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If A Is Average, Say So-- the Dawn of Honest Transcripts

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By Thomas K. Lindsay

A recent Harvard Crimson piece has raised eyebrows. From "Substantiating Fears of Grade Inflation, Dean Says Median Grade at Harvard College Is A-," we learn that the estimable Harvard has done for grades what the Weimar Republic did for the mark. At Harvard, we read, the "most common grade is A." But anyone surprised at Harvard's hyperinflation hasn't been paying much attention, and anyone who thinks Harvard should be singled out for this has been paying even less. Higher education nationally has for decades been slouching toward Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon--"where all the children are above average."



While Harvard's undergraduates enjoy higher grade point averages than others, the truth is that A's are now the most common college grade everywhere. Professors Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy's study of the last fifty years of college grades finds that, in 1960, 15 percent of all college grades were A's, which were outnumbered by D's and F's combined. The most common grade was a C. Today, an A is the most common grade given nationally (43 percent); A's and B's together now account for 73 percent of all college grades at public universities and 86 percent of all private school grades.

Easy A's, Disengaged Students

Rojstaczer and Healy's findings are corroborated by the parallel research of Arthur Levine, current president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation and past president of the Teachers College at Columbia University. Levine examined forty years of surveys of two-and four-year students. He found that in 1969, seven percent of students reported that they enjoyed A- grade-point-averages or higher. By 2009, that number had jumped to 41 percent.

One predictable result of years of grade inflation is the reaction of nonplussed prospective employers, who regularly complain that transcripts mean less and less. The deeper, more troubling result is described well by Rojstaczer and Healy: "When college students perceive that the average grade in a class will be an A, they do not try to excel. It is likely that the decline in student study hours [from an average of 24 hours a week in the '60s to 15 hours a week today], student engagement, and literacy are partly the result of diminished academic expectations."

How are students able to study less and yet receive nearly triple the percentage of A grades? Education researcher George Kuh cites the "disengagement compact" that he argues has been struck between professors and students: "I'll leave you alone if you leave me alone.' That is, I won't make you work too hard (read a lot, write a lot) so that I won't have to grade as many papers or explain why you are not performing well. . . . There seems to be a breakdown of shared responsibility for learning--on the part of faculty members who allow students to get by with far less than maximum effort, and on the part of students who are not taking full advantage of the resources institutions provide."

Columbia and Dartmouth Do It

What to do? In fact, a number of universities--cognizant that grade inflation debases student transcripts in the same manner that monetary inflation devalues the dollar--have begun to institute "honest transcripts"--transcripts that disclose not only the letter grade the student received for each class, but also the average grade that the professor gave the entire class, thereby helping "contextualize" what a given grade means in a given class. At present, Dartmouth, Columbia, the University of Indiana, and the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill have adopted some version of this.

Will honest transcripts exercise a salutary effect? It's too soon to say, given the small number of schools that have adopted the reform to date. But things are always bigger in Texas, where there is a movement in the legislature to require all of the state's public universities (which enroll nearly 600,000 students) to adopt honest transcripts. Championed this year by first-term state representative and former NFL player, Scott Turner, Texas' Honest Transcript was approved nearly unanimously by the Texas House of Representatives. It did not receive a hearing in the Senate, but Turner has already begun efforts to bring it back next session. If passed, supporters expect that the "Texas Transcript" will come quickly to be regarded as the gold standard by prospective employers, heightening transparency and, with it, public awareness of and indignation over decades of lax university standards.

In one sense, Turner's work has already gone national. His bill was just adopted as model legislation by the American Legislative Exchange Council, whose members include over 2,000 state legislators across the country. In addition to Turner's bringing the bill back in the 2015 Texas legislative session, other statehouses could soon pick up the grade-inflation ball and run with it.

Even so, will this transparency measure prove adequate to restoring sound grading standards? Academically Adrift's Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa offer reasons for doubt. Although they grant the "inadequate information on school performance being provided to students and parents" could be "remedied by greater institutional transparency," they find "no reason to expect that students and parents as consumers will prioritize undergraduate learning as an outcome. Rather, it is likely that other features of institutions will largely be focused on, including the quality of student residential and social life, as well as the ability with relatively modest investments of effort to earn a credential that can be subsequently exchanged for labor market--and potentially marriage market--success. . . ."

Arum and Roksa quote critics taking us to the heart of democracy's essential challenge: Defenders of the Honest Transcript bill

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Arum and Roksa's acute critique takes us to the heart of democracy's perennial challenge. Defenders of the honest transcript will rejoin that their faith in transparency springs from the same faith undergirding the defense of democratic self-government--that the people are capable of enlightened consent and that, in this case, the transparency wrought by honest transcripts will inform their consent and lead prospective students and their parents to be more discriminating in their choices of schools and majors, thereby reforming higher education from the ground up.

Granted, this may be a lanky reed on which to hang hopes of reform, but increasing the transparency on which full public accountability depends is the only game in town. Why? Universities have proven themselves unwilling or unable to reform from within. For the task of educating the educators, apparently only the people remain.

Thomas K. Lindsay directs the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and is editor of SeeThruEdu.com. He was deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities under George W. Bush. His recent book, *Investigating American Democracy*, was co-authored with Gary D. Glenn (Oxford University Press).

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