.21 in the fall of 2008, up from 2.99 in 1995. A's have become the most frequent grade, and together, A's and B's accounted for 82 percent of the 2008 grades. Last spring, the faculty called for the creation of Mr. Perrin's committee to help the registrar give context to undergraduate grades by providing statistics on what percentage of students got each letter grade, what percentage are majors in the department and what percentage are seniors, juniors, sophomores and freshmen.

"We seem to have a pretty good consensus here now," said Holden Thorp, the chancellor. "What I like about this approach is that it allows faculty who have a certain philosophy of grading to stick with it, as long as they're O.K. with having it be shown. If somebody gets an A in a class with a lot of A's and that's put out there, that's good. If the chemists are willing to tell everybody that they grade harshly, that's good too."