



# Just the Facts... Grade Inflation—Fact or Fiction?

## The Concern Over Inflation

This issue of *Just the Facts* explores the issue of grade inflation. Most of the literature examining the issue finds that grade inflation is a phenomenon that began in the late 1960's and then experienced a resurgence in the mid-1980's.

There is research supporting the notion that grade inflation exists and further

research suggesting that the topic of grade inflation is itself an inflated issue. Furthermore, there is also a school of thought among those who do believe grade inflation exists, that it is not a serious problem due to the availability of other measures of student performance.

This brief serves to exam-

ine both sides of the issue and explore Samford's grading patterns and trends over the past decade. Data is broken out by student level as well as faculty status.

Several examples of schools' attempts to address grade inflation are also provided to guide discussion.

### A Sample of Grade Inflation Studies Spanning the Last 40 Years

Author and Year	Sample	Findings
Arvo E. Juola 1960-78	180 colleges with graduate programs	From 1960 to 1974 the average GPA increased half a grade point (0.432). From 1974 to 1978, a leveling of grade inflation was detected.
Arthur Levine and Jeanette S. Cureton 1967, 1976, 1993	Data from survey of 4,900 undergraduates at all institutional types	Grades of A- or higher grew from 7 to 26 percent. Grades of C or below fell from 25 to 9 percent.
George Kuh and Shouping Hu 1984-87; 1995-97	52,256 student surveys from College Student Experiences Questionnaire (CSEQ) at all institutional types	College grades increased over time in every institutional type on average from 3.07 to 3.343.

SOURCE: American Academy of Arts & Sciences

#### Is grade inflation new?

*"Grade inflation got started in the late 60's and early 70's. The grades faculty members now give deserve to be a scandal"* — Professor Harvey Mansfield, Harvard University, 2001

*"Grades A and B are sometimes given too readily. Grade A for work of no very high merit, and Grade B for work not far above mediocrity. One of the chief obstacles to raising the standards of the degree is the readiness with which insincere students gain passable grades by sham work."* — Report of the Committee on Raising the Standard, Harvard University, 1894

SOURCE: Chronicle of Higher Education, November 8, 2002

# Grade Inflation as Fact—The Causes

In 2002, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences released a grade inflation report called “Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing?”. In that study the authors reviewed the available literature on the topic and suggested six factors contributing to grade inflation in recent years:

1.) **Higher education’s response to the Vietnam War and the turmoil of the 1960’s** - The size of the professoriate doubled between 1960 and 1970 and there was a growth in the “student-centered” functions of institutions

2.) **Changes in curricular and grading policies** - Expanded withdrawal

periods, removal of “first attempt” grades, pass-fail options, and the incorporation of “pluses” and “minuses” are all cited in the literature as contributing to inflation

3.) **The advent of student evaluations of professors** - Research has shown a strong and significant correlation between grades and faculty evaluations



4.) **The rise in**

A study done by the University of Washington found that faculty members who were “easy graders” received significantly better results on student evaluations.

**the 1980’s of consumerism** - Universities have shifted to operating like businesses for student clients

5.) **The watering down of course content** - Some studies have found that institutions require students to master less content and put more focus on group work

6.) **The increasing role of adjuncts in university faculties** - Only half of the faculty in the United States are designated as “tenure” or “tenure-track”

# Grade Inflation as Fact—How are schools addressing it?

**The American Academy of Arts and Sciences explored several solutions to grade inflation:**

## USE ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

Graduate schools are increasing reliance on standardized tests, recommendations, ranking of particular schools, and interviews

## PROVIDE FACULTY WITH GRADING STANDARDS AND GRADE DISTRIBUTION OF PEERS

Harvard and Duke provide each professor annually an index comparing individual grading practices with departmental averages

## PROVIDE ADDITIONAL COURSE INFORMATION ON STUDENT TRANSCRIPTS

Columbia, Dartmouth, Indiana, and Eastern Kentucky are examples of schools that provide the number of students in

each class and the average grade of the class on students’ transcripts (see **FOCUS ON EXPANDED CONTEXT TRANSCRIPTS** below)

## USE OF A STANDARD GRADE DISTRIBUTION

In large classes, professors and de-

partments often establish a standard grading distribution (a curve) in order to maintain distinctions over time.

*“A survey of Human Resource Officers at Fortune 500 companies in 1978, 1985, and 1995 found that the percentage of HRO’s who felt that transcripts of college grades ought to be included with an applicant’s resume fell from 37.5 percent to 20 percent.”*

SOURCE: Career Development International

## FOCUS ON EXPANDED CONTEXT TRANSCRIPTS

Indiana University shifted from a “Traditional” transcript to an “Expanded Context Transcript”

<u>Traditional</u>	<u>Expanded Context</u>
Course title	Grade distribution for each course
Department	Class GPA
Course number	% students whose majors match dept offering course
Credit hours	Average student GPA in course
Grade for each class	

# Grade Inflation as Fiction...or Perhaps an Issue of Institutional Type

A 2002 study released by the U.S. Department of Education, entitled "Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1999-2000" suggests the current state of grading is more rigorous than portrayed in other studies found in the literature. The 2002 study finds that grades of C and below comprise one-third of all grades given by postsecondary institutions. However, some in academe point to the fact that the

study included two-year and for-profit institutions.

Findings of the study do show differences when looking at institutional type. For example, one-quarter of grades given at private, non-profit institutions were C's. Meanwhile, in public 4-year institutions, one-third of grades given were C's and below. **By comparison, grades of C or**

**lower accounted for only 18% of Samford grades given on 1999-00.**

Therefore, the question of grade inflation as fact or fiction could have very different answers depending upon the type of institutions being examined. Do private institutions give more A's because of inflation in grading practices or because their students are of better quality? That is a question that might never be answered.

## Grade Distributions for the 1999-2000 Academic Year

	C's and D's or lower	B's and C's	Mostly B's	A's and B's	Mostly A's
<b>All Undergraduates</b>	33.5%	16.4%	24.6%	10.9%	14.5%
<b>Undergraduates By Institution Type</b>					
<b>Public 4-year</b>	34.4%	21.2%	25.1%	9.7%	9.7%
<b>Private, Non-profit 4-year</b>	22.4%	18.2%	30.1%	14.4%	15.0%
<b>Public 2-year</b>	38.2%	13.2%	22.3%	9.8%	16.6%
<b>All Private for-profit</b>	25.6%	12.1%	23.1%	16.2%	22.3%
<b>Undergraduates By Class Level</b>					
<b>Graduating senior</b>	15.8%	21.9%	34.5%	14.7%	13.0%
<b>All other undergraduates</b>	35.4%	15.8%	23.6%	10.5%	14.7%

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education

## Grade Inflation or Academically Better Students?

Average Academic Qualifications of Enrolled First-Time, First-Year Students at Four-year Institutions, 1985, 1992, and 1999

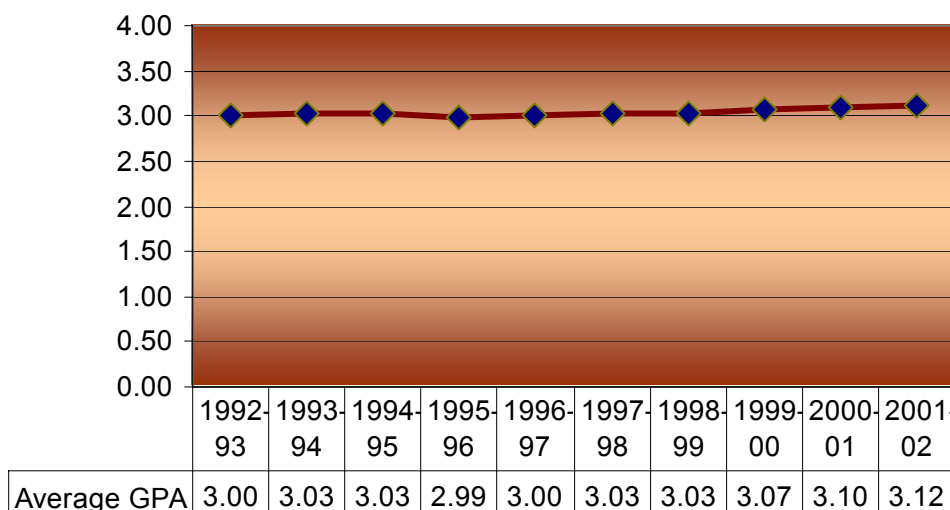
	Public			Private		
	1985	1992	1999	1985	1992	1999
<b>High School GPA</b>	3.0	3.0	3.2	3.0	3.0	3.2
<b>ACT Composite Score</b>	19.6	21.2	22.0	21.0	22.4	23.5
<b>SAT I Verbal Score</b>	533	532	524	543	543	558
<b>SAT I Math Score</b>	523	532	527	520	529	555

SOURCE: *Trends in College Admissions 2000*

# Samford Grading Trends

When looking at the annual cumulative GPA of undergraduates at Samford, there has been a .12 increase over the last 10 years. Over this same time period the average ACT score of our entering freshmen has risen from 24.3 in Fall 1992 to 24.8 in Fall 2001.

Samford Average Undergraduate GPA



When looking over time, the average GPA of students increases across levels (i.e. the senior average is higher than the juniors, which is higher than the sophomores). While there is some fluctuation, the average cumulative GPA at every level has increased over the last ten years.

Samford Average GPA's by Student Level

	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
Freshmen	2.91	2.87	2.85	2.78	2.77	2.84	2.78	2.86	2.91	2.94
Sophomore	2.94	3.05	3.03	2.95	3.00	3.02	3.04	3.05	3.08	3.07
Junior	3.07	3.02	3.06	3.01	3.06	3.08	3.10	3.15	3.15	3.20
Senior	3.10	3.19	3.19	3.20	3.16	3.17	3.20	3.20	3.25	3.25

## Samford Grading Practices by Faculty Rank\*

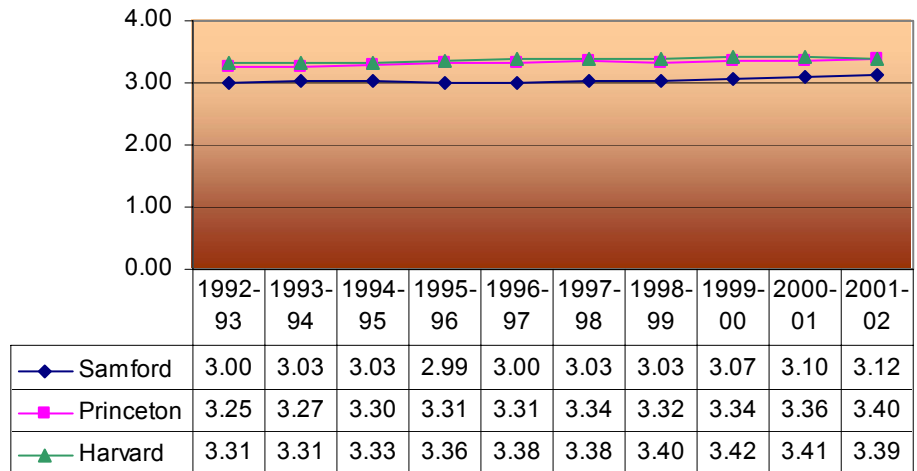
When looking at undergraduate grading practices by faculty rank, there is little difference in the percentage of D's and F's given. For the 2001-02 academic year, D's and F's constituted between 4 and 6% of all grades given—regardless of rank. Differences in grading practices are more evident when looking at the percentages of A's, B's, and C's given. Within each rank, approximately 50% of all grades given were A's. The two exceptions to this were adjunct professors and staff, whose percentages of A's given were 91% and 64% respectively. Visiting Professors tended to give higher grades (more A's and B's) than did Samford resident full-time professors.

RANK	A		B		C		D		F	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
Professor	2,633	47%	1,864	33%	810	14%	204	4%	116	2%
Associate Professor	1,966	51%	1,211	31%	501	13%	118	3%	67	2%
Assistant Professor	3,183	49%	2,193	34%	777	12%	214	3%	117	2%
Instructor	2,833	50%	1,900	34%	667	12%	184	3%	84	1%
Adjunct Professor	64	91%	5	7%	-	0%	1	1%	-	0%
Staff	241	64%	104	28%	23	6%	6	2%	3	1%
Visiting Professor	451	58%	248	32%	48	6%	21	3%	11	1%

\*Does not include withdrawals and only includes professors who had a rank available on the HRS or SIS system at the time of extract creation.

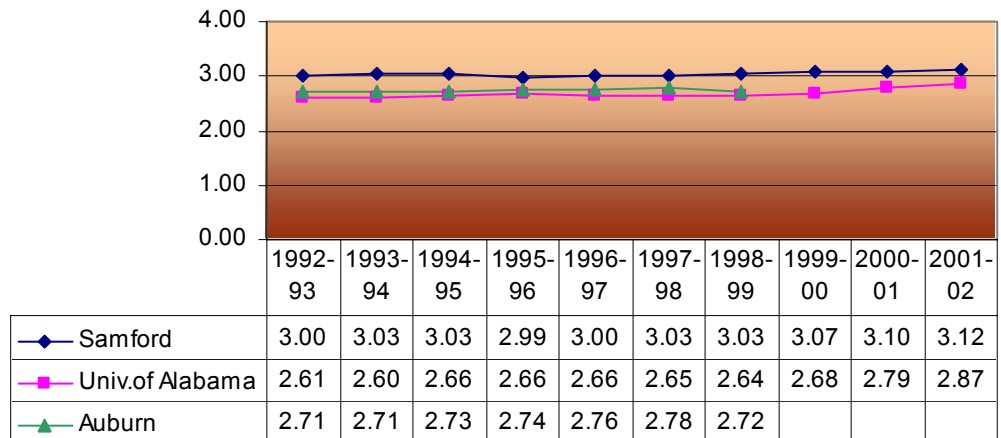
## How Samford Compares—Elite Institutions

The average GPA for Samford students, as compared to Princeton and Yale, is typically .3 lower. The average has risen over the past 10 years at all 3 institutions, with Samford and Princeton witnessing a higher increase than Harvard. Harvard recently formed a student-faculty committee to examine grade inflation. Recommendations arising from that group included limiting the number of honors tracks available, narrowing the grade point gap between A- and B+, and adopting an **Expanded Context Transcript** (see p. 2).



## How Samford Compares—State Public Institutions

Samford's average GPA is on average .3 higher than the average undergraduate GPA at Auburn University and the University of Alabama. While comparable information for all years was not available for Auburn, the University of Alabama had a much higher increase in GPA when compared to Samford (.27 as compared to .12).



## How Samford Compares—Peer Institutions

To assess how Samford grading patterns compare to those of peer institutions, two institutions were chosen who have ranked higher than Samford in its peer group in the *U.S. News and World Report*. Data from James Madison was only available for even years and data from Stetson was only available for senior. GPA's have increased over time at all three institutions, however Samford GPAs for both undergraduates and seniors are higher than those at Stetson and James Madison.

	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99	1999-00	2000-01	2001-02
<b>Samford</b>										
<b>Undergraduates</b>	3.00	3.03	3.03	2.99	3.00	3.03	3.03	3.07	3.10	3.12
<b>Samford Seniors</b>	3.10	3.19	3.19	3.20	3.16	3.17	3.20	3.20	3.25	3.25
<b>James Madison</b>	2.89		2.89		2.89		2.91		2.94	
<b>Stetson Seniors</b>			2.90	2.97	3.02	3.03	3.05	3.07	3.07	3.11

# What Samford Students Say—Using NSSE to Assess Academic Rigor and Grading

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is an annual survey of Samford freshmen and seniors that assesses the extent to which college students en-

gage in educational practices associated with high levels of learning and development. Below are several questions that gauge students' views on the academic

rigor of their courses and the promptness of feedback.

In 2002, NSSE released a benchmark study looking at the last three years of NSSE responses. They developed 5 Benchmarks of Effective Educational Practices, one of which was the Level of Academic Challenge. This benchmark included the time spent preparing for courses, the number of assigned books, the number and length of written papers, and the campus emphasis on time studying. When compared to 257 other Master's level institutions, Samford scored higher than 90% of institutions on how their freshmen responded and better than 70% of schools on how they rated among senior students. Thus, Samford freshmen report being more academically challenged than Samford seniors.

	Samford Mean	All Masters Institutions Mean	Significance *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001
Discussed grades with an instructor (1=Never; 4=Very Often)	Freshmen - 2.81	Freshmen - 2.57	**
	Seniors - 3.08	Seniors - 2.79	***
Received prompt feedback regarding academic performance (1=Never; 4=Very Often)	Freshmen - 2.71	Freshmen - 2.58	**
	Seniors - 2.98	Seniors - 2.80	
Worked harder than you thought you could to meet instructor's expectations (1=Never; 4=Very Often)	Freshmen - 2.60	Freshmen - 2.61	
	Seniors - 2.64	Seniors - 2.71	
To what extent did your exams challenge you to do your best work (1=Very Little; 7=Very Much)	Freshmen - 5.72	Freshmen - 5.55	
	Seniors - 5.49	Seniors - 5.56	



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