

## Grade Inflation in Engineering Education at Ohio University

Brian Manhire  
Ohio University

### Abstract

The results of a follow-up study updating a 2001 report of academic standards at Ohio University are presented, and findings for both the University and its Russ College of Engineering and Technology are described, contrasted and compared for 1993, 1999 and 2004. Causes of grade inflation in higher education as reported in the literature are described—with emphasis on recent literature attributing the continuation of grade inflation to the commodification and commercialization of higher education in America.

### I. Introduction

Over the past four decades, grade inflation has become a hallmark (pun intended) of American higher education. A significant body of literature now exists which suggests that grade inflation is a serious social problem; part of what Callahan calls *The Cheating Culture*.<sup>1</sup> Nearly everyone involved with higher education is now complicit in grade inflation one way or another, including professors, administrators, governing boards (of trustees, regents, etc.), students and their parents and their eventual employers, politicians and the public they serve. The immorality of this complicity speaks for itself and does not bode well for America.

Its causes have been attributed to events and phenomena of the sixties<sup>2-3</sup>—most notably resistance to the Vietnam War, the counterculture movement and civil rights advances. These in turn have spawned social/cultural impacts on higher education,<sup>4</sup> and in some cases society at large, such as: postmodernism,<sup>5-6</sup> the self-esteem movement,<sup>7-8</sup> radical feminism,<sup>9-10</sup> political correctness and multiculturalism,<sup>11-13</sup> *diversity*,<sup>14-16</sup> and the politicization<sup>16-21</sup> and commercialization<sup>22-28</sup> of American campuses. Indeed, the campus has served as a sanctuary, hothouse and social-engineering test-bed for these ideas since the sixties.

To take just one example from this list, consider postmodernism and its relationship to grade inflation. In his ground breaking book *Grade Inflation*, Johnson quotes<sup>29</sup> Billamoria's<sup>30</sup> postmodern justification of grade inflation:

Teachers' increasing awareness of the biases inherent in modern science is likely to affect their evaluations of students' acquisition of subject matter. Because disciplinary content domains are increasingly open to diverse interpretations and the inclusion of alternative representations, the scope of what is legitimate and appropriate knowledge in the academic enterprise is widened. The global questioning of tenets once held to be sin-

gularly true allows a larger number of students to display with greater diversity a legitimate and appropriate grasp of a widened content. Consequently, grade distributions are higher than they were before the advent of postmodern challenges....As postmodern perspectives gain greater legitimacy, teachers' openness to different conclusions and more diverse methods at arriving at them favor higher grade distributions because evaluation criteria are broadened and there are many, rather than a few, acceptable discourses in which students can engage. Students are empowered to challenge not just the insights but also the methods presented by dominant orthodoxies. Failure to display reason, analysis, objective consideration of evidence, and distance is much less used as an explanation for poor grades, as these keystones of modern science are themselves shown to be biased in favor of certain, but not other, views, and are hence no more valid than any other method of arriving at conclusions.<sup>29</sup>

Johnson aptly describes this turgid nonsense as "bizarre."<sup>29</sup> It's a prime example of what Leo calls pomobabble<sup>31</sup>—and it's Bogus Sophistry (BS) that's unlikely to instill confidence in, and respect for, academic standards in higher education.<sup>32</sup>

From a political perspective, in the past, the (political) Left's overall impact on the academic zeitgeist of American higher education<sup>19-21</sup> has been blamed for grade inflation. However, this is now changing as its ideological opposite is being implicated as well by Bok,<sup>22</sup> Kirp,<sup>23</sup> Twitchell<sup>24</sup> and Vedder<sup>25</sup> (and as foreshadowed by the earlier reports of Edmundson,<sup>27</sup> Bromell,<sup>28</sup> and Brooks<sup>29</sup> and as alluded to by de Russy and Fichera<sup>33</sup>). Higher education's adoption of free-market ideology favored by the Right, advocating a much more businesslike approach to higher education, has led to corporate-style campus management that pursues strategies which promote education as a vocational credentialing commodity for personal gain rather than a privilege benefiting the public weal.<sup>34</sup>

This new criticism includes Twitchell's<sup>24</sup> disturbing explanation of why (in part), as a result of the corporate-culture now in vogue in higher education, there is little resistance on campus (or off) to grade inflation nowadays. He argues that product *branding*, which is "a commercial process of storytelling"<sup>35</sup> and a fundamental business marketing practice, is now integral to recruiting undergraduate student-consumers and producing satisfied *and generous* alumni/alumnae. Consumer satisfaction is of course essential to each brand's pitch. Why branding in higher education? Because there are too many universities that are too much alike (fungible) and "There is simply too much supply, too many seats, not enough Marios [Mario Savio, used here as a metaphor for students in general]. The boom is over. Now the marketing begins."<sup>36</sup> And what's the brand's story? In marketing to prospective students:

The first matter to note is that good [premier] schools have little interest in the bachelor's degree. In fact, there's a direct ratio: the better the school, the less important the terminal undergraduate degree. The job of the student is to get in, and the job of the school is to get the student out into graduate school. The job of the elite schools is to certify that their students are worthy of further education in law, medicine, the arts, or business. . . . These schools essentially let the various tests—the LSAT, the MEDCAT, and the GRE—do that kind of work for them.<sup>37</sup>

[Schools] now make their case not by wielding the shame stick but by promising the edutainment carrot. . . . [T]he dominant institutions now attempt to gather an audience by promising good feelings . . . not fear and trepidation. No fire and brimstone, please. No harsh discipline. No shunning and no failure. . . .

Once we understand that it's all about getting *in*, not getting *through*, we will understand, and even accept such startling developments in the groves of academe as wholesale grade inflation; the outsourcing of services, including most of the teaching and even some of the library services; the selling of space—not just buildings and stadiums but cola-pouring rights and shoe contracts; admissions hijinks such as early admissions and 'tuition packages'; expensive propaganda such as viewbooks; and the gradual disappearance of need-blind admissions.

You can see this transformation by just glancing at the surface—at what in marketing is called *trade dress* and *wordmarks*. Competitive marketing explains why Colorado State University at Pueblo changed its name to the University of Southern Colorado, Beaver College became Arcadia University, Regents College became Excelsior, Hollins College became Hollins University, and the Penn State/University of Pennsylvania confusion is still a nightmare. Ohio University and Ohio State University have been in court about who owns the Ohio name. Since the experience is essentially fungible, the brand—the literal word—is crucial.<sup>38</sup>

Premier schools have to separate their students by generating a story about how special they are. That's why good schools care little about such hot-button issues as grade inflation, teaching quality, student recommendations, or even the curriculum. . . . They're not stupid. They have to protect the brand for incoming [and future] consumers [who hopefully become satisfied graduates/customers who later donate generously to their alma mater] because that's where they really compete.<sup>37</sup>

It's about getting *in*, not getting *through*? Care little about grade inflation, et cetera? Twitchell explains further:

From a branding point of view, what happens in the classroom is beside the point. I mean that literally. The old image of the classroom as Socratic ideal, with Mark Hopkins (future president at Williams) at one end of the log and the student at the other, is no longer an invoked idea. Higher Ed, Inc., is more like a sawmill. . . . And with grade inflation you can be comforted by the fact that it really makes no difference. . . .

Elite schools are no longer in the diploma business; that's for the convenience schools. And they are no longer in the cultural literacy department; that's for the mass media. Higher education is in the sponsored research and edutainment business; what colleges and universities offer is just one more thing that you shop for, one more thing that you consume, one more story you tell and are told. Not by happenstance do you hear students talking about how much the degree costs, how much it is worth, what a credit hour is going for, as if they were trying to decide between watching TV and going out to the movies. And that is very much how the schools themselves talk as they look for new sources of research or development funding. . . .

So we “do college” as we do lunch or do shopping or do church. That’s because for most students in the upper-tier schools the real activity is getting in and then continuing on into the professional schools. No one cares what is taught in grades 13 to 16, certainly not the professoriate or the students. Not by happenstance is one of the favorite words on any campus today “whatever,” usually delivered with a shrug. To some degree this observation is the result of an education that teaches the equality of not just points of view but subjects of study. I’m not really judging here, for this *whateverness* may just as well be the result of emancipation from rigidity as it is from being overstimulated, as it is from perhaps just being really tolerant. I only point it out because it may be the appropriate response to a pattern of learning by consuming.

Understanding this sangfroid also explains why no one on either side of the lectern cares much about the curriculum. To the outside world this coolness may be perplexing, but not to those of us in the academy.<sup>39</sup>

About the curriculum nowadays, he goes on to say:

To be sure, the nonacademic world may be momentarily aghast. Is this the place to be catechizing or teaching how to write a sentence? But cries of dumbing down or politicizing the classroom miss the point. No one cares about what is taught because that is not our charge. . . . We are in the business of creating a total environment, delivering an experience, gaining satisfied customers. The classroom reflects this.<sup>40</sup>

So, in a tacit arrangement, agreeable to both buyers and sellers, grade inflation serves as an ersatz proxy for the high academic achievement customers demand as part of the “experience” they purchase so dearly.<sup>25, 34, 41</sup> Branding has made un-inflated grades obsolete. Grades other than the highest detract from the “best” educational experience on offer by creating unwanted unexpected student-customer disappointment, discomfort and dissatisfaction—outcomes that are certainly *not* to be identified with *any* school’s brand. Traditional full-spectrum grading hurts the brand and that’s verboten. Grade inflation is an essential part of every brand so efforts to combat it are counterproductive.

Inflated grades are now part of the education-commodity-package, and savvy consumers strive to purchase those products on offer by the “best” brands. In this sense, grade inflation itself is a commodity. But it’s a shoddy one (think costume jewelry) that’s cheaply made (the easiest grades to give are high ones), highly coveted (students are obsessed over getting the highest grades<sup>1</sup>) and paid for dearly<sup>25, 34, 41</sup>; and unfortunately, all of this is evidently widely perceived to be acceptably harmless and apparently, ethical<sup>42</sup>—a truly postmodern conundrum indeed!

So, originally spawned as an undesirable byproduct of the Left, grade inflation is now exploited through the free-market business behavior of higher education advocated by the Right. From the perspective of over thirty years in the professoriate (and as an undergraduate university student during the sixties), the irony of this evolution is not lost on this writer.

Grade inflation has no virtue and this should be of great concern to everyone. But apparently it isn’t, at least not enough to provoke much action to remedy it—and this in itself is cause for serious concern about higher education’s priorities and future direction.

Should engineering educators be concerned about grade inflation? Yes, for practical reasons such as its limited utility in the assessment of learning for accreditation purposes. Because inflated grades have no purchase in assessing educational efficacy, grading doesn't (and shouldn't) play a more explicit and important role in the ABET processes used to accredit our educational programs. Professors work directly with their students. They are in the best, most intimate position to measure and assess the merit of what their students are learning. But inflated grades are too blunt an instrument for this purpose because of their poor resolution (they're limited to mostly just two grades: A and B, neither of which used to mean "average").

But even more important are fundamental social questions related to grade inflation's impact on credibility, accountability, responsibility and, last but not least, ethics.<sup>42</sup> For example, does grade inflation set a good example of candid evaluation of academic and professional performance for our students to follow and is engineering practice, and for that matter society itself, best served by it?

Be that as it may, there should still be interest in learning more about grade inflation, even if only as a social phenomenon worthy of scholarly study—which is not to say that there are few who believe grade inflation is seriously wrong. Johnson's book,<sup>29</sup> *The Initiative to End Grade Inflation*,<sup>43</sup> Rojstaczer's *GradeInflation.com* Web site<sup>44</sup> and the contributions of many others,<sup>\*</sup> are worthy efforts to better understand grade inflation.

And better understanding was the motivation for both a formal study of grade inflation at Ohio University in 2000<sup>45-46</sup> and this five-year update.

## II. Grade Inflation at Ohio University

In the spring of 2000, Ohio University's central administration commissioned a study of grade inflation at the University. The Teacher Evaluation of Learning Committee (TELC) was formed for this purpose by former Ohio University Provost Sharon Stephens Brehm.

In addition to holding discussions and considering testimony, the TELC gathered voluminous undergraduate grade data across many cohorts of the University. Undergraduate grades were collected for the fall quarters (terms) of 1993 and 1999 for the University en masse as well as for the following sectors: the chief academic divisions (colleges) of the University, course levels (i.e., the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior levels), faculty tenure status (i.e., tenured faculty, non-tenured tenure-track faculty and faculty not eligible for tenure) and faculty sex.

The TELC's findings were reported to the provost in June of 2000.<sup>46</sup> Here however, only findings for the University's Russ College of Engineering and Technology (RCENT), and for comparison purposes, the University (OU) are presented—and updated to include 2004.

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\* For example, see the many cited in this writer's earlier work.<sup>32, 42, 45</sup>

Undergraduate grade data are shown in Table 1. This data was amassed on a per-credit basis to avoid introducing spurious bias into the course-grade descriptive statistics which would result from counting courses carrying different credits equally.<sup>47</sup> By assembling the data this way, the grade measurements are compatible with the grade-point-average (GPA) calculation widely used in American higher education.

Grade	Fall 1993		Fall 1999		Fall 2004	
	RCENT (%)	OU (%)	RCENT (%)	OU (%)	RCENT (%)	OU (%)
A	14.73	19.89	24.27	22.68	23.19	24.95
A-	11.06	12.62	13.46	13.22	12.56	13.79
B+	12.49	11.67	13.14	12.12	11.76	11.96
B	17.03	16.28	15.70	15.78	15.78	15.09
B-	10.09	8.81	7.58	8.44	10.41	8.82
C+	7.97	6.91	5.67	6.29	6.65	5.92
C	10.75	9.47	8.45	8.49	7.55	7.34
C-	3.42	4.01	2.27	3.47	3.45	3.30
D+	2.25	2.05	1.86	1.88	1.25	1.77
D	2.87	2.97	1.98	2.68	2.39	2.33
D-	1.14	1.18	0.98	1.12	1.28	1.20
F	6.20	4.16	4.64	3.82	3.74	3.54

Table 1. Fall Quarter Letter-Grade Percentages, 1993, 1999 and 2004

Table 2 tabulates the coarser whole-letter-grade counterparts *A*, *B*, *C*, *D* and *F* formed by aggregating the percentages of each letter grade in Table 1 with its  $\pm$  gradations. In other words, the percentages tabulated in Table 1 for *B*-, *B* and *B*+ are added together to obtain corresponding percentages in the *B* grade-range category (row) of Table 2, and so forth.

Grade	1993		1999		2004	
	RCENT (%)	OU (%)	RCENT (%)	OU (%)	RCENT (%)	OU (%)
A	25.79	32.51	37.73	35.90	35.75	38.74
B	39.61	36.76	36.42	36.34	37.95	35.87
C	22.14	20.39	16.39	18.25	17.65	16.56
D	6.26	6.20	4.82	5.68	4.92	5.30
F	6.20	4.16	4.64	3.82	3.74	3.54

Table 2. Fall Quarter Whole-Letter-Grade Percentages, 1993, 1999 and 2004

Table 2's data are displayed in the histograms of Figures 1 and 2.

RCENT whole-letter-grade percentages for fall 1993, fall 1999 and fall 2004 are shown in Figure 1; OU counterpart percentages are shown in Figure 2.

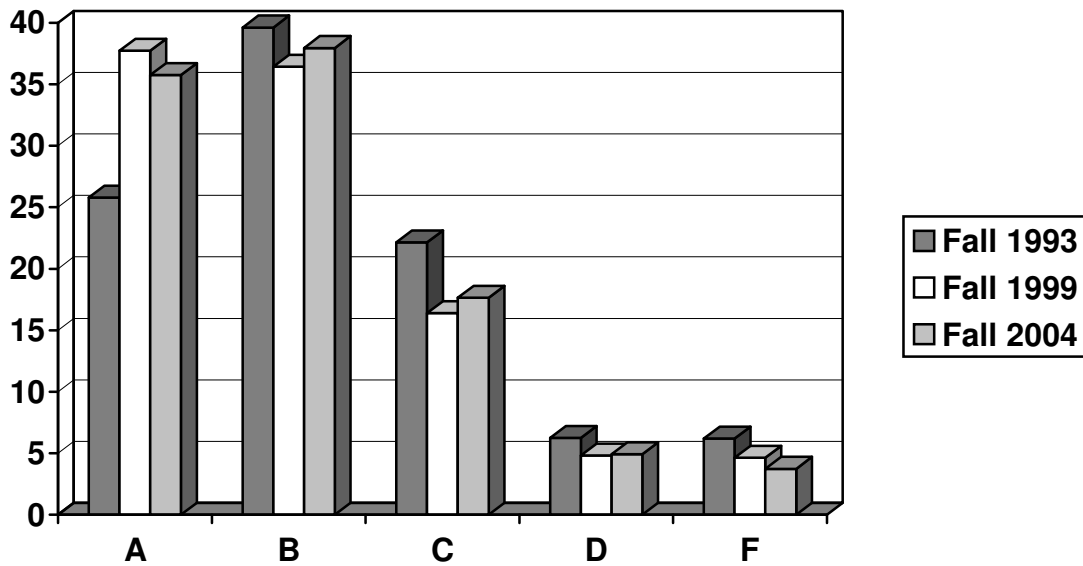


Figure 1. RCENT Whole-Letter-Grade Percentages, 1993, 1999 and 2004

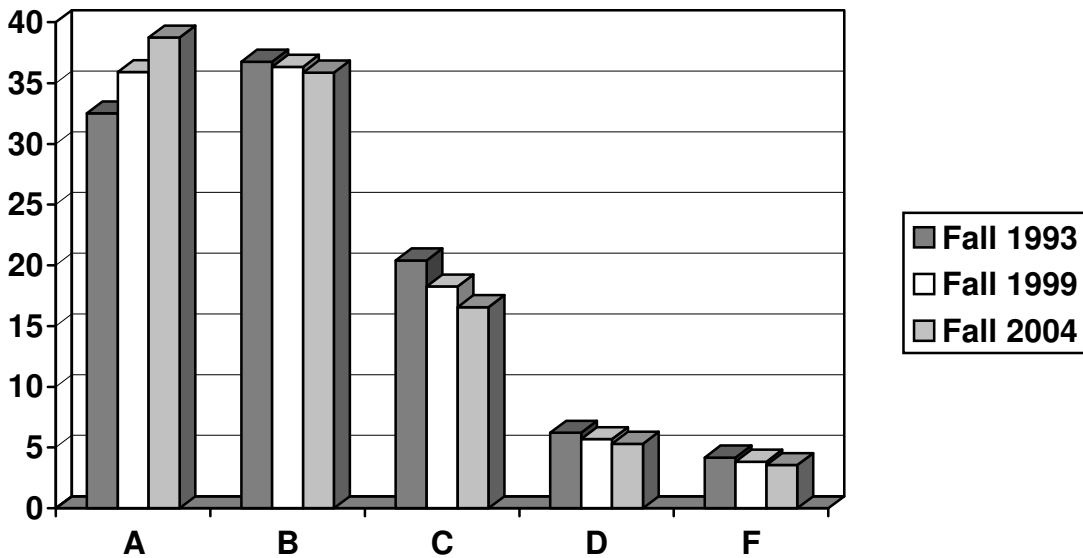


Figure 2. OU Whole-Letter-Grade Percentages, 1993, 1999 and 2004

In the TELC study, the academic aptitude of students was measured by way of SAT and ACT standardized test scores as well as high school class standing and found to be essentially constant over the period 1993-1999.<sup>45</sup>

Grade-point-averages (using numerical weights of 4.0 for A, 3.0 for B, 2.0 for C, 1.0 for D and 0.0 for F) for the whole-letter-grade histograms for 2004 are 2.97 and 3.01 for RCENT and OU respectively. They're 2.98 and 2.95 for 1999; and 2.73 and 2.87 for 1993.

In 2000, the TELC deemed the 1993 versus 1999 letter-grade changes and other findings unsatisfactory and detrimental to the University's mission.<sup>46</sup> Since then, RCENT has improved somewhat, which is encouraging; but overall, grade inflation has grown worse at the University (OU).

### III. Conclusion

Grade inflation continues at Ohio University and elsewhere, likely to no one's surprise. It's taken for granted nowadays; it's just business as usual. Too many students obsess over (rather than earn) *inflated* grades that in the past they wouldn't have deserved and ironically, have far less cachet now anyway. Most everyone knows grade inflation is a sham but few seem ashamed of or even embarrassed by it. And if it's not best described as a commodity itself, perhaps it can be categorized as a (tacit) *competitive amenity*, like so many others on American campuses nowadays that have little to do with learning. *Competitive amenities?* Twichell explains:

To get the students needed for better ratings, which draws better students, who boost external giving, which finances new projects, raises salaries, and increases the endowment for getting better students, which gets better rankings, which . . . , the second-tier school must perpetually treat the student as a transient consumer. That's why good schools, really good schools, have all that stuff, all those *things*, that have nothing whatsoever to do with their oft-stated lofty mission. There is even a term for these things inside the industry, *competitive amenities*—things such as Olympic quality gyms that few students use, Broadway-style theaters that are empty much of the time, personal trainers, glitzy student unions with movie theaters, and endless playing fields mostly covered with grass, not athletes. Just take a tour of any Ivy League school and observe not just the facilities but how much use they get.

This marketing madness is now occurring on the other side of the barbell with the mass suppliers getting into the act. So the University of Houston has a \$53 million wellness center with a five-story climbing wall, Washington State University has the largest Jacuzzi on the West Coast (it holds fifty-three students), Ohio State is building a \$140 million complex featuring batting cages, rope courses, and the now-necessary climbing wall, and Southern Mississippi is planning a full-fledged water park. These schools, according to Moody's, are selling billions of dollars of bonds for construction that has nothing whatsoever to do with education. But it's all about generating difference, about branding.<sup>48</sup>

"If everyone agreed to cut physical plant and amenities by half, could we still provide the same education?" asks Professor Winston at Williams College. He knows the answer is yes. But understanding the marketing machinery operating Higher Ed, Inc., may explain why this doesn't happen. Plus it may explain some recent developments at universities, such as (1) the predictable and supposedly uncontrollable eruption of grade inflation and the concomitant charade of teaching evaluations, (2) the single-minded outsourcing of almost every conceivable aspect of Higher Ed Inc., (3) the selling off of academic space



as the campus becomes commercialized: Georgia Tech put McDonald's golden arches on the floor of its coliseum, Columbia University lent its name to a for-profit company offering distance learning classes over the Internet, The University of California accepted a research grant from a pharmaceutical company to research new drugs and give the corporation the right to get the first look at the results, and faculty members have titles such as Weyerhaeuser Professor of Forestry, (4) the loss of any shared nationwide curriculum, (5) the collapse of good schools at the low end of a cohort, and, of course, (6) the impact of shopping for branded education not just as a way to enter the institution (early admissions, negotiated tuition) but as a method of choosing a course of study. What looks like dumbing down is in reality a predictable effect of competitive branding.<sup>49</sup>

With grade inflation built into the brand, now nearly *everyone and anyone* can purchase faux marks of academic distinction, high grades, as part of the package on offer—and what brand could *not* build this amenity into its product line and remain competitive nowadays? Early in the history of grade inflation, the deception was a bonanza for the truly academically undistinguished. And it was unfair and unethical<sup>42</sup> because it stole the cachet of high academic marks of distinction from the talented, gifted and deserving and gave it to the mediocre, dilators or worse. But the cat's been out of the bag for some time now. Inflated grades are phony and everybody knows it. The deception is over and what remains is decadence.

Today's grades no longer mean what they once did, just as higher education's demographics are no longer what they once were. Vedder explains:

Grade inflation, combined with a probably smaller stock of basic knowledge, means today's students know a bit less coming into college—but are evaluated more highly than their parents were. Many long-time college professors, this one included, would argue that in some real sense academic standards have fallen, making the job of imparting a given level of skills or knowledge more difficult than it was several decades ago. As the proportion of students going to college rises, by mathematical necessity a growing percentage will come from the middle or lower echelons of the high school grade distribution, meaning they are less prepared (in a relative sense) than the typical student of a generation earlier.<sup>50</sup>

Times have changed and be it an ironic postmodern *Higher Ed, Inc.* enclave of the Left or not, so has American higher education and America's expectations of it.<sup>51-65</sup> And despite claims to the contrary, un-inflated grades are now unwelcome in America. What other explanation is there for the fact that of the five traditional gradations (A through F) of academic merit available, essentially only three (A through C; but mostly A and B) are actually used (with B being average) and that this continues unabated? The legacy of traditional grading is its de facto obsolescence through grade inflation over the past four decades. And while it's always been an easy target for criticism, there has *never* been the critical mass of concern about grade inflation needed to stop it (a national character flaw perhaps, but a fact nevertheless).

Nonetheless, surely *something* should be done about grade inflation. Continuing to do nothing about it is disgraceful. Remember: most everyone now knows what grade inflation is and common sense tells them what it *really* means about the integrity of American higher education, if not American society itself.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, it's Scarecrow's *diploma* that makes him smart; and it's common sense that tells us that this is just entertainment, that it's fantasy, not reality. Inflated grades are more or less the postmodern counterpart of Scarecrow's diploma. Near the end of the film, from his rising hot-air balloon, the Wizard (Professor Marvel) cries out in exasperation "This is a highly irregular procedure!"<sup>66</sup> as he accidentally leaves Oz without Dorothy and Toto. So too is grade inflation "a highly irregular procedure!" Indeed it is leaving academic standards behind.

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BRIAN MANHIRE

Brian Manhire ([manhire@ohio.edu](mailto:manhire@ohio.edu), <http://www.ent.ohiou.edu/~manhire/>) is a professor of electrical engineering at Ohio University.