



Grading Standards and Grade Inflation

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One question in the Sheridan Center Survey on the Brown Grading System enquired whether grades were assigned according to a prescribed standard, that is, on an absolute scale. A major advantage of this approach is that it challenges the instructor with two important questions: what are my goals in teaching this course and what are my expectations of the students? An expectation that would be applicable in many courses, from introductory to advanced level, would be the application of critical thinking to the material covered in the course. In more advanced courses students might be required not only to analyze critically the primary literature but to write brief research proposals of experiment or observations which would advance knowledge within a particular field. Such proposals require careful experimental design, the description of possible outcomes, and a discussion of the conclusions which could be drawn from each of the outcomes.

Once the course goals have been articulated, rubrics can be designed to assess student performance. Fortunately, over the past decade there has been much interest in developing rubrics and so there are examples in the literature which can be used as templates. Rubrics can be applied to individual pieces of work, for example, an examination essay or a term paper, and collectively to the student's entire performance during the course.

Within a particular course rubrics might be refined over time as the instructor gains more experience or as the instructor's own view of the subject evolves. But in general well-designed rubrics can be used over a long period.

Courses which have been taught over a number of years and which have employed similar rubrics during this period might provide one measure of whether grade inflation has occurred. I have taught such a course most years since 1976. In this 100-level cell biology course there has been fluctuation in course grades on a semester-to-semester basis, but my data show no grade inflation over the 25 year period.

The usual approach to assessing whether grade inflation is occurring involves examination of the overall grades issued within the institution as a whole (see "Changes in Grade distribution at Brown since 1975"). My suggestion is that a supplementary approach would be to examine long-term records of grades issued within individual courses.