Pandemic GPAs

James Felton
Central Michigan University

Woongsun Yoo
Central Michigan University

A student's grade point average (GPA) is very important to most scholarship committees, potential employers, and graduate school selection committees. Some students place such importance on grades that they actively manipulate their GPA higher by taking actions that raise grades without additional study and learning. Students can seek out easy professors, transfer grades for difficult topics from community colleges, try to gain favoritism with their professors, or cheat on assignments. During the Covid-19 pandemic, universities offered grading leniency, such as allowing students to switch grades to credit / no credit after the semester's end, which artificially inflated grades. We apply Felton and Koper's (2005) proposal for having two grades on a transcript, Nominal GPA and Real GPA, as an easy to understand and apply method for dealing with some of the methods of GPA manipulation.

Keywords: grade point average, grading leniency, grade inflation, COVID-19, pandemic, nominal GPA, real GPA

INTRODUCTION

College student grades are considered a quality signal to recruiters (Spence, 1973 and Stiglitz, 1975). Most potential employers and graduate schools, law schools, and medical schools include a student's Grade Point Average (GPA) in some method in their assessment of a candidate's qualifications. In most cases, GPAs play a major role in these life-changing decisions made by employers and admissions offices. However, undergraduate grades are manipulated by faculty with grade inflation, students with cheating, faculty with favoritism, and recently by institutions with pandemic-related leniency. To make matters worse, "many selective opportunities are awarded early in academic programs, which means that a relatively small number of grades can have a profound influence on which students receive them." (Chilton, Joy, Rozema, and Thomas, 2023, p. 2). This paper explores the impacts of grade manipulation, including the temporary leniency allowed during the pandemic.

Grade Inflation and the Disengagement Compact

The most well-documented manipulation of grades is grade inflation, the increase in average grades over time (Johnson, 2003). With higher overall grades, recruiters have the more-difficult task of selecting students when differences between students' grades are smaller. The average GPA at Harvard has risen

from 2.55 in 1950, to 3.05 in 1975, 3.17 in 1985, 3.36 in 1995, 3.41 in 2000, 3.72 in 2019, and 3.80 in 2022 (Barton, 2022). Barton (2022) argues in the *Harvard Crimson*:

> There's no easy solution to either grade inflation or grade compression. Other colleges have experimented with grade deflation or rationing of As, but changes as radical as those are unlikely to be implemented soon. Instead, I think sunlight is the best disinfectant. Harvard should immediately release annual grade distributions (they stopped doing so in 2006), allowing a greater understanding and analysis of the problem. . .More importantly, if average grades for classes or departments were released, then students' transcripts could be put into greater contest. You may have gotten a C in Math 55, but your potential employer could see the average grade was a B+. Curious students would no longer have to fear pursuing a harder class or concentration.

One cause of grade inflation is the "disengagement compact," where faculty give higher grades and lower workloads in return for higher student evaluation of teaching (SET) scores from students (Kuh, 1991). Felton and Koper (2005) and Koper, Felton, Sanney, and Mitchell (2015) propose that universities provide a "Real GPA" on transcripts along with the traditional GPA, where a Real GPA adjusts for the class GPA. An "A" in a class where the class GPA is 2.80 (on a 4-point scale) means more than an "A" where the class GPA is 3.80 (on a 4-point scale).

Student Cheating

A second method for manipulating grades is student cheating, which rose dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jenkins, Golding, Le Grand, Levi, and Pals, 2022). Jenkins et al. found self-reported cheating by 75% of students during the pandemic, and 46% of the sample students admitted to first-time cheating during the pandemic.

Favoritism

A third method for grade manipulation is an exchange of a grade for sex or, cash, or some other favoritism. In a recent survey of college students in Africa, 76% of students stated they would report a professor who offers to exchange a higher grade for sex, while 21% would not report the professor (Awaah, 2019).

Pandemic Leniency

A fourth method for manipulating grades is recent and institutional. During the pandemic, some universities allowed unprecedented leniency in grading, where students were allowed to change any of their classes to credit/no credit if their grade was at least a "C," or they were allowed to change any of their classes to satisfactory/unsatisfactory (where a "D" is considered satisfactory), or they were allowed to drop classes even after grades were turned in at the end of the semester. These mostly temporary changes make current GPAs much less reliable than usual as a measure of student quality.

The University of North Dakota allowed students to change any spring 2020 course to satisfactory/unsatisfactory, where only a failing grade was considered unsatisfactory. In October 2020, the university was still debating whether to continue the practice for fall 2020. Brooke Kruger, a writer for the *Dakota Student*, the school paper at the University of North Dakota, was opposed to keeping the grading leniency (Kruger, 2020):

> The pass/fail grading system of Spring 2020 allowed students to underperform. There was no distinction between finishing a class with a seventy-five or a ninety. With S/U grading, students weren't required to work hard to receive a reputable grade. The elimination of traditional grading allowed students to be content with settling for "satisfactory." Of course, before a S/U grading system, students uninterested in pursuing top grades saw their

efforts reflected in evaluations resulting in C's or D's. With the satisfactory scale, students that perform at the C or D earning level were no different than the top students in the class.

S/U grading allowed all students to achieve 4.0's regardless of their effort. The grading decision implemented by the university allowed students to choose how they wanted to be graded for each of their courses: traditional letter grading or the pass/fail method. Only courses evaluated using the traditional letter grading impacted a student's cumulative GPAs. Students could apply pass/fail grading to courses they had low grades in and use traditional grading methods. Classes that students are successful in are chosen to count towards their GPA by using traditional letter grading. If a student receives a bad grade, they could apply S/U grading techniques, allowing that course to be disregarded when calculating cumulative GPAs. With students having the power to manipulate their cumulative grade point averages, all students had the potential to increase their grades with no effort.

Pass/fail grading is going to impact the hiring process completed by companies as well. With the inability to distinguish between students that earned 4.0s and students that manipulated their grades with the S/U scale, employers are going to struggle to find the most appropriate employees. Applications for internships, jobs, and organization positions will contain inaccurate college transcripts and resumes. Employers at reputable companies may be looking for highly skilled graduates. They can be misled by potential employees' GPAs that were distorted due to S/U grading.

Mostafa, Ferguson, Tang, and Ashqer (2023) examined flexible grading policies for Spring 2020 to Spring 2021 at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, a public Historically Black College and University. Students were given the choice of receiving a grade of "P1," a passing grade for grades "A-D" that is not calculated in their GPA. Mostafa et al. considered the impact of this grading leniency on sequential courses, such as MATH 103 to MATH 104, where both are required, and MATH 103 is a prerequisite for MATH 104. Normally, a "C" or better grade is required to pass MATH 103 and MATH 104. With the P1 option, students receiving grades of "C-," "D+," "D," or "D-" (who would normally need to retake the class) can now pass the class with grade of "P1." Most students who were in the "A" to "B" range in the first class performed well in the second class. A cluster of students who chose the P1 option in the first class performed well enough in the second class to keep the assigned grades in the "A" to "C" range. However, a cluster of students who chose P1 in the first course performed badly again in the second course. They either chose P1 again or failed the second course. Mostafa et al. argue that "… it would have been to the advantage of these students to retake the first course to build proper foundations for the second course instead of using the P1 option to advance to the second course while underprepared."

Nominal GPA and Real GPA

Felton and Koper's (2005) proposal for Nominal GPA and Real GPA starts with the standard calculation for GPA, and they call it Nominal GPA because it is a raw score that is not yet adjusted for grade inflation. The student in Table 1 had a Nominal GPA of 2.86 on a 4.00 scale where an "A" is 4.00, an "A-" is 3.70, a "B+" is 3.30, a "B" is 3.00, a "B-" is 2.70, a "C+" is 2.30, a "C" is 2.00, a "C-" is 1.70, a "D+" is 1.30, a "D" is 1.00, and a "D-" is 0.70.

$$\text{Nominal GPA} = [3.00(3) + 1.70(3) + 4.00(3) + 2.00(3) + 3.30(3) + 3.70(1)]/16 = 2.86$$

The student's Real GPA is calculated by adjusting each letter grade by the class GPA. The Real GPA is then adjusted to a 2.0 scale, where "C" is average.

$$\text{Real GPA} = \left\{ \left[\frac{3.00(3)}{2.56} + \frac{1.70(3)}{2.16} + \frac{4.00(3)}{3.80} + \frac{2.00(3)}{1.86} + \frac{3.30(3)}{3.49} + \frac{3.70(1)}{2.98} \right] / 16 \right\} \times 2.00 = 2.04$$

A Real GPA above 2.00 shows that the student has outperformed on average, while a Real GPA below 2.00 shows underperformance. The student in Table 1 has a transcript with a 2.86 GPA for the semester, but the student barely outperformed on average. We agree that having both Nominal GPA and Real GPA on student transcripts would provide potential employers and graduate schools with better information regarding student quality.

TABLE 1
REAL AND NOMINAL GPAS

Course	Letter Grade	Credit Hours	Class GPA	Nominal GPA	Real GPA
REL 102	B C-	3	2.56	3.00	2.34
MTH 132	A	3	2.16	1.70	1.57
HST 111	CB+	3	3.80	4.00	2.11
ECO 222	A-	3	1.86	2.00	2.15
ANT 173		3	3.49	3.30	1.89
BUS 100		1	2.98	3.70	2.48
Total Credit Hours, Weighted-Average GPAs		**16**	**2.79**	**2.86**	**2.04**

Nominal GPA and Real GPA With Pandemic Leniency

Table 2 shows the huge impact on Nominal GPA when students can switch courses to credit / no credit. The student switched a "C-" and a "C" to credit (CR), and the Nominal GPA rose to 3.46. The student's transcript shows a 3.46 GPA for the semester, but the Real GPA, using the original Class GPA, is still only 2.15, which shows that the student barely outperformed in the remaining four classes. The Class GPA would also rise, which would cause the Real GPA to be even lower.

TABLE 2
REAL AND NOMINAL GPAS WITH PANDEMIC LENIENCY

Course	Letter Grade	Credit Hours	Original Class GPA	Adjusted Nominal GPA	Adjusted Real GPA[*]
REL 102	B	3	2.56	3.00	2.34
MTH 132	CR	3	2.16	-	-
HST 111	A	3	3.80	4.00	2.11
ECO 222	CR	3	1.86	-	-
ANT 173	B+	3	3.49	3.30	1.89
BUS 100	A-	1	2.98	3.70	2.48
Total Credit Hours, Weighted-Average GPAs [*]Using Original Class GPA		**16**	**2.79**	**3.46**	**2.15**

Tables 3 and 4 contain hypothetical transcripts for Students A and B who are competing for a scholarship. The scholarship committee is stunned to see that the two students took exactly the same courses and made exactly the same grades. It looks like a tie. They both have a 3.76 GPA. However, if the committee has access to Real GPAs, it becomes clear that Student A, with a Real GPA of 2.90, is better than Student

B, with a 2.55 Real GPA. Student B, whether intentionally or not, has a less impressive record because of easier professors with higher grades and lighter workloads.

TABLE 3
TRANSCRIPT FOR HYPOTHETICAL STUDENT A

Course	Letter Grade	Credit Hours	Class GPA	Nominal GPA	Real GPA
FIN 201	A	3	2.40	4.00	3.33
ECO 204	A-	3	2.25	3.70	3.29
BIS 101	A	3	3.82	4.00	2.09
ACC 250	A-	3	1.95	3.70	3.79
MGT 258	A	3	3.35	4.00	2.39
ENG 101	B+	3	2.09	3.30	3.16
BLR 235	A-	3	3.45	3.70	2.14
BIS 255	A	1	3.90	4.00	2.05
ACC 255	A-	3	2.58	3.70	2.87
MTH 132	A	5	2.32	4.00	3.45
BIS 221	A	3	2.13	4.00	3.76
BLR 202	A	3	3.90	4.00	2.05
ECO 201	B+	3	2.60	3.30	2.54
ENG 201	A	3	2.58	4.00	3.10
SPN 280	A-	3	3.36	3.70	2.20
ACC 202	B	3	2.53	3.00	2.37
ECO 202	A	3	2.14	4.00	3.74
ENG 202	A-	3	2.44	3.70	3.03
HST 280	B+	3	2.63	3.30	2.51
SOC 200	A	3	3.09	4.00	2.59
STA 282	A	3	3.64	4.00	2.20
PSY 100	A-	3	1.72	3.70	4.30
Total Credit Hours, Weighted-Average GPAs		**66**	**2.72**	**3.76**	**2.90**

TABLE 4
TRANSCRIPT FOR HYPOTHETICAL STUDENT B

Course	Letter Grade	Credit Hours	Class GPA	Nominal GPA	Real GPA
FIN 201	A	3	2.85	4.00	2.81
ECO 204	A-	3	3.10	3.70	2.39
BIS 101	A	3	2.61	4.00	3.07
ACC 250	A-	3	2.44	3.70	3.03
MGT 258	A	3	3.39	4.00	2.36
ENG 101	B+	3	2.90	3.30	2.28
BLR 235	A-	3	2.92	3.70	2.53
BIS 255	A	1	3.58	4.00	2.23
ACC 255	A-	3	3.02	3.70	2.45
MTH 132	A	5	2.84	4.00	2.82
BIS 221	A	3	2.94	4.00	2.72
BLR 202	A	3	3.29	4.00	2.43
ECO 201	B+	3	2.83	3.30	2.33
ENG 201	A	3	2.97	4.00	2.69
SPN 280	A-	3	3.12	3.70	2.37
ACC 202	B	3	2.95	3.00	2.03
ECO 202	A	3	3.11	4.00	2.57
ENG 202	A-	3	3.09	3.70	2.39
HST 280	B+	3	3.21	3.30	2.06
SOC 200	A	3	3.84	4.00	2.08
STA 282	A	3	2.25	4.00	3.56
PSY 100	A	3	3.09	4.00	2.59
Total Credit Hours, Weighted-Average GPAs		**66**	**2.99**	**3.76**	**2.55**

Table 5 shows the impact of pandemic leniency if Student B switches the lowest four grades to credit. Then a "B+," "B+," "B," and "B+" become "CR," and student B looks like the better choice with a 3.90 Nominal GPA. However, even with the lowest four grades deleted, Student B still has a lower Real GPA than Student A.

TABLE 5
TRANSCRIPT FOR HYPOTHETICAL STUDENT B WITH PANDEMIC LENIENCY

Course	Letter Grade	Credit Hours	Class GPA	Nominal GPA	Real GPA
FIN 201	A	3	2.85	4.00	2.81
ECO 204	A-	3	3.10	3.70	2.39
BIS 101	A	3	2.61	4.00	3.07
ACC 250	A-	3	2.44	3.70	3.03
MGT 258	A	3	3.39	4.00	2.36
ENG 101	CR	3	2.90	-	-
BLR 235	A-	3	2.92	3.70	2.53
BIS 255	A	1	3.58	4.00	2.23
ACC 255	A-	3	3.02	3.70	2.45
MTH 132	A	5	2.84	4.00	2.82
BIS 221	A	3	2.94	4.00	2.72
BLR 202	A	3	3.29	4.00	2.43
ECO 201	CR	3	2.83	-	-
ENG 201	A	3	2.97	4.00	2.69
SPN 280	A-	3	3.12	3.70	2.37
ACC 202	CR	3	2.95	-	-
ECO 202	A	3	3.11	4.00	2.57
ENG 202	A-	3	3.09	3.70	2.39
HST 280	CR	3	3.21	-	-
SOC 200	A	3	3.84	4.00	2.08
STA 282	A	3	2.25	4.00	3.56
PSY 100	A	3	3.09	4.00	2.59
Total Credit Hours, Weighted-Average GPAs *Using Original Class GPA		**66**	**2.99**	**3.90**	**2.64**

CONCLUSION

GPA manipulation took a new turn in 2020 with institutional pandemic-related grading leniency. The quality signal grades are meant to send to potential employers, graduate schools, law schools, and medical schools are the weakest in history. Universities can respond by providing more information than GPAs alone.

REFERENCES

Awaah, F. (2019). Sexually transmitted grades and the culture of silence: Will female students blow the whistle? *ResearchGate*. Retrieved July 2023.

Barton, A. (2022). Grade Inflation: What Goes Up Must Come Down. *Harvard Crimson*. Retrieved October 3, from, https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/10/3/barton-grade-inflation/

Chilton, A., Joy, P., Rozema, K., & Thomas, J. (2023). Improving the Signal Quality of Grades. *The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization*, forthcoming.

Felton, J., & Koper, P.T. (2005). Nominal GPA and Real GPA: A simple adjustment that compensates for grade inflation. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *30*(6), 561–569.

Jenkins, B.D., Golding, J.M., Le Grand, A.M., Levi, M.M., & Pals, A.M. (2022). When Opportunity Knocks: College Students' Cheating Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Teaching of Psychology*, forthcoming.

Johnson, V.E. (2003). *Grade inflation: A crisis in college education*. New York: Springer.

Koper, P.T., Felton, J., Sanney, K.J., & Mitchell, J.B. (2015). Real GPA and Real SET: Two Antidotes to Greed, Sloth, and Cowardice in the College Classroom. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, *40*(2), 248–264.

Kruger, B. (2020). College Students Are Given the Power to Manipulate Their GPAs, Dakota Student, October 16.

Kuh, G.D. (1991). Teaching and Learning – After Class. *Journal of Excellence in College Teaching*, *2*, 35–31.

Mostafa, S.A., Ferguson, R., Tang, G., & Ashqer, M. (2023). An analysis of the COVID-19-Induced Flexible Grading Policy at a Public University. *Higher Education Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41307-023-00315-2

Spence, M. (1973). Job Market Signaling. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *87*(3), 355–374.

Stiglitz, J. (1975). The Theory of 'Screening,' Education, and the Distribution of Income. *American Economic Review*, *65*(3), 283–300.