

**DEFLATING GRADY**  
**Part I – Maintaining Standards**

The following is an e-mail exchange between Prof. Grady Rizeng and his chair, Lois Marks, that Prof. Rizeng has forwarded to Dean Nolira.

-----Original Message-----

Sent: Sunday, January 09, 2005 11:31 PM  
To: A. C. Nolira  
Subject: FW: RE: RE: RE: RE: Maintaining our standards

Dean Nolira,  
Can you believe what I have to put up with? I'm begging you to do something about the way I'm treated by this tyrant!

Grady Rizeng  
University Distinguished Professor

-----Original Message-----

Sent: Sunday, January 09, 2005 8:25 PM  
To: Grady Rizeng  
Subject: RE: RE: RE: RE: Maintaining our standards

I'm not saying that. What concerns me is that your grades reflect a different standard and that has all sorts of implications. Let's meet tomorrow morning at 8 to discuss grade inflation. That's not too early for you I hope.

Lois Marks  
Department Chair

-----Original Message-----

Sent: Sunday, January 09, 2005 3:22 PM  
To: Lois Marks  
Subject: RE: RE: RE: Maintaining our standards

But as you said yourself, we get really good students. Do you really think half of them should get C's or lower?

Grady Rizeng  
University Distinguished Professor

-----Original Message-----

Sent: Saturday, January 08, 2005 8:19 PM  
To: Grady Rizeng  
Subject: RE: RE: Maintaining our standards

That's fine, but perhaps you need to redefine the criteria for excellence. Do you think this is Lake Wobegon where all the students are above average? From your grades, I can't tell who the best students are.

Lois Marks  
Department Chair

-----Original Message-----

Sent: Friday, January 07, 2005 4:53 PM  
To: Lois Marks  
Subject: RE: Maintaining our standards

Absolutely. With all due respect, I don't accept the premise that low grades necessarily mean high standards. They could mean unreasonable standards or poor teaching. I have taught my courses for many years and have well-defined criteria for an A. If everyone achieves those criteria, then everyone gets an A. Of course the converse is true as well.

Grady Rizeng  
University Distinguished Professor

-----Original Message-----

Sent: Friday, January 07, 2005 3:13 PM  
To: Grady Rizeng  
Subject: Maintaining our standards

As you should be aware, this department is well known for its rigor. We attract excellent students and they work hard. For many years the average grades given in this department have been among the lowest on campus, which reflects our demanding standards.

My reason for writing you is that grades in this department have risen in recent years and the grades you give are among the highest in the department—63% A's and B's. Do you really think your students deserved those grades?

Lois Marks  
Department Chair

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1. Individually: In 25 words or less, write down in a complete sentence your definition of *grade inflation*.
  2. As a group, share your definitions and come to consensus on a definition that your group should write down.

## **DEFLATING GRADY**

### **Part II – Midnight Thoughts**

Somehow Grady Rizeng couldn't get to sleep. He had just ripped off the e-mail to the dean to vent his frustration. He kept thinking about his 8 am meeting with Dr. Marks. He felt blind-sided by the insinuation that the grades he gave his students were too high. He had never looked at his grades over time or in comparison with grades given by his faculty colleagues. Never had he thought he was being easy on the students and their course evaluations suggested they had worked hard in his courses. *“What evidence does she have that the increase in grades in the department is due to my courses or a decrease in my standards? Couldn't it simply be that our students are getting better? There are all sorts of reason that grades might be rising.”* At 1 am he got out of bed and logged on to the Internet to see what he could find out that would help him later in the morning.

Meanwhile, Lois Marks was having second thoughts. *“Did I come down too hard? I assumed Grady's high teaching ratings reflected easy grading standards. Did I jump to an incorrect conclusion? I need to check into this a bit more.”* And she logged on to the Internet as well.

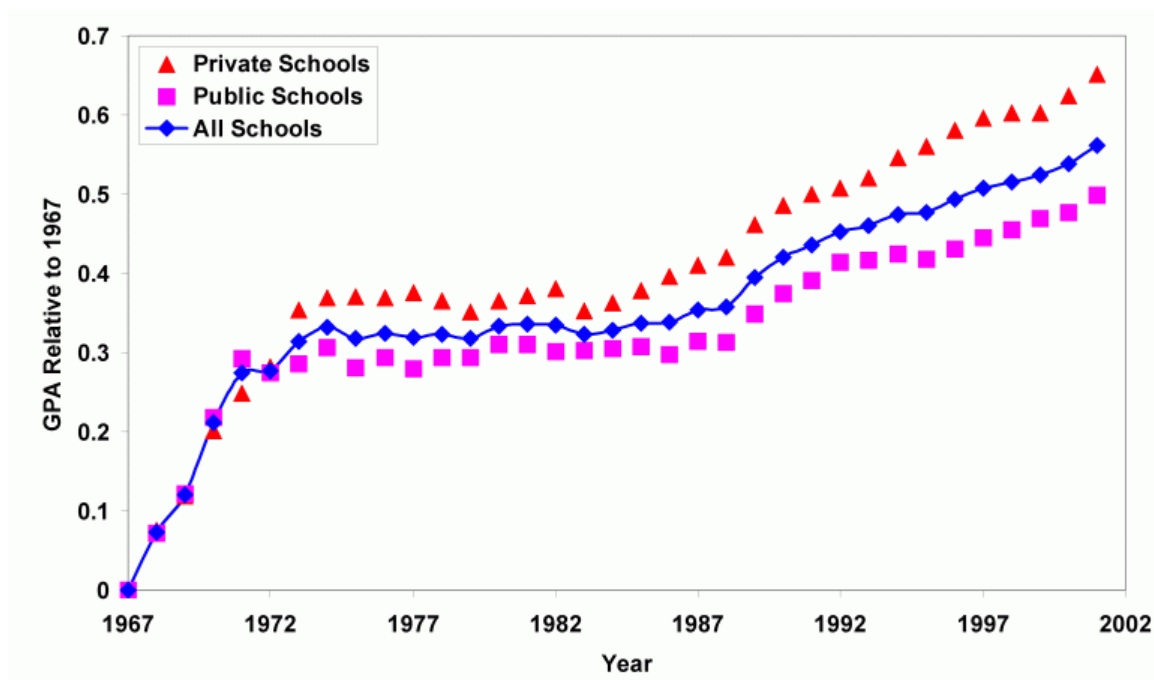
1. What information should Prof. Rizeng bring to the meeting with his chair?
2. What evidence would Chairperson Marks need to demonstrate grade inflation?

## DEFLATING GRADY

### Part III – What’s the Evidence?

Within a few minutes of googling “grade inflation” both Prof. Rizeng and Chair Marks found the following graph. The data show the average grades received by college students at US public and private schools over the past 30 years.

Make a list of questions (learning issues) you have about these data.



This graph comes from [www.gradeinflation.com](http://www.gradeinflation.com).

# Characteristics of Good Learning Issues

*"...once you have learned to ask questions - relevant and appropriate and substantial questions - you have learned how to learn and no one can keep you from learning what ever you want or need to know."*

Neil Postman & Charles Weingartner (1969)  
in *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*.

Knowledge is power (Bacon). All of us have vast areas of ignorance and we will never come close to knowing more than a very small fraction of what there is to know. Nevertheless, being aware of what we don't know is also a type of power because it enables us to focus our learning where it counts when we have problems to solve. The more adept we become at defining what we need to know in away that it can be pursued, the easier it is to quickly locate needed information and the better problem solvers we become.

Most of us are reluctant to reveal our ignorance. Who wants to look "stupid?" A major tenet of problem-based learning is that learning occurs best in an environment where we can admit our knowledge gaps and do something about them by working together to achieve understanding. In problem-based learning, our knowledge gaps become our learning issues. The way we go about defining learning issues influences the depth of understanding we achieve. What are the characteristics of a good learning issue?

1. Presented in the form of a **question** or **series of questions**.
2. **Focused** so that it seeks specific information.
3. Constructed so that it asks an **answerable** question.
4. Pursues information that is **relevant** to the problem.
5. Goes beyond superficial knowledge to probe **conceptual** issues.
6. Often set in a **context** that provides direction. **Why** is the question important?

**DEFLATING GRADY**  
**Part IV – Who Cares?**

As an individual, match the statements below with the following stakeholders. Then compare with other in your group and come to consensus.

- \_\_\_ Chairman Marks
- \_\_\_ Dean Nolira
- \_\_\_ Student Newspaper Reporter
- \_\_\_ Faculty Union Representative
- \_\_\_ Parent of a Student
- \_\_\_ Alumnus who hires Graduates

A: “This is a complex problem. We need to create a culture where learning not grades is the focus.”

B: “This is an academic freedom issue. They can’t tell Grady what to do.”

C: “In addition to grades, the transcript should include a score from a nationally standardized exam in the discipline.”

D: “Why is Prof. Rizeng being harassed by his department when he’s a great teacher.”

E: “What are Joe’s chances of getting into medical school if they limit the number of ‘A’s’?”

F: “Without uniform and demanding standards, grades aren’t worth a thing.”

**DEFLATING GRADY**  
**Part V – What’s Our Position?**

The following questions are offered to help your stakeholder group focus its attention and define its position on grade inflation.

How does grade inflation hurt your stakeholder group?  
How big is the problem? Is it getting worse?

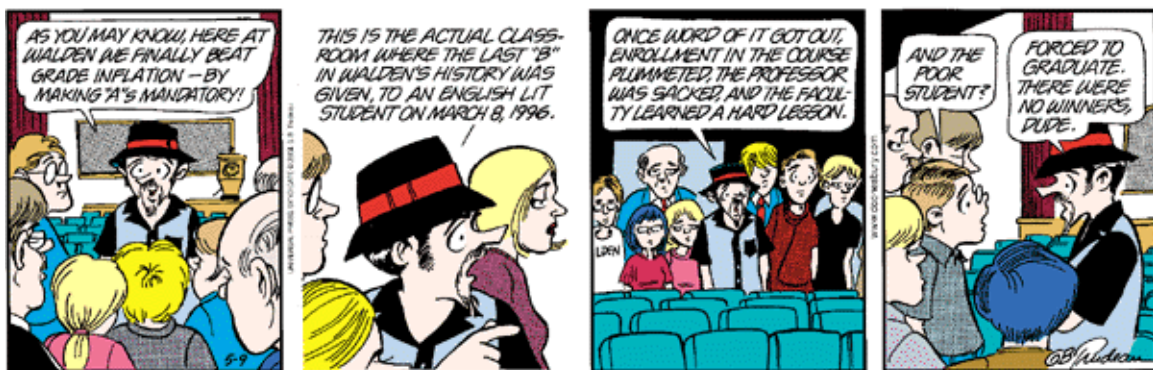
Members in your stakeholder group need to be prepared to articulate the position and provide support for it when they return to their respective home groups.

## DEFLATING GRADY Part VI – Formulating a Plan

*(Return to home groups.)*

Princeton University's faculty recently approved a proposal to limit the number of "A's" in any department to 35%. Your diverse group of stakeholders has been charged to do better and come up with an effective solution. Your plan needs to eliminate or reduce the problem of grade inflation and be feasible in terms of time, person-power, expense, and material. The interests of multiple stakeholders must be considered.

Your satisfactory plan will be presented to the assembled audience.



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