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Simple Change in GPA Records Would Better Measure Student Ability

Description

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Newswise - A simple two-tier indexing method developed by two Central Michigan University faculty members may help lessen grade inflation problems plaguing colleges and universities across the United States.

CMU faculty members James Felton, finance and law, and Peter Koper, English, advocate using two grade point averages on transcripts - the traditional grade point earned in the course, which they call the "Nominal GPA," and another GPA based on a comparison of the Nominal GPA and the average grade given in that section of the course during that semester. They call this indexed second number the "Real GPA."

"Placing a simply calculated Real GPA alongside a Nominal GPA is statistically less sophisticated than some other proposed methods, but the simplicity is an essential component of its utility," said Felton. "The Real GPA makes the relative degree of inflation in a transcript immediately visible and creates positive pressures on academic standards."

Felton and Koper think that, over the long term, this would challenge the status quo of the academic system by discouraging professors from assigning inflated grades and students from seeking out courses in which they could get high grades, although the Real GPA would be much lower because the grades in the course were inflated.

The addition of an indexed Real GPA to transcripts would make grade inflation visible to evaluators. In the current system, for example, a scholarship selection committee or a personnel manager looking at the transcripts of students with high GPAs might have difficulty determining which of the applicants deserved consideration. Inflated grades make it hard to differentiate those who have taken demanding courses from those who have not. A two-tier grading system would make such judgments easier.

"Grades are inherently ambiguous evaluations of performance with no absolute connection to educational achievement," acknowledges Koper.

This lack of reliability is due to many factors, including different instructors in the same course, differences in difficulty of subject matter, and differences in ability and behavior of students. Some critics say GPAs only show how well students have acclimated to the biases of a dominant group or individual.

Some would abolish grades entirely, but they still have value, said the faculty members. They propose to make grades more meaningful by creating incentives not to inflate them.

"As long as the political demands on the educational system require some assessment of educational performance, the focus should be on grades since other forms are also limited and subject to political pressures," said Felton. "Grades are not going to be eliminated, but the system can be simplified to reduce or avoid the pressures on students to take courses that inflate grades and on faculty who receive higher course evaluations and professional benefits from positive student evaluations."

The terms "nominal" and "real" are adopted from economics, where the actual gross domestic product for a given year is called the Nominal GDP, and Real GDP measures production in constant prices.

Their study, "Real GPA and Nominal GPA: A Simple Adjustment That Compensates for Grade Inflation," will be published in *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, Vol. 30, 2005.

Duke University's average grade was 2.7 in 1961 and 3.3 in 1994. The grade point average at The University of Washington went from 2.31 in 1964 to 3.12 in 1996 and at The University of Chicago rose from 2.5 in 1965 to 3.26 in 1999.

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