

# The Lake Wobegone Effect

“The Dangerous Myth of Grade Inflation” by Alfie Kohn, in *The Chronicle Review* (Nov. 8, 2002), 1255 23rd St., N.W., Ste. 700, Washington, D.C. 20037.

At Harvard University and other campuses, a handful of administrators and professors have launched a loud attack on grade inflation. Harvard political scientist Harvey Mansfield, for instance, calls today’s grading a scandal. But Kohn, author of *Punished by Rewards* (1993) and other books, contends that the real scandal lies elsewhere.

It’s not even clear that grades at most colleges have been rising, he notes. After reviewing transcripts from more than 3,000 institutions, an analyst at the U.S. Department of Education concluded in 1995 that “grades actually declined slightly in the last two decades.” A 2002 report found that one in three undergraduates in 1999–2000 had a grade point average of C or below—hardly a sign of lax grading standards.

Though it “may well be true” that grades at the most selective institutions are higher today than they used to be, Kohn says, that does not necessarily mean they are artificially inflated. The SAT scores of entering students at top schools have been going up in recent decades, so why not grades? Perhaps students are doing better work. And students are able to avoid poor grades by withdrawing from courses in which they’re not doing well—an option not widely available decades ago.

Kohn adds that complaints about grade inflation are nothing new. At Harvard itself, a committee raised the issue as early as 1894.

Underlying today’s campaign against grade inflation, Kohn argues, are certain dubious assumptions:

- *That professors should be sorting students for the benefit of future employers or graduate schools.* That’s not a teacher’s job, insists Kohn, and in

any case he says there is “growing evidence . . . that grades and test scores do not in fact predict career success.”

- *That students should be encouraged to compete with one another for scarce A’s and B’s.* Instead of contriving to have the distribution of grades resemble the familiar bell curve, instructors should strive to have most students in their class learn “what they hadn’t known before,” Kohn argues.

- *That grades motivate.* But a desire to learn also can motivate, Kohn points out, and grade grubbing often undermines the love of learning. “Scores of studies have demonstrated that the more people are rewarded, the more they come to lose interest in whatever had to be done in order to get the reward.”

Kohn’s conclusion: “The real threat to excellence isn’t grade inflation at all; it’s grades.”



*Searching for knowledge, or just a higher grade?*