If Everyone Gets an A, No One Gets an A

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What is an "A," anyway? Does it mean that a 16 year-old recognizes 96 percent of the allusions in "The Bluest Eye"? Or that she could tell you 95 percent of the reasons the Teapot Dome Scandal was so important? Or, just that she made it to most classes? Does it come from a physics teacher in the Great Smoky Mountains who bludgeons students with weekly, memory-taxing tests, or from a trigonometry teacher in Topeka who works in Taylor Swift references and allows infinite "re-tests"?

One answer is that A is now the most popular high school grade in America! Indeed, in 2016, 47 percent of high school students graduated with grades in the A-range. This means that nearly half of seniors are averaging within a few numeric points of one another.

A belt has several holes, but usually only one or two of them show any wear in the leather. Can the same really be true for the grades we give our students, with their varied efforts and their constellations of cognitive skills? A grading drop-down menu ought not to be so simple a tool as one person's belt.

And grades have only gone up since 2016, most notably since the pandemic, most prominently in higher-income school districts. Were this a true reflection of student achievement, it would be reason to celebrate, but the metrics have it differently. From 1998 to 2016, average high school G.P.A.s rose from 3.27 to 3.38, but average SAT scores fell from 1026 to 1002. ACT scores among the class of 2023 were the worst in over three decades. Is it any wonder, then, that 65 percent of Americans feel they are smarter than average?

I'll confess that in my nearly 30 years as a high school English teacher, my own conceptions of grading have either softened, or evolved, depending on how you see it. While I may fret over the ambiguity on Page 5 of a student's essay, I'm aware of the greater machine. Their whole semester will boil down to one letter, and that letter joins 30 or so others on a transcript they may send to a dozen colleges, some of which have thousands of applicants.

Besides, I like my students. I see them coming into the building at 7:30, carrying three backpacks for a routine that may well go on until 7:30 that night, roughly the span of time it takes someone to complete a full Ironman Triathlon. They will use their free periods to prep for group projects, they'll scarf down lunch before a French quiz, and hours later, toe the line of scrimmage against those massive defensive backs from the other side of the county. I don't need to be excellent at as many utterly different things as they do. And my skills are not constantly judged like this, year-after-year, by a rotation of personalities. If kids come to my writing classes and share their heart and soul on the page, I want to offer them a handhold on this stony path.

Also, it's just so much easier to give good grades!

But when so many adolescent egos rest upon this collective, timorous deflection, it doesn't do an awful lot of good. Passing off the average as exceptional with bromides like "wonderful" and "impressive" soothes the soul, but if there's nothing there to modify these adjectives, teachers do little service to

their colleagues who receive these students the next year. It has that looming sense of climate denial, propped up by wishful thinking.

Grade inflation, after all, acts just like real inflation. In the early 60s, when, according to gradeinflation.com, about 15 percent of grades given at four-year colleges were A's, a dollar could buy you a movie ticket. Now, this will get you 15 seconds with a college essay coach and a first-hand lesson in Freud's concept of the narcissism of minor differences: The more a community shares the same thing, the higher the sensitivity becomes about small disparities. So, if everyone else applying to the College on the Hill has A's in math, your A-minus suddenly gives you the wrong distinction.

In the shape-shifting landscape of college admissions, grades have never been more important. Now, more than 80 percent of four-year colleges do not require standardized tests. Interviews, perhaps the truest show of the unadorned student, are also falling the way of the Bachman's warbler. Chat GPT brings possibly serviceable responses to essay questions, if you can live with yourself for using it. And a recommendation letter coming from someone who teaches 150 students is going to look different than from someone who teaches 50. This all augurs toward the new Pangea: grades. As a high school teacher, I don't want to hold that much power, nor do I think I should.

It's so easy to see grades as sheer commodities that we all but overlook their actual purpose — so far as I know — of providing *feedback*. In English class, this happens not just on days we wield our red pens, but every time we encourage students to appreciate the complexity of an idea, every time we can coax an apprehensive hand into the discussion about the bloody field or the Tuscan garden. It happens in meetings outside of class when students fumble into ideas for their own stories, and on the words, words, words of comments my English-teaching kinfolk are thoughtfully spooling onto our students' drafts. To forsake all this for one fixed letter is to waste the process for the stamp.

How might grade inflation's roiling cloud now be pierced? Do we approach the colleges that purport to favor both mental health and kids who take 10 A.P. exams? Or high schools, who watch these grading trend lines with the dread of sea level rise? We keep treating high school and college as two separate entities, but ultimately, they service the same people, and there needs to be more conversation about what this mess of grades is doing to them.

For now, a modest proposal: Consider the essay that comes in with a promising central idea, but lacks support from a few critical moments of the text. It makes a smart, but abrupt transition, and closes with an interesting connection, a trifle undercooked. With another assiduous go-round, it might become something amazing. … But please don't give this draft an A-minus, the grade that puts so much potential to an early, convenient death. Instead, think of the produce of this student's deletions and insertions, the music as he riffles through those pages he'll annotate better next time, the reflective potential of a revision. Grading offers a singular place to teach such lessons of resilience. Instead, consider the B-plus.

This means nothing if done alone. But if we're really going to be teachers, it's high time to tighten the belt.