

The New Politics of Education: Credentialism and Grade Inflation

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NOTE—Based on the following, the conservatives have called me radical and the radicals have called me conservative. Take your pick.

The present discussion focuses on what I call the crisis of higher education: education inflation. I sub-divide education inflation in two parts—credential inflation (or credentialism) and grade inflation. My point of departure is the overall democratization of educational access; a process that I fully applaud, but one that has been derailed by cheap politics. Compared to the socially-minded campus radicals of the 1960s, today's students were formed in the context of a liberal revolution where an individualist, materialist and consumerist ethos predominates. Unlike their 1960s counterparts, then, their behaviour is informed by narrower considerations of individual self interest, and fuelled by great anxiety.

As said, then, there are two aspects to education inflation: the first is a society-wide obsession with credentialism, which in turn leads to the second, grade inflation. One of the common descriptions of inflation usually given to a non-specialist in economics is, "too much money chasing too few goods." Though somewhat simple, it is as accurate as a general description can be. Whenever there is a great deal of money in circulation and the production of goods does not keep pace with demand, an inflationary situation is created and prices rise to levels that have little relation to their actual costs of production. And if this describes economic inflation I claim it is also applicable to education inflation.

In today's highly competitive market economies, where academic credentials are widely used as job search currency and short cuts to guide employers in hiring decisions, more credentials mean a better chance at good employment. So, as student demand increases, colleges and universities increase their range of offerings, and credentialism (a form of a paper chase), which links education and access to education with the wider system of social inequality, is born. Because ascribed status, inherited privilege and aristocratic breeding are no longer viewed as legitimate bases for claiming entitlement, considerations of merit and achievement are given over to the (higher) educational system, where the pursuit and accumulation of educational credentials (degrees, diplomas, certificates), are almost ends in themselves. Increases in the numbers of credentialed persons in a society will inflate the qualifications required for any given position.

A good case in point is the teaching profession where fifty years ago high school teachers were high school graduates. Today, a high school teacher must have at least a BA and a B.Ed., if not an M.Ed. But to the extent that credentials are tickets to privilege, they have also led to calls for democratization and mass education. But as the high value placed on scarce credentials is made more complex by calls for the democratization of educational access, credential inflation and falling value result. This in turn produces the contradictory consequence which sees moves to restrict access to higher education.

A clear example of this is the MBA. In the 1970s and 1980, MBAs monopolized the high paying jobs in business and finance, and boasted opulent life styles. Because the MBA had become the degree of choice, economically-minded universities and colleges everywhere began swiftly to offer all variety of certificates, diplomas and degrees in business, finance, accounting, marketing, management and related fields. Predictably, as the numbers of business graduates became inflated, their value declined, and today's dime-a-dozen MBAs (and other business graduates) are faced with serious unemployment and under employment.

To restore the MBA to its elevated position in the credentials hierarchy, many business schools have moved to re-impose a traditional form of social closure that benefits the privileged: privatization and tuition deregulation. This has created a system of first-class and second-class MBAs, along with a host of other lower placed business graduates with undergraduate degrees and diplomas. Ironically, therefore, the democratization of business education that sparked the credential inflation in business degrees, has had the unintended consequence of reinforcing unequal access to the quality MBA.

Grade inflation: Accompanying the democratization of educational access, there has also been a concomitant lowering of standards via what has been called *grade inflation* and the *dumbing down of the curriculum*. When *The Economist* suggested that “grade inflation followed the introduction of affirmative action” (April 14/2001) this was not to imply that the elites are *naturally* superior in intelligence to the masses. Rather, the elites’ economic wealth permits their children a better quality of educational preparation for the university experience. This underlines the class stratified nature of the society, clashes with the ideal of democratization, and feeds the campus movement of political correctness.

For following in the wake of the politically correct revolution, the majority of students have grown increasingly assertive and politically manipulative. Thus, Wilson writes: “thanks to student evaluations . . . students have learned the not-so-subtle art of blackmail” (3/24/2003 ¶16), which they use against professionally inexperienced TAs and insecure junior professors. And, in those cases where students “do not receive the grade they need to pass, they often hold the professor and then the administration responsible” (Karabell 1998:11). This is a major source of grade inflation which has also witnessed the virtual removal of failure as a motivator for students: “. . . we all have a sense that grading isn’t what it used to be” and today “the fear of failing has all but disappeared” (Wilson 3/24/2003 ¶1).

So, whereas greater democratization of educational access is positive, it has also produced inflation, declining standards, and the general crisis facing the educational system. Because high grades are tickets to graduate and professional schools, grants, jobs etcetera, today’s students feel very driven and experience tremendous pressure from family, friends, professors and potential employers to succeed. Thus, compared to the 1960s, the behaviour of today’s politically empowered students is far more individualistic and self-serving: Major in Yourself!

In certain disciplines, they demand a say in setting the curriculum, or in determining the content, form and weighting of tests and examinations, and even challenge professors’ grading decisions. Add to this the apathy of some professors as noted by Kamber and Biggs: “lenient grading . . . requires less work, thought and courage than rigorous grading” (1/31/2003 ¶13, 14). These authors also link apathy with declining educational standards: “Most institutions have accepted grading practices that persistently blur the distinction between good and outstanding performance, while they award passing grades for showing up and turning in work—even when that work is poor” (Ibid: ¶2). And: “Years of grade inflation in secondary and post secondary schools may have established an expectation that class attendance and a good-faith effort should be adequate to generate a good grade” (Gaultney and Cann 2001:84).

This led Young to write cynically in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*: “There’s an emerging compact between faculty members and students which goes something like, ‘If you don’t bother me too much I won’t bother you too much—I’ll trade you a B if you trade me some piece of mind” (2002:37). So whereas “A ‘C’ used to be the grade for an average performance, nowadays, it’s a slap in the face” (Wilson 3/24/2003 ¶14). These students’ “grade expectations” are clearly tied to the politics of educational democratization: “When only young, affluent white men attended college, the white male curriculum went unchallenged. Now every Latino, African American, Asian American, Irish American,

woman, gay, and ad-infinitum wants to learn about his or her roots” (Karabell 1998:xxi). And while a curriculum that is less white, less Eurocentric and more inclusive, is most welcome, the zero-sum tactics of modern campus politicians often preclude the search for a moderate, middle ground.

Conclusion

Clearly, any solution to this crisis will have to begin with a re-assessment of the entire education industry. Democratization and the inclusive curriculum are important gains and must be protected. However, they must not become political footballs for powerful interest groups (politicians, administrators, professors and students) with narrow, selfish agendas. For the sake of economic and societal well-being, academic standards cannot be permitted to fall prey to political correctness, for thus defined, politics have no place in the classroom, nor do professors who pass the buck and students who spend it is a check on education inflation. We need to ensure a closer fit between what graduates know and what employers want, whether English departments, engineering firms, banks or small business ventures.

Dumbing Down

In recent years, there has been the erosion of the private sector’s confidence in our schools and universities. The employers who routinely ask universities to educate the students and leave job training to themselves, also commonly lament the lack of basic literacy skills among graduates. As a consequence an entire, parallel educational industry has grown up alongside the university and college system to accommodate the concerns of professional schools and private sector employers. I am referring here to the institutionalization of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) in the United States, whereby universities and colleges basically say to the high schools, ‘we don’t trust the credentials you have conferred on students and before admitting them to our institution, we reserve the right to test and certify them ourselves.’

As the *National Center for Policy Analysis* reported in 1998, College Board officials in the US found that “more college-bound students have A averages than a decade ago—but they score lower on their SAT exams.” The same report goes on to point out that: “The College Board test takers with A averages grew from 28 percent to 38 percent in the last 10 years—but their scores fell an average of 12 points on the verbal portion of the SAT and three points on math.” And as if this were not enough, many North American universities appear not to trust their own standards either, so those students who have earned honors bachelors’ degrees are not automatically admitted to graduate programs until they have taken and passed Graduate Record Entrance (GRE) examinations.

And beyond their undergraduate degrees, I know of no professional schools that do not require students to pass special examinations before gaining admission. Thus, in Canada and the United States (among other countries), admission to law schools requires that one passes the LSAT, medical schools have the MCAT, business schools the GMAT, dental schools the DAT, pharmacy schools the PCAT, and so on. In the United States four out of five students graduating with GPA’s of B-minus or better, and with a college degree ensuring neither the knowledge of subject matter nor basic skills, employers and graduate schools have had to rely on other measures to sift applicants.

Standardized test scores and institutional “reputation” have become more important than the judgments of teachers and scholars. The result is the discouragement of excellence, the concealment of failure, and the torpedoing of the university’s own credibility. While these are harsh accusations that are hard to believe, they are the consequences of grade inflation.

The MBA Paradox

Further, to the extent that credentials are tickets to privilege, those who occupy positions of privilege and who wish to protect those positions, will implement rules and standards that support the acquisition and amassing of credentials. And this is at the base of education inflation, which today has spiralled out of control. But this gives rise to an important contradiction that relates to the charge that “Higher education is becoming mass education and in the process is being radically democratized” (Karabell 1998:xx). The desire to impose social closure and restrict access to the ranks of the privileged was contradicted by the democratization of higher education.

To stem the inflationary trend, which was fuelled by the democratization of business education, and to restore the MBA to its elevated position in the credentials hierarchy, most business schools have attempted to re-impose a traditional form of social closure; one which will give greater advantage to the privileged. Reasoning that an oversupply of MBAs on the market caused the inflation in the first place, the guardians of the supply source, administrators at the elite business schools, have embarked on a project to restrict access to their schools by virtually privatizing them. Thus, the more recognized and reputable schools have raised tuition and associated costs to levels that are now way out of the reach of the democratized masses, while the less recognized schools have followed suit, though to a lesser degree.

This has served to institute a system of first-class and second-class MBAs, along with a host of other more lowly placed business graduates with undergraduate degrees and college diplomas. Ironically, therefore, the democratization of business education that followed the credential inflation in business degrees, has had the unintended consequence of reinforcing more clearly a structure of stratification among various business schools and programs.

References

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