

## DISHONOURING THE GRADUATES

Harvard's solution to the problem of grade inflation might simply make matters worse\*

By Gil Troy, Professor of History, University of McGill

As college students step up to receive their diplomas this spring, their future employers should be worrying about what modern transcripts tell about a student's performance. In too many universities, the "gentleman's C" of yesteryears has become the modern gentle-person's B-plus or even A-minus.

The spectre of grade inflation is haunting the modern academy, spooking even Harvard University, "the McGill of America". Echoing the shopaholic's cry – "stop me before I shop again" – last month Harvard professors proclaimed: "stop me before I grade too generously!"

In 2001, 90 per cent of Harvard's graduates were awarded honours. After a year-long debate, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences decided to change its grading scale, and to set an arbitrary limit on the number of honours degrees it hands out every year.

Sadly, the university has chosen a cosmetic solution that might even exacerbate the problem. This Harvardian sidestep is typical of how universities throughout North America often dodge serious educational challenges.

The central reform involves a recalibrated grading system. Harvard's old system was graduated, with major jumps marking the boundaries between grades. The New York Times reported that the change "will narrow the difference between an A-minus and a B-plus, which the faculty hopes will make a B more palatable." The University's own Harvard Gazette spoke vaguely about trying to remove "any pressure on grades."

Apparently, students have not become smarter, only more aggressive grade-grubbers. But if Harvard professors have been caving under pressure, repeatedly jumping a clear barrier from a B-plus to an A-minus, how will these malleable souls react to the pressure that comes from a desperate undergraduate who missed an A or B by just a whisker? Having a clear barrier required faculty members to clarify just what A-level work versus B—level work, and so on down the line.

The great weakness of a continuous grading scale is that a slight statistical hiccup can have dramatic consequences, because whatever scale you use, there remains a huge symbolic difference between an A- and a B+. At McGill, veteran professors often warn rookie teaching assistants to think long and hard before assigning numerical grades that are just short of the margin. Those are the grades that generate the most student complaints and lobbying. The problem is especially acute in humanities courses. I can tell the difference between an

A paper and a B paper, I cannot distinguish nearly so well between a paper worth 3.7 versus one worth 3.6 on a four-point scale, or one worth 82 versus an 83 on a 100 point scale.

Clearer standards would do far more good than blurring boundaries. The crisis here is educational not statistical. Professors must teach students that grades are not "goodies" to be solicited, but marks to be earned. Teachers who worry whether a B is "palatable" have failed to explain what grades are all about. Low grades are not punitive, they are indicative of how student's output, regardless of intentions or efforts, measures up to what should be reasonably clear standards. Hard graders are not sadists although most are masochists, for it is far more time-consuming to grade papers carefully, painstakingly, constructively and critically, than to simply hand out As will-nilly.

Rigorous grading runs against numerous cultural trends. Students feel enormous pressure to succeed and to tend to view each individual grade as a make-or-break indicator of whether they will be able to survive in the world. Many modern students have been coddled by a self-esteem industry that begins in first grade when spelling mistakes go uncorrected, "so as not to discourage the child."

Then, too, teachers often have professional incentives to be softies. The consumer mentality that has overtaken the modern university often confuses popularity with good teaching. Too many professors play to the crowd, with an eye on the consumer surveys students fill out at the end of a semester. (I always take comment: "hard grader but great teacher" as the highest of compliments.)

At a time when professors throughout North America have to re-think grading strategies, the Harvard reforms seem to abdicate responsibility. And limiting the number of honours degrees available every year is a little like putting a shopaholic on an allowance, without really addressing the underlying issues.

Unfortunately, this is all part of a broader trend demonstrated in some institutions by speech codes, and in other institutions by awarding tenure on the basis of artificial quantitative criteria. University teachers must stop turning to big brother to set limits and standards. Instead we need to engage in the difficult daily work of assessing, balancing, and deciding, even on murky issues. In fact, this reform suggests that maybe it is not just the grade-grubbing students who are soft and spoiled.

\* (NDLR: this article originally appeared in the Montreal Gazette, June 15, 2002)