

Grade Inflation, Gatekeeping, and Social Work Education: Ethics and Perils

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Abstract

The definition of grade inflation, its causes, and consequences are discussed. Although literature concerning grade inflation in social work education is sparse, there is enough evidence to conclude that grade inflation exists in social work education. The ethical imperative to fairly evaluate students and the role of gatekeeping are discussed.

Keywords: social work education, grade inflation, gatekeeping, professional ethics, competency

1. Introduction

As I recently finalized grades for three undergraduate social work courses, which involved converting points to letter grades, I was struck by the observation that over half of my eighty students received A/A- grades and only 6% received C+/C grades. No student received less than a C. After double-checking common grade descriptors and finding that a grade of A represents “outstanding”, “superior”, and/or “work that far exceeds expectations”, I wondered aloud, “Are the majority of social work students really outstanding or superior?” Or, alternatively, had I become complicit in grade inflation? I remembered that the only place where the majority of students are above average, much less outstanding, is Garrison Keillor’s idyllic Lake Wobegon, and then I knew.

2. Grade Inflation Defined

Grade inflation can be defined as “an upward shift in the grade point average (GPA) of students over an extended period of time” without

a corresponding increase in student achievement (Goldman, 1985, p. 98). The literature on grade inflation is disturbing. According to Rojstaczer (quoted in Epstein, 2010), the average GPA rose from 2.52 in the 1950’s to 3.11 in 2006-7, an increase of 23%. The modal grade today at colleges and universities is an “A,” accounting for 43% of all grades; in the 1940s, the modal grade was a “C” and “A’s” accounted for only 15% of all grades (Rojstaczer and Healy, 2012). As Carey (2011) succinctly stated, “Yes, there’s been grade inflation. A-minus is the new C” (para. 5). McCabe and Powell (2004) found that over half of the faculty they surveyed believed grade inflation existed in their institution. A similar result was reported by McSpirit, Chapman, Kopacz, and Jones (2000) in their survey of faculty at a Midwestern university. Interestingly, McCabe and Powell (2004) also found that the majority of faculty believed that grade inflation was an issue. However, the same faculty believed they did not inflate their grades even though 92% underestimated the actual grades they gave to students.

3. Possible Reasons for Grade Inflation

Some authors trace the beginning of grade inflation to the 1960’s when sympathetic college instructors allegedly gave students higher grades so they could keep their student deferments and avoid military service in the unpopular Viet Nam war (Rojstaczer and Healy, 2012; Perrin, 2009; Fajardo, 2004). Grades appeared to stabilize after

the war, but a second wave of grade inflation began in the late 1980s and has not subsided yet (Rojstaczer and Healy, 2012; Educational Policy Committee, 2000). Unlike the first wave of grade inflation in the 1960s, explanations of this new round of inflation are varied. However, two clusters or categories of reasons are represented in the literature on grade inflation:

1) Student-related factors – One reason that has been asserted is that college students today are smarter than those who have come before them. Logically, smarter students earn better grades. Standardized test scores, however, do not support this rather simple and elegant hypothesis. SAT scores rose only 1.6% between 1990 and 2010 (College Board, 2010). A recent report from ACT found that only 25% of all ACT-tested high school graduates met all college readiness benchmarks (ACT, 2011). Arum and Roksa (2011), using the Collegiate Learning Assessment, which is designed to measure critical thinking, analytical reasoning, and other higher-level skills, found that 45% of college students did not make any gains after two years of college and 36% made no gains after four years of college. Significantly, they found that students majoring in education, business, and social work made the least gains when compared with students in other majors. One-third of new teachers, in fact, failed a basic literacy test required for new teachers in Massachusetts (Miller and Slocombe, 2012).

However, Tucker and Courts (2010) state that students today may be more productive learners due to the immediate availability of technology that enhances study skills. These authors also state that today's students may be more focused on career-preparation and take more classes that match their talents, earning higher grades. Mostrom and Blumberg (2012) state that increases in GPAs over time may actually be grade improvement rather than grade inflation and cite factors such as more effective learning-centered teaching methods. However, even if the quality of students (or teaching) has risen, it has been argued that grading standards must be raised to reflect such an increase (Educational Policy Committee, 2000).

Another student-related factor deals with the reality that today's students have different attributes than students of twenty years ago. The majority of today's students are members of the so-called "millennial" generation. While many positive attributes have been associated with this cohort, millennials are believed by many to have a strong sense of entitlement (Alsop, 2008). Many parents and K-12 schools systems have been overly concerned with developing self-esteem in these students through a system that rewards students regardless of their performance (Miller and Slocombe, 2012; Fajardo, 2004). Some have even referred to millennials as "trophy kids", reflecting that many may have received trophies and awards just for "showing up" and participating in athletic or academic events (Alsop, 2008). It is not surprising then that 34% of a sample of college students believe they deserve "at least" a B if they just attend "most classes" in a given course (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, and Farruggia, 2008). Coupled with this strong sense of entitlement, millennials also view themselves as consumers of education rather than students responsible for their own learning (Rojstaczer and Healy, 2012; Cain, Romanelli, Smith, 2012). This sense of entitlement also leads to students demanding and badgering instructors for higher grades (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, and Farruggia, 2008). With such an entitlement and consumer perspective, students believe, on some level, they have entered a "buyer-seller" relationship with schools where classes are perceived as "purchased services," and good grades are an integral part of the transaction and not necessarily something to be earned (Tucker & Court, 2010; Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009; Marcus, 2000; Sacks, 1996). As Tucker and Court (2010) state, "The ideology of the student as a consumer has changed the power relationships within higher education, placing satisfaction higher than intellectual growth" (p. 48). As higher education has become more consumer-oriented, students feel more entitled, academic expectations have decreased, and grades have increased (Gentry, 2011).

2) Institutional-related factors – Needless to say, a consumer model of education cannot exist unless all parties—students, teachers, and administrators—agree to play the necessary roles in the “buyer-seller” relationship. While most higher education personnel would likely dispute that they play the role of a seller in the consumer model, few would dispute that a “business model” exists at all levels within universities that emphasize student satisfaction as a means of retaining students to achieve financial benchmarks. Hawe (2003) found that lack of administrative support was one of the two major reasons why instructors were reluctant to assign failing grades, and Stone (1995) postulates that enrollment-driven funding results in administrators supporting grade inflation on some levels to increase budgets. In addition, some authors have noted that professors have needed to become more like entertainers than educators to increase student satisfaction to support such a business model (e.g., Crumbley, Flinn, & Reichelt, 2010; Edmundson, 1997). One author even reported that his chairperson encouraged him to take an acting class to enhance student satisfaction in his classes (Sacks, 1996).

The most used measures of student satisfaction are student evaluation of teaching (SET). Although SETs are purported to assess instructors’ effectiveness, many see SETs purely as a satisfaction measure (e.g., Tucker & Courts, 2010). Although there continues to be controversy regarding the reliability and validity of SETs in assessing effectiveness (e.g., Wachtel, 1998), there is little doubt that SETs are widely used as summative evaluations for promotion and tenure for tenured and tenure-track faculty, and that they determine job security for non-tenure track instructors, who account for 68% of faculty appointments in higher education (AAUP, n.d.). Interestingly, a number of researchers have found evidence that adjunct faculty give higher grades than tenured and tenure-track faculty (Moore & Trahan, 1998; Sonner, 2000; and Boualem, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). While Wolfer and McNown (2003) and Gentry (2011) acknowledge

the possible use of SETs as a formative evaluative tool, they reject the use of SETs as a summative tool. Because SETs are used increasingly as a summative evaluation, there is now widespread speculation that many/some instructors are more lenient in their grading and/or engage in course “deflation” (i.e., “dumbing down” course materials and assignments) in an effort to increase their SET score. This has been referred to as the “leniency hypothesis” of grade inflation or the trading of inflated grades for higher SETs (Brockx, Spooen, & Mortelmans, 2011). The corollary to this is, of course, that rigorous graders are punished with low SETs from students. Germain and Scandura (2005) found students knowingly give good scores on SETs to instructors who give high grades. Love and Kotchen (2010) found the increased emphasis on SETs exacerbates grade inflation. Millea and Grimes (2009) also found expected grades are positively correlated with SETs. A survey by Crumbley and Reichelt (2009) found that when SETs were used as a summative evaluation tool, instructors may tend to “game the system” by easing or inflating grades or deflating course work. Crumbley, Flinn, and Reichelt (2010) refer to SETs as an “administrative control tool” that leads to “pandering” by faculty. Although Goldman (1985) and Crumbley, Flinn, and Reichelt (2010) fault institutions for their use of SETs, they call the actions of individual instructors who, in effect, trade higher grades for better SETs unethical. Crumbley, Flinn, and Reichelt (2010), pulling no punches, state: “A persuasive argument can be made that this increased use of SET’s for administrative control has caused grade inflation, coursework deflation, and a reduction in student learning as a result of unethical behavior of professors and administrators” (p. 187).

4. Grade Inflation in Social Work Education

The literature on grade inflation specifically in social work education is relatively limited, but there are anecdotal reports that imply some degree of grade inflation in social work programs,

following the general trends described earlier. For example, the University of Utah's student newspaper reported that in 2006 students majoring in social work had the highest GPA of any major, 3.74, compared to an overall campus GPA of 3.17 (Mayorga, 2007). The Indiana University School of Social Work stated it was "highly likely" there was grade inflation in their M.S.W. program when an evaluation of their M.S.W. curriculum was performed in 2009 (Ramsey, 2009). This was then identified by faculty as an important issue to work on. Kourilova (quoted in Tucker & Courts, 2010) reported that 79% of students at Louisiana State University received A's in the Spring term of 2008. Finally, according to data published on the web, the Registrar's Office at the University of Missouri reported that 73% of all grades given to social work students in the Fall semester of 2012 were A's (University of Missouri Registrar, 2013).

In addition to anecdotal reports, there are several empirical studies related to grade inflation in social work education. An early study by Hepler and Noble (1990) compared GPAs, GRE scores, and TSWE (Test of Standard Written English) scores of B.S.W. students to non-B.S.W. students seeking admission to a graduate School of Social Work. They found the B.S.W. students, when compared to non-B.S.W. students, had: 1) significantly higher GPAs; 2) significantly lower GRE scores; and 3) lower TSWE scores (although not significantly). After standardizing all GPAs, GRE scores, and TSWE scores by calculating percentile rankings, Helper and Noble (1990) concluded that B.S.W. grades overstated student ability, and they concluded grade inflation existed. As a result, the authors suggested that GPAs of B.S.W. students be mathematically "discounted" using standardized scores in the M.S.W. admission process. For example, thirty applicants were from one public university and their average GPA was 3.06. Their model adjusting for GRE and TSWE scores indicated the "discounted" GPA should actually be 2.43, a 20% discount or, stated differently, the grades were inflated by 20%.

In another study, Culver (2006) reviewed the transcripts of 163 B.S.W. students who graduated between 2000 and 2003. He found that approximately 40% of these students had a 3.75 GPA or higher in the social work major. The grades of these students in non-social work courses were lower than their grades in social work courses. Based on this data, Culver (2006) expressed concerns about grade inflation within social work.

Black, Apgar, and Whelley (2010) surveyed 71 deans and directors of accredited graduate social work programs in the United States about grades and grade inflation in their programs. They found that 61% of the respondents identified grades and grade inflation as problems in their programs, and 44% were attempting to develop strategies for dealing with it. The three major factors that influenced grading and grade inflation, according to the respondents, were student evaluation of teaching, avoiding confrontation with students over grades, and the student-as-consumer mentality (Black, Apgar, & Whelley, 2010).

In a more recent study, Deitsch and Van Cott (2011) examined grades in 26 introductory courses for the Fall semesters of 1990 and 2009 at Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana). They compared the grade point averages and the percent of A and B grades for each course for the two time periods. While noting that the GPA and the percentage of A and B grades increased in 23 and 24 courses, respectively, the GPA and the percentage of A and B grades increased the most for the Introductory Social Work course. The GPA for this course rose from 2.46 in 1990 to 3.20 (a 30% increase) and the percentage of A and B grades rose from 43% to 84% (a dramatic 95% increase).

In another recent study, Sowbel (2011) examined grading of social work students in field placement, the "signature pedagogy" of social work education. Noting that very few students seem to do poorly in field and few are screened out of social work programs due to poor performance

in field, Sowbel (2011) compared traditional grading with an alternative grading scheme, vignette matching evaluation (VME) developed by Bogos et al (2004), for 154 social work students in field placement. VME uses a set of 20 prepared vignettes of students interacting with clients that are given to field instructors who are asked to read each vignette and then select the one that best exemplifies their student. Sowbel (2011) found that the traditional grading methods identified 4% of the 154 students as “problem students” in field, but the VME method identified 27% as problematic. Sowbel (2011) concluded that “this result supports previous assertions by field faculty that there is a general trend toward inflated field ratings regardless of the measure used” (p. 373). As field typically accounts for a significant portion of the social work curriculum, inflation in this area is especially significant.

5. Consequences of Grade Inflation

Social work educators should be concerned about inflated grades. When inflated grades are given, students are not challenged to do their best work. If average or above-average work receives an A grade, there is little motivation to strive to excel and be the best possible student. Students may come to believe there is little need to prepare for class, read required or optional readings, or study. Arum and Roksa (2011) report that social work and education students spend 17% less time per week studying than college students in general (10.6 hours/week vs. 12.4 hours/week). Miller and Slocombe (2012) note that grade inflation contributes to students’ beliefs in their intellectual superiority, resulting in graduates unprepared to deal with the realities of work environments. Similarly, Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar (2009) state that grade inflation fosters and reinforces an inflated perception about one’s knowledge, skills, and competencies. For social work students, the result can be the mistaken belief that the profession of social work is “easy” and that work with client systems requires little preparation and effort. Learning theory predicts

that when mediocre preparation and effort is rewarded with above average or better grades, this behavior likely will generalize to other settings, including practice settings, after graduation. This can place vulnerable client systems at risk and potentially lead to harm to those vulnerable client systems.

6. Normative Ethical Theory and Grade Inflation

Normative ethical theory concerns itself with explaining the morality or the rightness/wrongness of specific actions. Three somewhat competing major theories are associated with normative ethical theory: consequentialist ethics, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics. Consequentialist ethics focuses on the outcomes of a specific action before determining whether the action is morally right or wrong; if the outcome is a good one such as benefiting others in some fashion, the action can be called morally right or ethical (Sinnot-Armstrong, 2012). Related to this theory is Mill’s Principle of Utility, which states that an action that brings the greatest good or happiness to the greatest number of people is the most moral (Connolly, Keller, Leever, & White, 2009). The consequentialist perspective would require the knowledge of or the ability to predict the outcomes of grade inflation before pronouncing grade inflation as either ethical or unethical. As there can be multiple outcomes (e.g., students are happy and achieve their goals, instructors receive positive evaluations, students’ future job performance is compromised, future clients are negatively affected, etc.), the Principle of Utility is needed to identify whether the greatest good is achieved by giving inflated grades. An obvious problem with this approach is that many possible outcomes occur in the future and thus are not predictable with any certainty so a complete analysis of outcomes is unobtainable (Bowen, 2004).

Deontological ethics (sometimes referred to as Kantian ethics after its founder, Immanuel Kant) focuses solely on the action itself and not the

consequence of the action or the intent of the actor (Koehn, 1995). Deontological ethics represents a universal, absolute, and “moral law” perspective as specific actions are deemed as always right/good or always wrong/bad regardless of their intent or the consequences they produce. The details of a situation, cultural factors, and other contextual variables are considered irrelevant (Connolly, Keller, Leever, & White, 2009). Under this theory, for example, lying is always wrong. Consequentialist ethics, on the other hand, would evaluate the outcome of a specific lie before determining whether the lying was right or wrong; this is an “ends may justify the means” perspective. In the deontological ethics approach, since a given action is always right or wrong, a duty or “categorical imperative” is created either to perform or not to perform a specific action. Standards of behavior and codes of ethics are often manifestations of deontological ethics (L’Etang, 1992). This perspective likely would consider grade inflation as morally wrong or unethical as it is an unfair misrepresentation or a lie about students’ academic abilities. Deontological ethics would demand that students always be assessed on their demonstrated abilities regardless of other factors or issues that may impinge on students. Significantly, the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (1996), states, in a deontological fashion, that social work educators must “evaluate students’ performance in a manner that is fair and respectful” (Standard 3.02b).

Virtue ethics takes a much different approach and focuses on the individual who performs a specific action rather than the action itself. This approach de-emphasizes outcomes and the duty to adhere to an absolute standard of behavior (Axtell & Olson, 2012). It focuses on whether the individual agent is expressing good character or virtue in their action (Garrett, 2005). As Garrett (2005) explains:

An act or choice is morally right if, in carrying out the act, one exercises, exhibits, or develops a morally

virtuous character. It is morally wrong to the extent that by making the choice or doing the act one exercises, exhibits, or develops a morally vicious character. (para.18)

According to Hursthouse (1999), moral virtues are “character traits that dispose one to consistently act, think, and feel in certain ways and thereby consist of prescriptions for action” (p. 36). Virtues are not inherited, but are learned and developed over time and, according to Aristotle, are necessary to lead a good life (Koehn, 1995). For this reason, virtue ethics theory maintains that individuals have a moral responsibility to develop virtuous character, and “right actions” are defined as what a person with a virtuous character would do (Burnor & Raley, 2011). According to several authors (e.g., Burnor & Raley, 2011; McBeath & Webb, 2002; Gardiner, 2003), virtue ethics, contrary to the other theories discussed, allows flexibility and a wide range of right actions after situations are assessed. However, in any given situation, it is possible for a conflict in applicable virtues to develop. The conflict can be resolved by using a mediating virtue, practical wisdom, which enables the individual to weigh the demands of all the competing virtues and take action (Greco & Turri, 2011).

In the view of the virtue ethicist, grade inflation cannot be deemed ethical or unethical without examining the motives of the teacher or instructor and uncovering the virtue or vice underlying the act of grade inflation. As confusing as it sounds, grade inflation by teacher A may be ethical and the same grade inflation by teacher B may be unethical according to this perspective. For example, teacher A may assign a higher grade to a student than deserved based on the virtue of compassion (i.e., to assist the student in realizing a life-long dream), which makes the act ethical whereas teacher B assigns a higher grade than deserved based on the vice of greed (i.e., seeking better evaluations to receive a promotion), making

the act unethical. When virtues conflict (e.g., the virtues of compassion and integrity) when deciding what grade to give a student, the virtue of practical wisdom or reasoning must be used to resolve the apparent ethical dilemma and decide on the action to be taken (Earle-Foley, Myrick, Luhanga, & Yonge, 2012). Clearly, the virtue of practical wisdom or reasoning is a critical mediating necessity. While the virtue ethics approach is appealing as prescribed actions are not called for, it is often difficult for individual actors, much less observers, to understand their true motives for their actions. In the case of grade inflation, this approach does not seem to give general guidance on whether grade inflation is ethical or not; rather the answer becomes, “it depends.”

7. Recommitting to Gatekeeping

Although the ethics of grade inflation are not clear, social work educators must act as gatekeepers to minimize the number of unprepared, but possibly overconfident, graduates entering practice environments. Social work educators have to do so in order to protect society and the profession (Younes, 1998) as well as vulnerable clients. As stated above, they must “evaluate students’ performance in a manner that is fair and respectful” (National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, Standard 3.02b, 1996). Although the term “fair” can be ambiguous, in this context it must be interpreted to mean “valid” and “accurate.” Black, Apgar, and Whelley (2010) note the irony of grade inflation in social work education and state: “Furthermore, overestimating academic performance in a profession that holds self-awareness as sacrosanct is paradoxical and counterproductive” (p. 19). Although college faculty, in general, often feel uncomfortable with and adverse to their role as gatekeepers, it is part of an implicit social contract with society (Goldman, 1985). Society expects and demands faculty to be gatekeepers in order to protect citizens. Goldman (1985) believes grade inflation subverts gatekeeping and states:

But it *is* our job to identify, as best we can (and we are certainly imperfect), those who are fit for particular occupations or social roles. The health and well-being of our society depends on our success. We have accepted the social function of certifying competence ... social reality requires (though perhaps not quite so much as we have believed) that we award certificates and degrees which reflect the level of competence necessary to do the job. Grade inflation has blurred important distinctions, has made everyone appear above average, and has led many citizens to suspect incompetents have been turned loose in the marketplace. (p. 109)

Social work has emphasized the importance of gatekeeping since its beginning as a profession (Moore and Urwin, 1991). The Allenberry Colloquium on undergraduate social work education held in 1971 reaffirmed that undergraduate educators must be gatekeepers for the profession and must screen out students who are not competent for social work (Feldstein, 1972). Several more recent articles have called for social work educators to reinvigorate their roles as gatekeepers (Younes, 1998; Reynolds, 2004; Sowbel, 2012; Whelley & Black, 2012). It is interesting to note that with the exception of Reynolds (2004), these articles focus on students’ emotional issues and/or problematic behaviors, not academic performance, as possible reasons why social work students should be screened out of social work programs. However, Moore and Urwin (1991) have identified grades as the first of five areas that should be of specific interest to gatekeepers. The lack of interest in academic performance in the literature suggests that grade inflation has kept grades so skewed that gatekeepers see little reason to focus on grades.

There are challenges and dilemmas in gatekeeping for social work educators. Reynolds

(2004) and Whelley and Black (2012) both note that social work programs need to attract and retain a sufficient number of students to maintain faculty and to survive as external resources dwindle. Therefore there can be implicit pressure to give inflated grades and retain marginal students, which is contrary to the purpose of gatekeeping. This is a macro-level application of the leniency hypothesis of grade inflation discussed earlier. Younes (1998) and Sowbel (2012) state that gatekeeping may also be perceived by social work educators on a personal level as antithetical to basic social work values. Younes (1998) notes an apparent conflict between gatekeeping and the ethical obligation of faculty to respect students' self-determination to become social workers. Gatekeeping can indeed deny the attainment of an important goal of students, becoming a social worker. This can become an ethical dilemma for the social work educator: respect self-determination of students versus protect vulnerable client systems and the larger society. Sowbel (2012) states that social work educators, who are trained in the strengths perspective, naturally focus on students' positive qualities. When students' academic achievements are subpar or low, other non-measurable factors such as degree of effort, overcoming personal or familial tragedies, or tackling challenging life experiences become the focus. From a strengths perspective, a grade thus may represent a combination of factors and much more than academic achievement. This is an example of what Allen (2005) calls a "merged judgment" grade, a grade that represents a "hodgepodge" of factors. Allen (2005) argues that grades should not represent a combination of factors, but must represent a single construct, academic achievement, in order to be valid and useful to the various audiences that use grades for decision-making purposes. An important component of Allen's argument is that external audiences will not understand the various factors that a merged judgment grade represents and wrong conclusions will likely result.

8. Conclusion

There is little doubt that grades for social work students are very high and, in some cases, are the highest in their respective universities and colleges. The reasons for this are probably many interconnecting factors including student, faculty and institutional variables as highlighted in this article. Regardless of the reasons, however, social work educators have an ethical imperative to fairly and accurately evaluate students' performance in order to protect society and students' future clients. While social work educators, like all educators, dislike and dread giving poor grades to students who may have many other strengths, their role as a gatekeeper to the profession demands that they do so. Professional disciplines such as social work must fulfill their implied social contract with society: they must train their own and assure competence and quality. If we do not keep our end of this social contract, the future of our profession is grim. As Reynolds (2004) so succinctly states, "Social work educators have stressed that the life of the profession is tied to whom we select to enter our profession and provide services to clients. This is an awesome responsibility ..." (p. 29). As much as it may pain us, we no longer can reside in Lake Wobegon.

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