



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on July 5, 2010

Grade Inflation in American Education

The Boston Globe reported July 4 that students have been studying less in high school and college compared with past decades. “In survey after survey since 2000, college and high school students are alarmingly candid that they are simply not studying very much at all. Some longtime professors have noted the trend, which rarely gets mentioned by college admissions officials when prospective students visit campus.”



But two weeks earlier, the *New York Times* [provided](#) a clue about one reason students feel less compelled to hit the books:

One day next month every student at Loyola Law School Los Angeles will awake to a higher grade point average. But it's not because they are all working harder. The school is retroactively inflating its grades, tacking on 0.333 to every grade recorded in the last few years. The goal is to make its students look more attractive in a competitive job market. In the last two years, at least 10 law schools have deliberately changed their grading systems to make them more lenient. These include law schools like New York University and Georgetown, as well as Golden Gate University and Tulane University, which just announced the change this month. Some recruiters at law firms keep track of these changes and consider them when interviewing, and some do not.

Of course, if you can get a higher grade without studying at all, why bother studying very hard?

The *New York Times* went on to [explain](#): “Law schools seem to view higher grades as one way to rescue their students from the tough economic climate — and perhaps more to the point, to protect their own reputations and rankings.” Grades given as economic support, rather than as a measure of student achievement? Yep, you read that right. But what is really happening is the destruction of the reputations of these colleges. Moreover, they are creating a “why try?” climate by granting higher grades for nothing.

The move to bump all students' grades northward is reminiscent of the satire based upon the fictional Minnesota town of [Lake Wobegon](#), where “all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, *and all the children are above average.*” Of course, not all children can be “above average” — or the word “average” loses all meaning.

The recent grade inflation at Loyola University will be retroactive to 2007, [according to](#) the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. “Loyola's change will affect current students and alumni who graduated in 2007 or later — the classes that received grades based on a letter-grade system beginning in 2004.”

Victor J. Gold [told](#) the *Chronicle of Higher Education* that the school's purpose was to keep up with grade inflation in other law schools. “We're not trying to make them look better than other comparable students at other schools. We just want them to be on an even playing field.” The *Chronicle of Higher Education* quoted Stuart Rojstaczer, “a retired Duke University professor who has studied grade



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inflation and created an online database about it," who "said that changes like Loyola's can open more job opportunities for students." Huh? Do the law schools really think they can really fool employers? In a word, yes. "There are employers that have GPA cutoffs," Rojstaczer said, "and by inflating grades, you increase the number of students who meet those GPA cutoffs."

Keith O'Brien of the *Boston Globe* for July 4 [explains](#) that the students are coming into colleges with the knowledge of grade inflation, and the same expectations that academic mediocrity should be rewarded with high grades:

They come with polished resumes and perfect SAT scores. Their grades are often impeccable. Some elite universities will deny thousands of high school seniors with 4.0 grade point averages in search of an elusive quality that one provost called "intellectual vitality." The perception is that today's over-achieving, college-driven kids have it — whatever it is. They're not just groomed; they're ready. There's just one problem. Once on campus, the students aren't studying.

The *Globe* goes on to [report](#) that an academic study by professors Philip Babcock of the University of California Santa Barbara and Mindy Marks of the University of California Riverside found "the average student at a four-year college in 1961 studied about 24 hours a week. Today's average student hits the books for just 14 hours."

Of course, why study if you can still get that 4.0 anyway?

Academic grade inflation has also made its way down to the secondary school level, where failure is simply not an option under "No Child Left Behind" and failing student grades are usually considered a [weakness on the part of the teacher's ability to connect to the student](#) rather than poor student motivation and achievement. One school district (Beloit, Wisconsin) simply bans "D" and "F" from their grade scale. "Under the new grading system, the lowest acceptable grade a student can receive is a C," the *Beloit Daily News* [reported](#) on June 23. But "No Child Left Behind" at work is a different matter. By refusing to fail even one student grade-wise, the school is setting the stage for students to fail at life. Of course, if a student is satisfied with a "C," a grade that is supposed to represent "satisfactory" or "average," then there's no need to do any studying — right? And students in school districts where they can't get a failing grade are undoubtedly wise to this tactic.

There is increasingly scant reward for true academic excellence in American education. Many high schools have ditched the traditional concept of a top student, a valedictorian, and have instead gone with "co-valedictorians" comprised of a group of the best students. Such a thing [happened](#) at Lyons High School in Colorado this past spring, when there were 10 "co-valedictorians." "It's honor inflation," the local ABC-TV affiliate quoted Professor Chris Healy of nearby Furman University saying. Healy noted: "In the real world, you do get ranked."

The whole concept of grade inflation has spawned a [website devoted to this academic cancer](#). Grade inflation has created a culture of mediocrity that is still spreading across academia.

Thomas R. Eddlem is a high-school teacher who does not engage in grade inflation.



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