



# Appendix G:

## Exploring the effects of high grades

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The *Easy A's* report considers whether high grades accurately reflect teacher candidates' preparedness to teach, and whether the assignments underpinning those grades are designed to maximize effective feedback. The report provides compelling evidence that teacher candidates earn disproportionately high grades and are likely not receiving the best possible feedback.

However, awarding consistently high grades to teacher candidates may create a risk aside from the assignments to which they are linked. Previous research, described below, has found several hazards attributed to granting consistently high grades. Although we do not think these issues are directly relevant to the report, they do merit attention in any discussion of overwhelmingly high grades.

### Grades don't equal learning

A wealth of high grades diminishes the value of these grades as a signal of academic excellence. Some research has rejected the notion that higher grades necessarily represent greater student learning. A comparison between the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)'s findings on their benchmarks of "deep approaches to learning" and students' GPAs found no relationship; one explanation is that "deep learning is not a necessary condition for a high GPA."<sup>1</sup> Additionally, grades are not consistent across instructors, programs, or institutions. It is generally accepted that some professors are more challenging graders than other, and a 4.0 grade point average (GPA) at some institutions represents a greater feat than at others, one of the main reasons that many institutions of higher education use standardized tests such as the SAT and GRE to compare across applicants.

One implication of divorcing grades from learning is that high GPAs will become less meaningful to would-be employers. Employers who consider students' grades when hiring have less information if everyone has a high grade, which helps students with lower academic abilities (who nonetheless receive high grades) and harms students with higher academic abilities.<sup>2</sup>

- 1 Campbell, C. M. & Cabrera, A. F. (2012). *Making the mark: Are grades and deep learning related?*, p. 14. Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Las Vegas, NV. The authors note that another possible explanation is that the measures of deep learning may actually be measuring something other than deep learning.
- 2 Babcock, P. (2010). Real costs of nominal grade inflation? New evidence from student course evaluations. *Economic Inquiry*, 48(4), 983-996.

## Widespread high grades may hinder learning

In addition to their failure to *signal* learning, awarding consistently high grades may, in fact, *impede* learning. As a Princeton University committee on reducing grade inflation reported: “Grading done without careful calibration and discrimination is, if nothing else, uninformative and therefore not useful; at worst, it actively discourages students from rising to the challenge to do their best work.”<sup>3</sup>

Several studies find that expected high grades are associated with reduced student effort, likely leading to decreased student learning. One study found that students spend about 50 percent less time studying when they expect that the average grade in a course will be an A versus a C.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, a study of students’ expectations (rather than behavior) found that students expected to study more (and for the class to generally earn lower grades) in more difficult courses.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, higher standards may not lead to greater academic perseverance: A longitudinal study that followed high school students for more than a decade found that higher standards for coursework were associated with higher test scores, although not with higher educational attainment.<sup>6</sup>

## Implications for teacher candidates

Koedel’s work on teacher candidates’ grades (referenced in the body of *Easy A’s*) draws a connection between high teacher candidate grades and exceptionally high teacher evaluation scores once they enter the classroom. He hypothesizes that teacher candidates who go on to become teachers may rarely receive substantive, critical feedback that compels them to improve their practice.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas teacher evaluations used to simply label teachers as satisfactory or unsatisfactory (and almost always favored the former),<sup>8</sup> states and districts are increasingly moving toward more discerning rating systems. New teacher evaluations are often based on a combination of student outcome data, observations (frequently by multiple observers using a strict rubric), and other measures. These new evaluations are designed to distinguish between more and less effective teachers — and it is not expected that a large percentage of teachers will fall into the highest bracket. When candidates complete teacher preparation programs having been consistently told that their work is not only adequate but exceptional, these programs have failed to prepare them for both the work of teaching and the candid evaluation feedback they are likely to receive.

- 3 This document was quoted in Kjos, L. (2004, April 23). Analysis: Princeton mulls grade limits. *UPI*. Retrieved 17 April 2014 from [http://www.upi.com/Business\\_News/Security-Industry/2004/04/23/Analysis-Princeton-mulls-grade-limits/UPI-53941082752284/#ixzz2zA9hDQRF](http://www.upi.com/Business_News/Security-Industry/2004/04/23/Analysis-Princeton-mulls-grade-limits/UPI-53941082752284/#ixzz2zA9hDQRF).
- 4 Babcock, P. (2010). Real costs of nominal grade inflation? New evidence from student course evaluations. *Economic Inquiry*, 48(4), 983-996.
- 5 Ansborg, P. I. (2001). Students’ Expectations of Workload and Grade Distribution by Class Difficulty.
- 6 Betts, J. R., & Grogger, J. (2003). The impact of grading standards on student achievement, educational attainment, and entry-level earnings. *Economics of Education Review*, 22, 343-352.
- 7 Koedel (Koedel, C. (2011). Grading Standards in Education Departments at Universities. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 19(23)).
- 8 Aaronson, D., Barrow, L., & Sander, W. (2007). Teachers and student achievement in the Chicago public high schools. *Journal of Labor Economics*, 25(1), 95-135; Goldhaber, D. D., Brewer, D. J., & Anderson, D. J. (1999). A three-way error components analysis of educational productivity. *Education Economics*, 7(3), 199-208; Rivkin, S. G., Hanushek, E. A., & Kain, J. F. (2005). Teachers, schools, and academic achievement. *Econometrica*, 73(2), 417-458; Weisberg, D., Sexton, S., Mulhern, J., Keeling, D., Schunck, J., Palcisco, A., & Morgan, K. (2009). The widget effect: Our national failure to acknowledge and act on differences in teacher effectiveness. *New Teacher Project*.