

Summary of Findings about Grade Inflation

Academic Affairs Committee

Athens State University

March, 2014

During Academic Year 2014, the Academic Affairs Committee of Athens State University undertook a cursory evaluation of possible grade inflation at the university. This evaluation was conducted at the request of the institution's chief academic officer and with the encouragement of the Presiding Officer of the Faculty Senate.

The Committee's findings are delineated below:

1. There has been what has been characterized by some as grade inflation in American higher education and what, on occasion, has been termed by others as grade elevation during much of the past 50 years. The most obvious manifestation of this grade inflation is the increased percentage of A or B grades awarded on the traditional A to F scale. This phenomenon probably has its origins in the anti-war movement of the Vietnam War, but has received additional impetus during the last generation. Decisions by administrators to encourage enrollment growth and to incorporate student feedback into faculty personnel decisions have also incentivized faculty to award higher grades. Other secondary factors included the desire of faculty to have an acceptable level of enrollment in increasingly specialized degree programs and courses, and perhaps the use of practitioner, experience-based courses, such as internships.

2. Grade inflation is a truly pervasive phenomenon and has arguably permeated the entire structure of contemporary higher education. It is not reserved to one type of institution of higher learning or found in only a few academic programs within institutions. It has been found at the nation's most prestigious institutions, at smaller regional schools, and within the community colleges. It is evident throughout the full range of academic disciplines, although the phenomenon seems slightly less evident in math and the sciences and somewhat more evident in the fine arts and in teacher education programs.
3. Initiatives by one institution to "go it alone" in an effort to remedy the problem of grade inflation pose a series of other problems, including possible collateral damage for alumni. For example, almost any systemic effort that results in lower grades and, therefore, lower GPAs for the institution's graduates arguably places them at a disadvantage in both the labor market and in the screening process for admission to advanced studies. Any "go-it-alone" tactic could be especially problematic for a small regional school which lacked a high profile reputation.
4. An evaluation of grade inflation at Athens State is made especially difficult as a result of the institution awarding grades for only upper division, undergraduate work. Data clearly demonstrate that grades are higher in upper division coursework, where students are taking much coursework associated with self-selected majors and minors, than in coursework at the freshman/sophomore level. Via the Internet, the committee was able to review grade distributions from a wide variety of institutions. However, grade distribution data that permitted a separate comparison/analysis of junior/senior course work was available from only Georgia Tech, Penn State, and the University of Wisconsin – Madison. While these institutions are not comparable to Athens State in many ways, it is worth noting that the percentage of "A" grades given

at Athens State in recent terms is quite comparable to the percentage awarded at Georgia Tech, Penn State and Wisconsin-Madison.

5. Although Athens State was comparable to this select group of other institutions at the top of the grading scale (grades of A and B), there was one feature of its grade distribution that was noticeably different. At Georgia Tech, Penn State and Wisconsin-Madison, the proportion of grades in the F category ranged from less than one percent to approximately two percent. Approximately five percent of the grades awarded at Athens State were in the F category! Insight from experiences of some committee members suggested that this higher rate of failure at Athens State might be a reflection of students who “evaporate” from a course and do not complete the official withdrawal process. Other committee members also suggested that the liberal policy controlling course withdrawal at Athens State may also contribute to a particular form of grade inflation, because some students who have made no effort or a very meager effort in a course are permitted to escape real academic accountability for that level of effort.

The committee’s overall conclusion is as follows:

Based on an evaluation of the general pattern of grades currently awarded across a wide spectrum of higher education, Athens State does not appear to have a grade inflation problem. In sum, Athens State may have grade inflation in an absolute sense, but not relative to other institutions. The problem does not appear to be appreciably better or worse than what is found on the contemporary landscape of American higher education.

In light of its deliberations and findings, the committee makes the following recommendations:

The institution should undertake a thorough review of three sets of policies and practices during the next academic year. These three areas are: (a) the withdrawal process, which should perhaps include a more

aggressive tactic of student notification near the withdrawal deadline, (b) the awarding of grades in certain experience-based courses, such as internships, where there has been no traditional (exam-based) assessment, and (c) an assessment of the GPA-based criteria for academic honors to ensure that the phenomenon of grade inflation has not devalued the standard for *genuine* excellence in the academy and to ensure that academic awards are not based on methods that inappropriately “doctor” or adjust GPA calculations, but are based on methods that reflect the student’s entire body of academic work.