

Grade Inflation and Course Choice

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The number of students graduating from American colleges and universities who had majored in the sciences declined from 1970–71 to 1984–85, both as a proportion of the steadily growing total and in absolute terms (U.S. Department of Education, 1987). This decline has prompted forecasts of a nation of scientific illiterates and a loss of economic competitiveness. The Director of the National Science Foundation, Ernest Bloch, put it this way in a speech at Carleton College (July 13, 1988):

The nation depends upon undergraduate education to prepare not only the small number of students who will become research scientists and engineers, but also the many other students who will have to function effectively in an increasingly technological world. That is a difficult and very important task. . . . The college age population is shrinking. Declines (in science enrollments) are inevitable unless the proportion of students pursuing science and engineering increases—and there is little evidence of that. Somehow, we must persuade more students to study science and engineering.

Other trends in student course choice, like the rise in enrollments in “vocational” courses, have also elicited concern. The most common response by faculty and administration concerned with these patterns of demand has been to tighten quantitative restrictions: distribution requirements have been altered with the aim of bolstering enrollments in the sciences.

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However, faculty bear some responsibility for these patterns of student choice which they bemoan. Students make their course choices in response to a powerful set of incentives: grades. These incentives have been systematically distorted by the grade inflation of the past 25 years. As a consequence of inflation, many universities have split into high- and low-grading departments. Economics, along with Chemistry and Math, tends to be low-grading. Art, English, Philosophy, Psychology, and Political Science tend to be high-grading.

As a Yale senior, interviewed by *The New York Times* (1988) for an article on honors and grade inflation, explained, "It's pretty hard to get below a B – in most humanities courses. I hear it's a little different in science classes, though. There aren't really F's anymore. People look at a C and think it's an F." Another Yale student, who switched from a science major to English, said in a *Wall Street Journal* (1990) story attributing science dropouts to low grades, "In other classes, if you do the work, you'll get an A. In science, it just doesn't work that way . . ."

One result of varying rates of grade inflation between departments is that grades as a signal of relative strengths and weaknesses become more difficult for students to interpret. Grades therefore contribute less to students' assessment of their comparative advantage. But even if grades fail completely to perform this function—even if a high mark is less an indication of the student's strength than of the weakness of the instructor's resolve—grades, or more precisely the expectation of grades, are still likely to influence course choice. A conflict exists between the incentives offered to students and the institutional goal of increased science and math education.

This paper presents evidence from nine colleges and universities that grade inflation has led to a divergence among departments in grading policies. We then discuss the results of an econometric study we conducted at Williams College of the influence of grading policies on course choice. The impact that differences in grading policies across departments have on the distribution of enrollments was also estimated, and policy implications of the findings are discussed.

Evidence of Divergent Grading Policies

Grade inflation and a widening gap between low and high grading departments are a nationwide phenomenon. We begin with a close examination of what has happened to grades at Williams College, and then compare grades at Williams with those at a diverse group of colleges and universities.

Table 1 shows that grade inflation at Williams has been substantial. The mean grade in the introductory courses of eight large departments at Williams has risen from 2.49 on a 4-point scale (a bit above C +) in 1962–63 to 2.93 (roughly B) in 1985–86; the proportion of students receiving less than B – has fallen from 47 percent to 26 percent and the proportion receiving more than

Table 1
**Mean Grades and Their Distributions in Introductory Courses
 in Eight Departments, Williams College, 1962-3 and 1985-6**

	<i>Mean Grade</i>	<i>1962-3 Standard Deviation</i>	<i>% Above B +</i>	<i>% Below B -</i>
<i>Departments:</i>				
Art	2.62	.7033	9%	32%
Economics	2.40	.9600	17%	49%
English	2.58	.6767	10%	48%
Math	2.09	1.063	9%	65%
Music	2.74	.6600	14%	37%
Philosophy	2.38	.7200	13%	46%
Poli. Sci.	2.43	.6967	8%	55%
Psychology	2.64	.7933	15%	44%
Aggregate Average	2.49	.7857	11.9%	47.0%
Standard Deviation	.1916			
1985-86				
<i>High Grading</i>				
<i>Departments:</i>				
Art	3.00	.6500	23%	20%
English	3.13	.5467	25%	12%
Music	3.26	.5733	28%	17%
Philosophy	2.94	.6067	20%	17%
Poli. Sci.	3.10	.5300	17%	19%
Average	3.09	.5800	22.6%	17%
Std. Dev.	.1105			
<i>Low Grading</i>				
<i>Departments:</i>				
Economics	2.67	.7333	15%	42%
Math	2.61	1.0033	20%	44%
Psychology	2.71	.8733	17%	37%
Average	2.66	.8700	17.3%	41%
Std. Dev.	.0411			
Aggregate Average	2.93	.6887	20.6%	26%
Standard Deviation	.2239			

B + has risen from 11.9 percent to 20.6 percent over the same period. This pattern is manifested by smaller departments as well.

More central to our concern is the variation in the pace of inflation. In some departments the rate of inflation is high; in Political Science the mean grade has risen by .67 and the proportion receiving below B - has fallen by nearly two-thirds. In others, the increase has been modest; the mean grade has risen only .27 in Economics, while the proportion receiving below B - declined

by one-seventh. As a consequence of this differential grade inflation, the variation of mean grades across departments has increased. In 1962–63, with the exception of the unusually low grading Math department, there was little difference across departments either in mean grades or in the distribution of grades. After 25 years of grade inflation, the situation is markedly different.

Williams College now divides itself into low-grading departments, in which the mean grade is 2.66 and 41 percent of students receive less than a B – , and high grading departments, in which the mean grade is 3.09 and only 17 percent of students receive less than B – . This difference in means between high- and low-grading departments is significant at the 1 percent level. Further, in those departments in which the grade distribution shifted higher, given the fixed limit on the highest possible grade, the distribution became more compressed. Within a typical low-grading department, the dispersion of grades is about the same as in 1962–63. But in the typical high grading department, dispersion is much less. The correlation between mean grade and the standard deviation of grades within departments is $-.886$, and is statistically significant.

The difference in grades between these two groups of departments cannot be explained simply by a difference in the quality of students; there is no significant difference between students in high- and low-grading departments in either SAT scores or grades in other courses.

We compared the grades at Williams to grades at Amherst College, Duke University, Hamilton College, Haverford College, Pomona College, the University of Michigan, the University of North Carolina and the University of Wisconsin. This sample is admittedly small, but was selected so as to include private and state schools, large universities and small colleges, and Eastern, Southern, Midwestern and Western schools. We promised these schools that we would publish the data only in the relatively anonymous way that it appears in what follows.

Seven of these eight schools have experienced substantial grade inflation. Table 2 provides data (unweighted averages) for these seven schools comparable to that in Table 1. Grades were relatively low and very similar across departments in 1962–63.¹ In 1985–86, grades were higher and all seven exhibited the same phenomenon that we have described at Williams: each school is now divided into low- and high-grading departments. Averaging across the schools, 32 percent of all students in high-grading departments receive grades above B + , while in low-grading departments only 19 percent do. Only 19 percent of students in high-grading departments receive grades below B – , while 40 percent of students in low-grading departments do.

In four of the seven schools, interdepartmental differences in grading policies are about equal to Williams, while in the others the differences are even more marked than at Williams. In one case the proportion of students receiv-

¹We lack 1962–63 data for two of these schools. As at Williams, the Math and Chemistry departments are an occasional exception.

Table 2

**Mean Grades and Their Distributions in Introductory Courses
in Seven Other Colleges, 1962-63 and 1985-86**

	<i>Mean Grade</i>	<i>1962-63^a Standard Deviation</i>	<i>% Above B +</i>	<i>% Below B -</i>
<i>Departments:</i>				
Art	2.45	.8312	11%	53%
Biology	2.22	1.045	11%	56%
Chemistry	2.19	1.032	12%	60%
Economics	2.23	.9421	11%	61%
English	2.30	.7517	5%	60%
Math	2.21	1.199	18%	57%
Music	2.67	.9123	20%	35%
Philosophy	2.48	.8302	11%	51%
Poli. Sci.	2.51	.7833	13%	50%
Psychology	2.59	.8142	20%	45%
Aggregate Average	2.38	.9141	13.4%	52.7%
Standard Deviation	.1682			
1985-86 ^b				
<i>High Grading Departments:</i>				
Art	2.95	.7223	29%	24%
English	3.12	.5437	27%	12%
Music	3.16	.6657	44%	21%
Philosophy	2.99	.6698	29%	21%
Poli. Sci.	2.95	.7115	24%	23%
Psychology	3.02	.6879	28%	23%
Average	3.03	.6668	30.2%	20.8%
Std. Dev.	.0809			
<i>Low Grading Departments:</i>				
Chemistry	2.66	.9847	17%	44%
Economics	2.81	.8905	20%	31%
Math	2.53	1.042	22%	46%
Average	2.67	.9722	19.9%	40.3%
Std. Dev.	.1126			
Aggregate Average	2.91	.7686	26.8%	27.3%
Standard Deviation	.1936			

^aThe data are not all from the same semesters. For one school the data is from 1962-63, for two the data is from Fall 1962, for one it is from Fall 1963 and for one it is from Fall 1969. We lack 1960s data for two schools.

^bFor four schools the data is from 1985-86 and for three schools the data is from Fall 1985.

ing below B – ranges from 9 percent to 60 percent; in another the share below B – ranges from 0 percent to 39 percent, while the proportion above B + ranges from 10 percent to 57 percent. In addition, the departments that grade low and high display a consistent pattern. Economics, Chemistry, and Math are consistently low-grading departments, while Art, English, Music, Philosophy, Psychology and Political Science are almost always high-grading departments. Only Biology varies, being a low-grading department in just over half the cases.

The one school in our sample which did not experience grade inflation is the exception that proves the rule. At this school, mean grades rose only .022 on a 4-point scale. It is also the one school that *has* managed to maintain uniform grades; in 1985–86, the standard deviation of mean grades across departments was only .1508, which is actually less than it was in 1962–63.

Some Intuition about Course Choice

An individual's choice among courses can be viewed in a utility maximizing framework.² There are two aspects of course choice as it pertains to utility maximization; one involves the intrinsic and extrinsic satisfaction derived from taking the course and from the grade received. The other involves students' knowledge of their learning abilities.

Learning can be intrinsically satisfying. Or the course may not be much fun in itself but still deemed useful; organic chemistry and microeconomics are often considered a pain worth tolerating because they lead to future courses or careers that are expected to be highly pleasurable or profitable. In the same way, good grades yield intrinsic satisfaction (the A that brings the warm glow of achievement) and extrinsic satisfaction (Dean's list, good jobs, and graduate scholarships). Bad grades, of course, may result in disappointment, restrictions on participation in sports, academic probation, and parental disapproval.

In addition to entering the student's utility function directly, grades have an indirect influence as signals of the student's strengths. Students do not typically know which subjects they learn most efficiently. Grades signal to students their relative strengths and weaknesses. They can be an integral part of the educational process, a feedback mechanism which helps the student define her comparative advantage and choose courses on that basis. They can reveal whether a student is good at Physics or English, poor at History or Economics.

If grading policies are uniform across departments, maximizing grades and exploiting comparative advantage are mutually consistent; by choosing those subjects in which she is good, a student will both learn more and get better grades. Departure from a uniform grading policy doesn't necessarily

²The analysis of this section is based on the activity choice model (Winston, 1982), which is an extension of the familiar Becker (1965) analysis.

obscure signals to students of their comparative advantage or alter course choice. A student who receives a higher grade in English than in Economics, but whose higher English grade is lower relative to her classmates than is her Economics grade, may correctly conclude that her comparative advantage is in Economics. She may then go with her relative strength, and choose a second course in Economics over a second course in English. Or she may choose a second course in the subject in which she is an inefficient learner, English, over a second course in Economics, because of the expected consequences of that choice for her grade point average. So, whether course choice is influenced by differences across departments in grading policy depends on the weight students give to grades as signals of comparative advantage, relative to the weight they give to grades as rewards.

Course Choice at Williams College

To investigate how grades affect student course choices, we studied a representative sample of 376 students enrolled at Williams College during the academic year 1985–86. Our data on these students were from three sources: student transcripts, student files including application forms, and a survey which we administered to these students which yielded a measure of the student's "need for achievement" (Gough, 1952). For each student, we had data on all courses taken and grades received through June 1987: 6842 total course choices. In addition, we had demographic and family background data, indicators of abilities, cognitive skills and academic performance prior to enrolling at Williams, as well as indicators of course preference and academic motivation. This panel data set is rich, but not unique. Similar data are to be found in the Registrars' Offices of all colleges and universities. While this study represents one of the first attempts by economists to exploit these data, replication and extension of this work at other institutions should be quite simple.

We chose for our analysis, from our sample, the five departments with the largest enrollments in their introductory course: Economics, English, Math, Political Science and Psychology. We used probit functions to measure the influence of the grade received by a student on the probability of that student taking a second course in the same department.³

In the two departments with the greatest number of observations—Economics, a low-grading department, and English, a high-grading depart-

³We derived maximum likelihood estimates of the parameters in the reduced form equation, $\text{Prob}(Y = 1) = D(X'B)$, where Y is a dichotomous variable which takes the value 1 when the individual has taken a second course in the discipline and 0 when she has not, X is a vector of exogenous variables (discussed below), and $D(X'B)$ is the cumulative normal distribution function. We focussed on the decision to take one more course, rather than on the number of courses taken (or the choice of major), because the decision to take a third course (or to major in a department) depends on the grade received in the second and subsequent course(s).

ment—we also assessed the independent influence on course choice of a measure of comparative advantage. Our hypothesis was that in assessing comparative advantage, students will deflate the grades they receive in high-grading departments. Thus, controlling for the absolute level of the grade received in Economics 101, students should be more likely to take additional economics courses the higher is their rank in the distribution of Economics grades relative to their rank in other courses.

When measuring the influence of grades we controlled for such other influences on course choice as intrinsic interest in the discipline, beliefs concerning the level of rewards associated with different disciplines, prior evidence of comparative advantage, and the student's need for achievement. To do this, we included a variable which reflected whether the student intended to major in that department, a gender dummy and a measure of the student's need for achievement, as well as the grade received. Details of the empirical work and our results can be found in Sabot and Wakeman-Linn (1988).

We first estimated course choice functions that did not include measures of comparative advantage. F-tests for four of the five equations are significant at the 1 percent level. We found that in Economics, English and Math, the probability of taking a second course declines significantly as the grade the student received declines.⁴ Political Science and Psychology also fit this pattern, although the grade variables were not statistically significant in these departments. However, these two departments had the fewest observations, and the significance levels of the coefficients on grades are sensitive to the number of observations.⁵

The probabilities of taking an additional course in Economics, the largest low-grading department, and English, the largest high-grading department, are revealing. Of the students in Economics 101 who do not intend to major in the subject (the large majority) and who are male (also the majority), the probability of taking a second course is 18.2 percent less if they received a B than if they received an A, and 27.6 percent less if they received a C than if they received an A. Responsiveness to grade is lower for those who intend to major in Economics than those who do not; likewise, it is lower for males than for females in Economics 101.

Students in English 101 are also responsive to their grade, though somewhat less so than students in Economics 101. Of those who do not intend to major in English (the large majority) and are male (again the majority) the

⁴Our results also show that intended majors are more likely than other students to take a second course in the department. Gender has no consistent effect on course choice. Women are less likely to take a second course in Economics or Political Science than men, but gender made no difference in the other departments. Need for achievement significantly influences course choice only in Economics.

⁵Course choice functions were estimated using random sub-samples of the Economics and English students in our sample. The coefficients on the grade variables became insignificant as N declined from 375 to 200. N was less than 200 in both Political Science and Psychology.

probability of taking a second course in English is 14 percent less if they received a B than if they received an A, and 20.3 percent less if they received a C than if they received an A. As in Economics, responsiveness to grade is lower for those who intend to major in English than for those who do not. In contrast to Economics, males and females in English 101 do not differ in their degree of responsiveness to grades. The structure of predicted probabilities for students in introductory courses in Math, Political Science and Psychology are similar to those for students in Economics and English.

Does the comparative advantage signal contained in grades influence course choice? To answer this, we added to our list of variables a continuous variable signifying the difference between the student's relative performance in the introductory course and relative performance in all courses, as measured by grade point average up to and including the semester in which the introductory course is taken. Our analysis focussed on Economics and English, the two departments with more than 300 observations.⁶

There are two notable findings. First, comparative advantage does influence course choice in both Economics and English. As students' rank in the introductory class increases relative to their grade point average rank, their probability of taking a second course increases. Despite discrepancies across departments in grading policies, students are able to derive a signal of comparative advantage from their grades, and they respond to that signal.

Second, accounting for signals of comparative advantage only marginally reduces the incentive effects of grades. While students do consider comparative advantage, the incentive effects of absolute grades on course choice are far more powerful. Changing a student's grade in Economics from B to A would increase his indicator of comparative advantage in Economics, and as a consequence would increase his probability of taking another course by about 4.5 percent. That same change in grade would increase his grade incentive to take a second Economics course, increasing the probability of doing so by about 15 percent.

Simulations and Implications for Altering Enrollments

What are the implications of differences in grading policies across departments for enrollments in courses beyond the introductory level? To answer this question, we conducted simulations with the probabilities generated by our course choice functions. Details of the simulation procedure are available in Sabot and Wakeman-Linn (1988). In particular, we address the question of how many more students would enroll in post-introductory courses in low-grading

⁶The sample size necessary for significant results is increased by the inclusion of the comparative advantage variable; exercises with the largest departments indicate sample sizes below 300 produce insignificant results. As with our earlier assessment of sensitivity to sample size, this exercise involved a random exclusion of cases.

departments, like Economics, if that department adopted for its introductory courses the grading policy followed in a high-grading department, like English. The results that follow do not use the comparative advantage variable, but its inclusion has very little effect.

Our simulation indicated that if Economics 101 grades were distributed as they are in English 101, the number of students taking one or more courses beyond the introductory course in Economics would increase by 11.9 percent. Conversely, if grades in English 101 were distributed as they are in Economics 101, the simulation indicated that the number of students taking one or more courses beyond the introductory course in English would decline by 14.4 percent. The results of applying this method to the Math department, which had the lowest mean grade and the highest dispersion of grades, are more striking. If the Math department adopted in its introductory course the English 101 grading distribution, our simulation indicated an 80.2 percent increase in the number of students taking at least one additional Math course! Alternatively, if the English department adopted the Math grade distribution, there would be a decline of 47 percent in the number of students taking one or more courses beyond the introductory course in English.

There are two reasons why exchanging Math and English grade policies produces greater impact than does the exchange of Economics department and English department grading policies. Grades in Math are substantially lower than grades in the introductory Economics course, hence the direct impact of a change to the English 101 grade distribution is greater in Math. Moreover, for reasons discussed below, Math students are more responsive to grades than are Economics students, which implies a greater increase in enrollments.

Although these results are striking, they probably underestimate the influence of grades in introductory courses on enrollments in advanced courses. First, our simulation method assumed that the probability of an A student taking another course was unaffected by the distribution of grades, while the probability for other students was allowed to vary with the grade distribution. That A students are unaffected is unlikely. If the Economics department adopted the grade distribution of English 101, the proportion of A students taking another Economics course would increase; making high grades easier to obtain increases the incentive to take courses in that department. Second, our simulations ignored the impact of grading distributions on the original decision to take the introductory course. This effect may well be substantial.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

The division of colleges and universities into high- and low-grading departments was not conscious policy but the result of uncoordinated decisions by individual departments and instructors. The consequent impact on the pattern of enrollments, which we have documented, is an unintended side effect of this

unplanned division. There are conflicts between implicit grading policies and the explicit policies of these institutions. Since science departments are typically among the low-grading departments, the skew in enrollments resulting from divergent grading policies is in direct opposition to attempts to increase enrollments in the sciences. Moreover, most colleges and universities would not wish for students to be lured away from their areas of comparative advantage by arbitrary differences in departmental grading. The policy implication seems clear: such arbitrary differences in grading policies among departments should be eliminated (although planned differences in grading policies may be desirable).

The findings of the Williams study are not neutral, however, with respect to whether low-grading departments should raise their grades or high-grading departments should lower their grades. Students in high-grading departments are consistently less responsive to grades than students in low-grading departments. This appears to be a consequence of the more compressed distribution of grades in high grading departments; the compression results in grades that provide less accurate signals of comparative advantage and are more random.

Two additional facts support this conclusion. First, grades in high grading departments are less accurate predictors of subsequent performance. The average correlation between grades received in the first and second courses at Williams is .6147 and highly significant in three low-grading departments, but only .3681 and occasionally insignificant in five high-grading departments.

Second, various indicators of ability, prior level of skill, and motivation are poor predictors of grades in high-grading departments. Sabot and Wakeman-Linn (forthcoming) estimate production functions to determine what factors contribute to success in introductory courses at Williams. In low-grading Economics, math and verbal SAT's, parents' education, the student's need for achievement, performance in high school and sibling rank all have a significant influence on performance. Together, they explain between a third and a half of the variance in Economics 101 grades. By contrast, verbal SAT's are the only significant variable in predicting introductory English grades, and all the variables together can explain only between 5 and 10 percent of the grade variance.

Compressed grading distributions in high-grading departments convey cruder signals. One reason is that instructors with fewer grading categories must make cruder distinctions. In addition, if there is little difference in the grade received by the top, middle, and bottom students in the class, there is less incentive for the instructor, and less pressure from students, to make accurate distinctions among students.

If the aim of grading is to convey information to students about their relative strengths and weaknesses, then grade distributions with more dispersion and a lower average will be preferable. In addition, our results indicate that a uniform grading policy might be an effective response to Ernest Bloch's entreaty to "persuade more students to study science and engineering."

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