

“I’m Present, ‘A’ Please”: A Case Study Examining Grading Issues in a Recreation Curriculum

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Abstract

Despite extensive research, grading and the potential for grade inflation remain areas of concern within higher education. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to obtain collective understandings regarding grading and pressures to inflate grades from faculty and instructors within a research-intensive university. The study focused on a university Health and Human Performance division, housing disciplines such as recreation, health, and physical education at a Carnegie Research Extensive institution. Researchers examined participant narratives for lived experiences and collective understandings of grade inflation, issues surrounding grade inflation, and potential solutions to lapses in rigor and pressures to inflate grades artificially. Results indicated that all participants agreed grade inflation was present within the division. Subjects reported that pressures to inflate grades included lack of training, job security, student behavior, and teacher evaluations. Suggested solutions included required teacher training courses for doctoral students, additional trainings for faculty, structured mentoring, and clear communication regarding expected course grades from administrators.

KEYWORDS: Grading, grade inflation, assessment, instructor training, teacher training

Although teaching can take a back seat at research-extensive universities, grading practices and potential for grade inflation continue to be an active debate among institutions today. With the increasing demand for research and publication within universities, there is great danger of losing sight of the importance of teaching, as time demands shift attention toward production of scholarly material.

In the realm of teaching, instructors are equally teachers and evaluators; therefore, assessing student performance is a vital component of the higher education system. However, grading is an inconsistent process, and the practice of inconsistent grading appears to follow a rising pattern. Since the 1960s, an upward shift exists in grade point averages without corresponding increases in student achievement, leading to a deterioration of standards in education (Nagel, 1998). This pattern of increased grades without commensurate knowledge gains typifies grade inflation. According to Mansfield (2001), grade inflation "compresses all grades at the top, making it difficult to discriminate the best from the very good, the very good from the good, the good from the mediocre" (p. 16). A historical examination of the phenomenon reveals a steady pattern of upward grading trends without promise of significant change on the horizon. Examination of these issues through qualitative methodology, a distinctive methodological lens, offers a unique understanding of the issues surrounding grading. Furthermore, the exploration of instructor perspectives through dialogue may yield promising solutions to grading issues identified by instructors. While the existing literature on grade inflation is prevalent in the academic areas of education, business, and psychology, the academic areas of recreation, physical education, and health have not been thoroughly explored. Thus, the purpose of the present case study is to examine participant narratives for the issues surrounding grading practices within the academic area of recreation and its sister departments physical education and health, referred to as the Health and Human Performance division (HHP), and to explore potential solutions to these issues.

The phenomenon of grade inflation can be traced for approximately forty years. According to Healy (2001), the start of the grade inflation problem begins with the Vietnam War. Students with higher grade point averages and class rankings had a better chance of avoiding the draft; therefore, some faculty members felt an obligation to protect their students' futures (Healy). From the early 1960s to the mid-1970s, the percentage of A's awarded for undergraduates increased from 16 to 34 percent (Denton & Henson, 1979). During the same period, the percentage of C grades reduced in half, changing the average grade from a C+ to a B in this short span (Denton & Henson). The trend has never reversed. Today, only 10-20% of all college students receive lower than a B-, resulting in 90% of all college students receiving either an A or a B (Sonner, 2000).

The existing literature examining grade inflation is rife with factors that influence grading practices such as student expectations (Chonko, Tanner, & David, 2002; Birk, 2000; Singleton, 1978; Sonner, 2000), teacher evaluations (Anderson & Miller, 1997; Aristides, 1976; Chonko, Tanner, & David; Isely & Singh, 2005), and job security (Sonner, 2000; Speer, Solomon, & Fincher, 2000). Anderson and Miller analyzed teacher evaluation instruments and found that student expectations play a significant role in teacher evaluation results. Further, Aristides indicated that faculty perceived fear of poor teacher evaluations could be a factor relating to grade inflation. Isley and Singh's study revealed that a student's grade expectation along with other factors influenced their teacher evaluation responses.

These three areas (student expectations, teacher evaluations, and job security) appear to be inextricably connected. Specifically, student expectations can influence teacher evaluations (Chonko, Tanner, & David; Isely & Singh) and teacher evaluation data can potentially affect job security (Aristides; Sonner, Speer, et al.). While tenure track faculty members are concerned with promotion and tenure status, adjunct instructors (AI) are fearful that they will not be asked to teach in future semesters (Sonner; Speer et al.).

The changing cultural and economic climates of the 1980s began a change in how universities function. In the 1980s, universities began operating as a corporation, seeing students as “clients.” This changing perception allowed the student-instructor relationship to be parallel to that of a customer-supplier relationship (Barndt, 2001; Germain & Scandura, 2005; Marklein, 2002). Therefore, by granting students high grades and giving them their money’s worth, universities keep the tuition dollars flowing. Sonner found that non-tenure track faculty such as doctoral AIs, graduate teaching assistants, and lecturers tend to give higher grades, perhaps in an effort to secure their positions. According to Farley (1995), it is no secret that “high grades go hand in hand with high tuition” (p. 5); thus, maintaining high class enrollments and assisting with job security. Barndt further denotes that lower evaluation scores can lead to reduction in class size, resulting in faculty job losses.

With no apparent end to the upward movement in the near future, will grades eventually become irrelevant? What, if anything, be done to mitigate the problem? This case study seeks to create in-depth dialogue with course instructors who may possess an understanding of the root issues influencing grade inflation within their division.

Method

The purpose of this inquiry is to describe the faculty and doctoral assistant instructors’ collective understandings of the issues that surround grading practices in undergraduate courses and how this may relate to grade inflation. Thus, the study utilizes the epistemological lens of the postpositivist perspective. This viewpoint maintains that knowledge is conjectural, and it is only through critical examination of multiple sources that we can come to understand a phenomenon (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Based on this perspective the current investigation consists of a qualitative case study design. Case study methodology examines a particular phenomenon within the real life context in which it occurs (Yin, 2003), as with faculty understandings of grade inflation pressures. Yin asserts that we gain knowledge from these cases that enlighten us about the experiences of the average person or institution. A major strength of focus groups is that participant discussion is more meaningful because participants both question and explain themselves to one other (Morgan, 2003). Through this approach, the present investigation seeks to examine the following three research questions: 1) Do participants perceive that grade inflation exists in the HHP division, 2) What are the collective understandings of the issues that surround grades issued in undergraduate courses within the

HHP division, and 3) what are the potential solutions, if any, to issues surrounding grading practices within the HHP division?

Data Collection Sources

Empirical summaries were generated from three focus groups within the HHP division creating informant narratives. For this qualitative study of an organization, a panel of informants "with people in different jobs on different levels, in different relationships to the institution..." was solicited (Weiss, 1994, p. 19). Subjects self-selected to participate in response to an email request sent to all faculty, lecturers, and AIs in the division. The focus groups participants included faculty and adjunct instructors representing all ranks (full professor, associate professor, assistant professor, lecturer, adjunct faculty, and doctoral assistant instructors) who actively participated in grading undergraduate courses in the HHP division. Participants included representatives from Recreation, Physical Education, and Health departments within the HHP division. In an effort to ensure confidentiality, the study employed pseudonyms for all participants and divisions.

Data-Collection Methods

Kreuger (1988) suggested four to six participants are preferable when participants may have a wealth of experience and/or the discussions that may yield lengthy discussions. Thus, the study utilized three focus groups with a target participation rate of four to six participants in each group. Notably, AIs could have different issues than faculty of other ranks. In addition, AIs might also feel intimidated to express their views among faculty; therefore, I reserved one focus group primarily for AIs. All other participants self-selected between the other two focus groups. The three focus groups were conducted near the end of the academic fall semester consisted of 20 participants: two full professors, three associate professors, one assistant professor, three visiting lecturers, one part-time lecturer, two full-time lecturers, and eight adjunct instructors (9 males and 11 females). Departmental representation of focus group participants within the HHP division was as follows: Recreation (n=14), Physical Education (n=5), and Health (n=1). Notably, all eight AIs were from the Recreation department. Due to the wealth of discussion, all focus groups consisted of at least one hour and fifteen minutes. The study utilized a structured interview format (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) consisting of approximately 11 questions that guided each focus group and interview. All focus groups and interviews were conducted by the author to increase consistency of style (Memon & Stevenage, 1996). Interview questions addressed training in grading, definitions of grade inflation, understandings of the issues surrounding grade inflation and potential solutions. In addition, I collected journalistic field notes as recommended by Morgan (1988) and reviewed university documents. Documents examined consisted of university policies on academic freedom, the university academic guide as related to teaching and grading, as well as the HHP division's policies on course evaluation and academic freedom. Participants examined grade distribution reports in the undergraduate courses during the focus groups. Though participants knew the grades were from undergraduate courses in HHP,

specific instructor names or course numbers were not disclosed thereby keeping these records unidentifiable. The purpose of course grade distribution data was to facilitate discussion on grade distributions and possible influences in grading. In particular, to illustrate possible discrepancies in grade distribution participants examined courses with multiple sections.

In an effort to ensure focus group data was trustworthy; unique to the case, I solicited two individual interviews with an associate professor and a Clinical Professor in the HHP department (1 male and 1 female) the following spring semester. More specifically, the purpose for the individual interviews was to ascertain if subject narratives would differ in peer focus groups as compared to individual interviews as well as to ensure data saturation.

Weiss (1994) denoted that implicit or explicit arguments made by a researcher about their case are more compelling when evidence is presented with that of a comparison study. He went on to say, "...comparison cases can correct what would otherwise be a tendency to exaggerate the peculiarities of the sample" (Weiss, p. 31). The importance of comparison interviews in this study was to understand to what extent the data/themes in the case were consistent or inconsistent with an alternate division on campus. Thus, in an effort to build trustworthiness that the HHP was a unique group, I completed two comparative interviews along with several informal interviews with subjects in the Social Science division. In an effort to gain a better understanding of the atmosphere and grading procedures within the comparison division, I conducted informal interviews with the designated advisor for teaching and various members of the Social Science division. Additionally, a comparison participant provided documentation on grading procedures for the division.

Data-Analysis Procedures

As suggested by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995), I reviewed and open coded participant narratives. These codes were analyzed for commonalties, recoded, and classified. More specifically, axial coding (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004) was the primary method used for data examination. Axial coding consists of analyzing the focus group transcripts and breaking them into meaningful chunks of information and then placing them into categories. Finally, themes and sub-themes emerge from the combination of categories or codes found within the commonalties of the data. Approximately 85% of the data was used to comprise the themes; notably, the remaining 15% of the data did not present clear commonalties.

Data triangulation, incorporating multiple strategies to examine the same phenomenon, consisted of numeric data set of grades issued in the undergraduate courses and multiple encoders of informant narratives. Additional efforts to ensure validation of data included member checking, which entails following-up with participants to ensure the accuracy of their statements. I maintained a "chain of evidence" to increase reliability via adequate citations to relevant areas of the data base. The data base would "reveal the actual evidence" and conditions under which the data was collected, and "these circumstances [are] consistent with the

specific procedures and questions contained in the case study protocol" (Yin, 2003, p. 105). In addition, I utilized jottings and field notes from a personal perspective to move toward deeper understanding and avoid loss of detail. As a theory was not present to assist with this case and the original purpose of the case was to be descriptive, the analytic strategy used to examine the data was "developing a case description" (p. 114). Efforts to ensure construct validity consisted of multiple coders, readers in addition to the primary investigator who also review and code the data. The present investigation utilized pattern matching and rival logic to strengthen internal validity (Yin, 2003). Pattern matching consists of comparing the previous literature to participant data. Rival logic consists of identifying outliers within the case.

Findings

The dialogues from the informant narratives were placed into codes/categories to analyze the data for potential themes and sub-themes resulting from the three research questions in the case: 1) Do the participants perceive that grade inflation exists in the HHP division, 2) what are the collective understandings of the issues surrounding grading practices within the HHP division, and 3) what are the potential solutions to these issues within the HHP division? All participants in this case study agreed that grade inflation existed in the HHP division. In the following sections, I will introduce the elements of the two models derived from the participant data in the case study and then present a visual representation of each model that might explain how the data relate to one another.

Dimensions of Grading Practices of Undergraduate Courses

Several issues emerged from the data regarding the dimensions of grading practices of undergraduate courses in the division via axial coding revealing the following themes: previous education/training, expectations of students and parents, teaching evaluations, and job security.

Previous education/training. The literature has a paucity of data (Lanning & Perkins, 1995), indicating lack of training on grading/assessment as an issue surrounding grade inflation; however, training is a reasonable trigger in the phenomenon. Thus, participants discussed their level of formal training on test construction to measure learning, grading test and assignments, required course work, orientations, mentorship, and workshops. Some participants indicated that they had voluntarily taken one or two courses and/or attended workshops on teaching. Those participating in courses and/or workshops on teaching learned about creating effective tests. However, Rachael, a full professor, explained that she "attended a lot of those workshops, but nowhere in that training did they talk about how to link the outcome measure to a grade."

Group discussion found that mentorship could be a factor in training, but noted that the value of this tutelage could vary with the mentor. Two doctoral adjunct instructors (AI) commented on the training instructions they received from their mentors/supervisors. Alice said she was told that if a student simply

turned in an assignment they should get at least 60% credit. Alice said, "I was really shocked, I was like whoa, that's ridiculous." Naomi concurred that she was also given instruction to give at least 50% credit for students who "turn something in" regardless of quality. Naomi further pointed out that when she first arrived at the university a particular professor gave her a rubric for every class. However, she went on to say "the second semester, nothing, and that's when I was thrown to the wolves." Naomi's remark that she was "thrown to the wolves" aptly expressed the feelings of many participants in the study. Most articulated that they felt as though they had to make their own grading guidelines as a novice college instructor. Only four out of 20 participants in this study attested that their programs required training on teaching and evaluation. Three of these participants were instructors from a department in which a teaching certification was a mandatory part of their curriculum; however, this training was to teach and grade in secondary education system (K-12). Andy, a lecturer, added "...when I was hired here it wasn't like I had a seminar or a session that said this is how we grade here."

The majority of participants lamented that they had no formal training or education on how to grade undergraduate course work. John, an associate professor, recalled asking his chair about the normal distribution of grades in the HHP when he was a novice instructor. He was instructed to give "whatever you feel is right." So, he then asked if he could flunk 80% of the class if he felt their performance was sub-par and was told, "Oh my God, you can't do that." The groups agreed that although expectations are not clear and they receive no training, a level of student satisfaction is expected. Interviews from the social science division noted a significant difference in the training received. Both respondents indicated that at least one "teaching course" was required for all students who are teaching undergraduate courses. Additionally, the comparison division members and the advisor for teaching AIs indicated that a faculty member supervised their teaching, grading, and formulation of tests. Additionally, the department provided documentation of grading procedures, which we reviewed during the interview.

While some divisions within the university require students to take course-work in grading and assessment (e.g., Social Science division), participants noted that no classes on grading practices were required for Ph.D. students by any of the departments within the Health and Human Performance division. Moreover, according to the participants, no course work was required of AIs or graduate adjunct instructors who were teaching classes. Faculty members in the focus groups and the individual interviews indicated they had very little required training prior to teaching. A few exceptions were those faculty who had a degree in education. At the time of this study, the only teaching requirement/training is that AIs and graduate teaching assistants who are teaching are required to attend an orientation at the beginning of the semester. However, focus group data indicated that information provided at such an orientation was of little value regarding teaching and assessing student work. Participants reported that some orientation sessions were not held, some were "weak", and others offered material that was superfluous. Alexis (AI) said, "the stuff that they offered is not what we need." Naomi (AI)

added "its more administration." In opposition, the comparison division indicated that all AIs are required to attend a two-week intensive orientation during the summer prior to teaching. Although Lanning and Perkins (1995) noted the scarcity of literature regarding training as a factor of grade inflation, the data presented here suggests training and education are indeed important variables to the case.

Job security. Participants indicated that concerns about job security could also influence the grades they issue which may contribute to grade inflation. The majority of the focus groups felt that teacher evaluations affect job security through salary increases and through tenure and promotion. The discussions of teacher evaluations and tenure and promotion were popular topics among all participants including those participants not currently in a tenure line.

Fear of negative evaluations can be particularly evident in faculty members whose advancement or continuation of employment is dependent on teacher evaluations. Aristides (1976), Chonko, Tanner, and David (2002), and Isely and Singh (2005) agreed that administrative pressures to obtain high teacher evaluations are a factor in grade inflation. A large portion of the participants when asked what influences surround assigning course grades replied plainly, "student evaluations [of teachers]." Nate, a visiting lecturer, stated, "I think... my evaluations are kind of in the back of my mind so I would assume they probably have an influence..." John, an associate professor, agreed and stated that at the end of a semester he might "bump up" student grades to give a "C+." Several participants expressed the opinion that they could ensure high teacher evaluations if they would give exemplary marks to all students. Paula was one of the few participants who disagreed that there was a correspondence between grades issued and higher teacher evaluations. She related personal experiences of giving few high grades yet receiving excellent teacher evaluations. However, these participants did not dispute that holding the mere perception that grade distributions effect teacher evaluations could cause grade inflation, even unintentionally.

John turned the discussion to teacher evaluations' impact on salary and promotion. He pointed out the belief that giving high grades lead to high teacher evaluations that in turn lead to greater salary increases. He expressed, "I have greater odds of making tenure because my teaching is going to look good if you just evaluated based on the teacher evaluations so there's a pressure... The pressure is all for inflation." John denoted that administration says that classes need rigor, but does not create an atmosphere that allows for poor teacher evaluations. John clarified by saying, "No it's just the pressure from the [administration]. Unless they find some way to neutralize the advantages of giving high grades, it's going to keep happening."

Andy, a lecturer, supported the notion that teacher evaluations affect one's job security. He pointed out that "student evaluations [of teachers] can determine if you get a raise," as suggested by Speer, Solomon, and Fincher (2000). He expressed that teacher evaluations are akin to a popularity contest so that instructors with "pacified students with high grades" are being rewarded professionally. Derek, an assistant professor, presented a different approach to the effect of perceived

influence of teacher evaluations as they relate to job security. He felt these could directly affect obtaining a position at an institution. He stated, "...you look at your jobs and they're going to want to see that we had good teaching evaluations. If you are hard on your students maybe your teaching evaluations aren't going to be very good" supporting Barndt (2001). Many participants agreed that within the current system issuing higher grades had no negative consequences within the department and professional life.

The data from the social science division interviews also noted teacher evaluations as a concern regarding securing employment and/or future employment. Von and Phillip commented that they will have to show past teacher evaluations to get future positions and that this requirement causes them to feel as though students hold undue power. This perception of students holding "the power" is an impetus toward higher grades with the hopes of receiving higher teacher evaluations. These last sentiments encapsulate the apparent close relationship of teacher evaluations to tenure and promotion.

As an assistant professor, Ken noted that professors seeking tenure or promotion based primarily upon teaching merit "better show outstanding marks in teaching and right now it's limited to student evaluations [of teachers]." He went on to add that he doubts students who are failing a course provide glowing teacher evaluations, potentially leading to instructors seeking to give students higher grades. He also added that research is the priority at R1 universities and this system may divert professors' attention away from grading and rigor in an attempt to conserve time and mental resources. Rachael followed up Ken's commentary by noting one could be dismissed for lack of research ability/production as well. Thus, participants expressed that they feel a variety of pressures to keep teaching evaluations high as related to tenure and promotion. Teacher evaluations are one of the only ways a teacher's effectiveness is measured within the current system and providing high grades to ensure good evaluations is one way to save time and emotional resources that could be diverted to producing research.

A lesser noted but equally passionate issue addressed by focus group participants was credit hour production. They expressed that instructors not in the tenure track feel the need to keep students happy and enrolled in their courses as a matter of job security. Bryson, a visiting lecturer mentioned that he often feels "pressure for cash cow courses," meaning he felt economic pressures upon universities are transmitted to instructors' teaching on a daily basis. He expressed that these economic stresses are influences on the grades he gives to students in an attempt to keep his credit hour production high.

A majority of the focus groups agreed that job security could be a contributing influence to grade inflation supporting the work of Denton and Kenneth (1979). The researchers maintain that declining mobility and increasing dependence on an instructor's position at his institution has resulted in anxiety for faculty members about student evaluation ratings (Denton & Kenneth). Participants perceived that teacher evaluations did have an influence on salary and/or tenure and promotion. The notion of demand for credit hour production proved a link to job

security as it related to student satisfaction. Phillip, from the comparison group, supported the notion of credit hour production by noting that there is an expectancy of consumerism in higher education. He stated, "on one hand, I know that there is this sentiment of consumerism in higher education and there is a pressure for us to inflate grades." Phillip's observation directly supports Germain and Scandura's (2005) notion that consumerism is a factor in grade inflation. Elizabeth, an adjunct instructor, aptly pointed out, "I don't feel for me or any faculty that there are any repercussions for giving high grades but if you give low grades, gosh, you hear from the students and possibly parents." She made the powerful insight that, "There are tons of consequences for giving low grades but there aren't any for giving high grades right now that I see." All the participants within the Health and Human Performance division expressed that high grades are desirable in every way.

Expectations. Administrative expectations related to the focus group in several areas. Several participant discussions revolved around administrative pressure for high enrollments and student expectations related to grading practices of undergraduate courses. Specifically, credit hour production was an expectation of the administration, and understandably so, as it is a necessity for the livelihood of the division. Barndt (2001) supports this notion and argued that allocation of state funding can be based on faculty performance or funding formulas that award dollars based on student enrollment. Institutions must also compete among other institutions to attract, retain, and place students (Zirkel, 1999). Increases or decreases in enrollment have the potential to apply additional pressure on the department and individual faculty to maintain standards and/or reach enrollment objectives. Several participants commented that the demand for rigor could often be a contradiction to the call to maintain and improve credit hour production.

When asked what other issues may impact grading other than job security, Paula, a lecturer, said,

Student expectation. Tuition is so high [students feels they] have an absolute right to get the best grades. Your responsibility to teach this course in a way that allows me to know exactly what's expected so I can get that A. [The student feels they are] paying a lot to get here and [they] want to have that high GPA when I get out to get a good job. So student expectation is a factor that changes over time but it's very strong right now I think.

Paula's point of view validated the notion that rising tuition costs corresponds with higher grade expectations (Farley, 1995). Alexis, an AI, agreed with Paula,

I think being a professor here would be a very hard thing because [instructors are] given a double message. One is, teach the student and have your classes full of rigor and two is, always make [money] if they can....

She expressed that the division says, "...we're going to evaluate you on what your students think." However, she believed there must be some "...happy middle ground somewhere." Rachael, a full professor, agreed and pointed out that different courses are likely to have different learning objectives that would affect how rigorously they need to be graded. She stated,

I don't think that you can look at the statistics just blankly or across the board

conclusion. I think we need to figure out a way... to grade fairly and with rigor according to the learning outcome objectives of the course.

Rachael is a full professor who has been teaching at the college level for more than 20 years, and her ability to seek insightful answers to the grading practices made her responses resonate within the group discussions. Her discerning perspective was in clear opposition to more novice instructors who had received little to no training in how to evaluate fairly.

The discussion turned to how instructors can know if they are grading appropriately. Most stated that they never had any courses or guidelines relating to grading practices and acceptable grade distributions. Many agreed that they would like more direction in this area but do not want to sacrifice academic freedom. Alexis, an adjunct instructor, said, "you don't want this thing to be micromanaged but at the same time if somebody's not doing their job and students really aren't getting anything out of [the class] something needs to be done about it." She went on to say, "there has to be some sort of system in place to keep check.... Education's too expensive."

A major difference between the focus and comparison groups exists regarding rigor. Both adjunct instructors from alternate departments knew their expected course GPA, which was between 2.7 and 3.0 respectively. The comparison interviews and discussions with supervisors explain that if an adjunct instructor had a course GPA that the department would consider "too high" the supervising mentor would call the adjunct instructor in to discuss why this was happening and what to do to correct the "problem." The advisor for teaching adjunct instructors noted that solutions to correct the issue often varied among cases. Phillip confirmed this protocol was true as he indicated that he had been called in once by his supervisor because his course GPA was too high. He indicated his supervisor reminded him about what the range should be and was given some strategies on how to achieve the appropriate range.

The current literature (Aristides, 1976; Birk, 2000; Chonko, Tanner, & David, 2002) cited student and parent expectations or behavior as a factor leading to grade inflation and the current study also identified student expectations as a major player in grade distributions. Chonko, Tanner, and David (2002) maintained that "expectations that revolve around feelings of entitlement are dangerous and certainly not in the long-term interests of the students" (p. 278). Student expectations range from students holding the expectation of always obtaining an "A" to confrontation against instructors who do not grade as the students would like. Ken stated that many students attend college without enough preparation to understand that not all tests, assignments, and classes will be easy or result in high marks. Gayle agreed and said, "I don't think anybody wants to be confronted." She adds her opinion that students today, "are ready to challenge in a minute, challenge a grade, challenge you." Building on this sentiment, student confrontation/intimidation was a challenge for numerous participants: notably both veteran teachers with over 20 years of teaching experiences provided somewhat shocking testimonies of intimidation by students about grades.

Rachael, a full professor reported, "I have had parents come to my home on Christmas Eve with daughter in tow to complain about a grade, if I would change it." She added, "I think there's a very different kind of parent today, one that is much more in front of their child and performance is expressed and in some cases taking the leadership for that child." Clearly, Rachael's story shocked all of the participants in the focus group. She said, "Oh, yeah, I felt creepy for months after that." She went on to express that she would like training about how to manage student intimidation.

Rachael went on to express how she now feels as she distributes grades, "my heart rate goes up, my palms get sweaty, my blood pressure shoots up because I know that I won't even get them all distributed. I won't even get through the class before there will be an attack." She later stated,

I can expect then to be laid into and you would think it would just be the Ds and the Fs and the Cs. [The] A-s, B+s, in fact they're even more likely to argue with me and attack me.

Other full professors such as Jack agreed that grading represents a significant anxiety. He said, "Over the years I've had some ugly kinds of experiences like that myself. It tends to, subconsciously you tend to think 'mark'em up' rather than 'hold them' where they are to avoid that kind of thing." An overwhelming majority of the participants agreed that student and parent expectations played a role in grade distributions supporting the work of Aristides (1976) and Birk (2000). Participants further expressed a need for more training to cope with student and parent expectations and intimidation.

According to Barndt (2001), the societal trend toward higher grades has occurred to reduce student competition and enhance a student's perception of himself or herself. A few participants noted their concern for self-esteem had an influence on the grades they issued. An adjunct instructor, Elizabeth, expressed that seeing students be "completely crushed" by a low grade made her hesitate to issue "harsh grades." Later in the dialogue, Elizabeth said she had taken into consideration factors other than a student's academic work and issued a different grade, resulting in grade inflation. She went on to note that she was new and needed training. Suicidal tendencies, depression, and the damaging of a student's self-concept all contribute to faculty members' approaches to lowering standards, reducing student challenges, and avoiding emphasis of persistence in achieving success (Cronin, 2001; Edwards, 2000).

The dialogues from informant narratives were placed into codes/categories to analyze the data for potential themes. The factors influencing the issues surrounding the grading practices in the HHP division are outlined. Major factors include training, job security, expectations, time, and doctoral associate instructor constraints.

Recommended Solutions

The second research question addressed potential solutions for the factors surrounding grade inflation. All members of this case identified training/education as an area the HHP division needs to address. When asked where the divi-

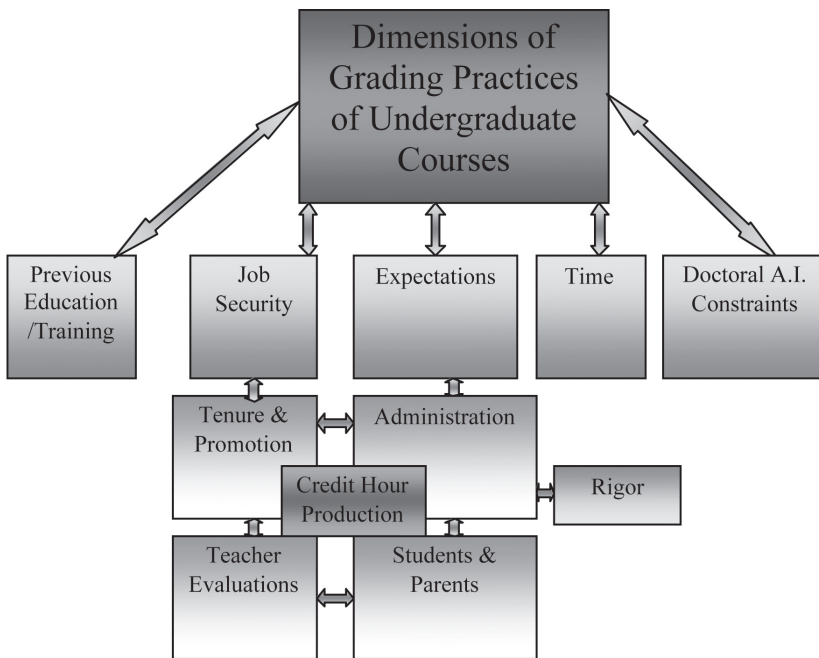


Figure 1.

The above model represents the codes/categories of informant narratives and the arrows indicate potential connections to assist with the identification of emerging themes. Dimensions of Grading Practices of Undergraduate courses outlines the factors influencing the issues surrounding the grading practices in the HHP division.

sion should start to combat the current grading issues Nate, a visiting lecturer, said emphatically, “training and information.” When asked if training should be required for all adjunct instructors (AI), all AI participants emphatically said “yes.” Elizabeth, an adjunct instructor, shared her thoughts,

Alright well coming in fresh out of your undergrad [or] fresh out of your master’s they say you’re teaching this class, good luck! Nobody ever comes to see what you are teaching. Nobody ever comes and monitors you. How do they know what we’re doing, really?

Most agreed they either had the same experience or knew of someone who had. Based on this and the poor orientation experiences, another popular solution was that all AIs should have an educational preparation on grading practices and teaching prior to their first day of teaching and/or grading course work. Suggestions for attaining this goal were via a required course, a required mini-course in the summer prior to appointments, a required seminar series, and orientation. Alexis suggested that orientation should include the tools and techniques new instructors need to grade effectively. She suggested rubric training, mentoring, and training related to how to balance teaching and personal coursework.

Offering specific workshops or seminar series was another popular training solution. Jack, a full professor, wanted to ensure that “the one thing that I hope

you make sure you get [written down as a solution suggestion]... is perhaps the establishment of the series of workshops, volunteer things that faculty can attend to pick up skills." Bryson, a visiting lecturer, continued, "And the [Graduate Assistant], adjunct instructor and... I think maybe even a one day intensive or two day intensive workshop before they start." Ken suggested these workshops/seminars should keep enrollment low to allow for more interaction, and Rachael added that an attractive element would be to have well known outside experts conduct the workshops for all levels of faculty and students. Jack suggested a continuum of training programs. He expressed that faculty could benefit from a sharing of information such as, "How do [other professors] grade term papers based upon what kind of content and criteria and etc., things like that. I'm starved for that kind of information." All levels of instructors and professors agreed that additional and ongoing training related to effective grading would be highly sought by them.

Interviews with subjects in the comparison division revealed inconsistency among the departments within the Health and Human Performance division regarding mentorship and supervision, which solidified the uniqueness of the cohort. Though all AIs are assigned a supervisor, the information and time provided by supervisors appears to be inconsistent; however, the comparison division showed significantly more structured supervision. Specifically, the comparison division provides supervision for the construction of the first exam an AI creates and observes three teaching sessions within their first semester of teaching. Additionally, supervisors monitor AI course evaluations every year and provide direct feedback. On the contrary, AIs within the Health and Human Performance division did not view evaluation feedback from their supervisors as noteworthy, if they received any feedback at all.

Case narratives suggest increased communication among administration, faculty, and AI could improve grading practices. All participants agree the division needs more explicit guidelines on course requirements and grading expectations to improve grading practices within the division. In particular, the AIs and individual interviews suggested that supervisors provide their personal grading philosophies and expectations as well as distinct grading instructions for the course. Additionally, some participants feel the division also needs to provide specific guidelines for mentorship and supervision. Anna suggested more structure for current mentorship practices with a form of non-threatening evaluative procedure in place. Ken, an associate professor, noted "I think if incoming professors and assistant professors have not had that pedagogical background...a mentorship could be part of that pre-tenure process." He further suggested that mentorship would need structure and should address course objectives, how to develop course syllabi, and different ways to assess student knowledge.

The dialogues from informant narratives were placed into codes/categories to analyze the data for potential themes. Potential solutions to the issues that surround grading practices in the HHP division emerged as a major theme in the case. Participants were all in agreement that there was a significant need for increased training/education and communication regarding grading within the HHP division.

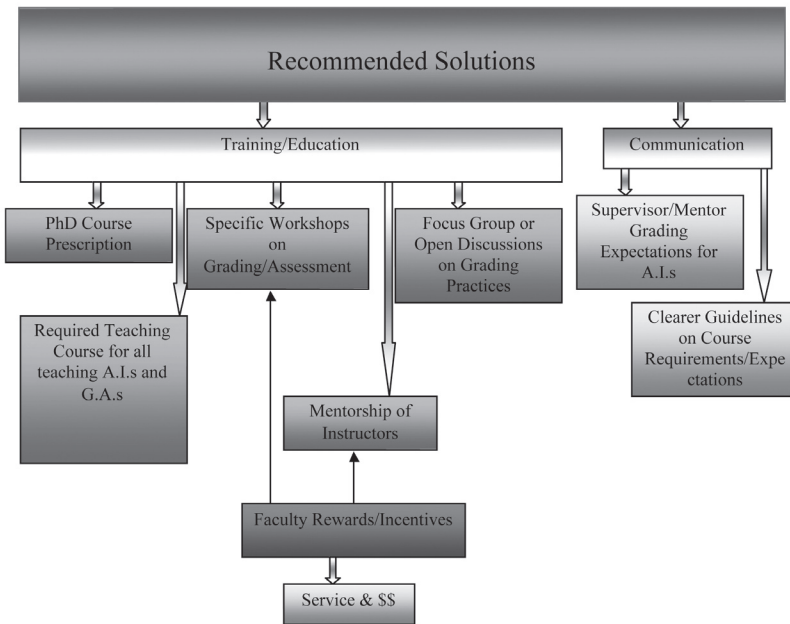


Figure 2.

The above model represents the codes/categories of informant narratives and the arrows indicate potential connections to assist with the identification of emerging themes. One of the major areas identified within this case was potential solutions to the issues that surround grading practices in the HHP division.

Discussion

The collective understandings of participants suggested grade inflation indeed exists within recreation, physical education, and health courses; yet the participants feel little is being done to rectify the problem of grade inflation. The comparison interview data provides significant support for some of the solutions presented by the participants in the HHP division. Interestingly, supervision, training, and courses guidelines solutions suggested by the HHP division participants were currently in action in the comparison division. This may account for any discrepancies regarding the level of concern of the existence of grade inflation within the respective departments. Most notably, the lack of training/education was the key and central element in this case study as the main contributor of grade inflation among participants. This salient finding supports existing literature that maintains more research is needed to explore the relationship between grading and faculty training (Lanning & Perkins, 1995). Ultimately, the results of the case beg the questions: are we adequately training/educating our future teachers in all aspects of teaching such as course content, lecture preparation and presentation, learning

styles, grading, providing meaningful feedback on assignments, mentorship, etc.? Additionally, are we providing adequate in-service training for existing faculty to hone or expand their knowledge base?

Other issues influencing undergraduate grading revealed in this case were consistent with the current literature: student expectations (Birk, 2000; Chonko, Tanner, & David, 2002; Singleton, 1978; Sonner, 2000), teacher evaluations (Anderson & Miller, 1997; Chonko, Tanner, & David, 2002; Isely & Singh, 2005) and job security (Barndt, 2001; Speer, Solomon, & Fincher, 2000). Interestingly, the three areas often intermingle with one another. Specifically, participant data supports Aristides findings that instructors are concerned with receiving lower teacher evaluations and this concern indeed influences grade inflation. The data further revealed that participants feared low teacher evaluation scores could affect promotion and tenure decisions. Fear of negative evaluations can be particularly evident in faculty members whose advancement or continuation of employment is dependent upon student evaluations. Lower evaluation scores lead to reduction in class size, resulting in faculty job losses (Barndt, 2001). Participants also felt many students expected high grades for mediocre work and if higher grades were not issued this could have a negative effect on their teacher evaluations (Chonko, Tanner, & David, 2002) and potentially affect job security. Chonko, Tanner, and David, cautioned educators to find a balance between consumer expectations and student perception of entitlement to a grade as did the participants in this case.

Lanning and Perkins (1995) called for further analysis of training as a factor in grade inflation in 1995; yet, little research exploring the role of training has been conducted since then. Interestingly, the most salient finding of the present investigation was a marked lack of training and supervision for adjunct instructors (AI). Notably, all AI participants were from the Recreation Department. This key finding could play a vital role in future curriculum and training requirements for graduate student instructors in the Recreation Department. While training is perhaps only one of many factors that contribute to grade inflation, the findings of this case revealed the lack of training and supervision indeed affected grading practices among AIs in the Recreation Department and warrants further investigation.

The data revealed in the present investigation opens the door for a fresh look at addressing grade inflation. Participant transcripts consisted of lively discussion filled with perceptive insights into grading from neophyte instructors as well as seasoned, tenured faculty. While this study presents several potential solutions, the data strongly warrants a culmination of actions to begin to address grade inflation. Specifically, the data within the case stresses the need for improved communication regarding expected grade distributions, additional mentorship for novice instructors, orientation and training on the use of rubrics and how to grade, and the introduction of specific assessment and teaching instruction courses as part of all doctoral programs¹. Based on the participant data, my journalistic field notes, and document resources from the HHP and social science divisions the follow-

¹ Upon the conclusion of this study, the findings were presented to the HHP division. As a result, the Recreation department developed a protocol to supervise and provide mentorship for assistant instructors in the department. The protocol included a majority of the suggestions presented in this study.

ing four assertions were formed: 1) assessment training/education should be a required course curriculum of all doctoral students, 2) lack of assessment training/education could be at the root of grade inflation, 3) considerable confusion exists among faculty and doctoral AIs regarding expectations on grading and course requirements, and 4) there appears to be a clear understanding among the members of the comparison departments regarding rigor and expected course GPAs.

Suggestions for further research could include a follow-up qualitative survey among the faculty within this division to triangulate the collective understanding of the issues that surround grading practices and grade inflation. Additionally, the survey would also gather data regarding the solutions presented in this case study for agreement, additional or alternative suggestions, and feasibility. Most importantly, the collective understandings of grading practices and grade inflation would benefit most through replication of this case study at alternate divisions and institutions. Instructors, professors, and graduate students teaching within recreation, physical education, and health related disciplines can best describe the pressures they experience, and data from a diverse selection of universities and administrators could provide a more comprehensive selection of themes.

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