Why Does the Trump Compact Talk About Grading?

The desire for objective grades connects to broader ideas about merit.

'Grade Integrity'

By Beckie Supiano **October 15, 2025**

Many portions of the draft compact that the Trump administration sent to nine universities earlier this month – and has since opened up to any takers - are familiar from its other efforts to reshape higher education.

Then there's section five: a 100-word paragraph with the broad heading "Student Learning," which focuses entirely on how the federal government wants colleges to use grades.

What is this less-obvious section about? And how does it fit into the broader agenda?

Colleges that sign the compact, it says, "commit to grade integrity." They agree that each grade should reflect "the quality, breadth, and depth of the student's achievement," and "must not be inflated, or deflated, for any non-academic reason, but only rigorously reflect the demonstrated mastery of a subject that the grade purports to represent." It also describes accountability measures such as "publishing grade distribution dashboards with multiyear trendlines, public statements that explain student outcomes and any unusual upward trends, and comparisons with peer institutions."

Many professors might nod along to some part of that. But even within its relatively few sentences, the compact contains contradictory ideas about grades.

The compact's description of what grades should include sounds like it could have come from educators who want to more closely align grades with learning, said Robert Talbert, the co-author of *Grading For Growth: A Guide to Alternative Grading Practices that Promote Authentic Learning and Student Engagement in Higher Education* and a professor of mathematics at Grand Valley State University. "The first couple of sentences here could have been written by any alternative-grading advocate out there, no matter what their political persuasion was," he said.

But the compact's description of grades is "seductive," said Josh Eyler, author of *Failing Our Future: How Grades Harm Students, and What We Can Do about It* and senior director of the University of Mississippi's Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, because it suggests that grades are an objective measure when in practice, they are a subjective determination of how a student performed in a particular context.

The idea of objectively awarded grades, Eyler said, connects to the Trump administration's broader concept of merit: "That the meritocracy exists, and we can force educational institutions to create this supposed completely even playing field" on which "everyone would be able to

succeed simply with the force of their own will." No need, then, to worry about addressing inequities.

Selecting or Developing Talent?

While the first half of section five describes what an individual grade should be, the second half is about grade distributions. It reads like a plan for reining in grade inflation, which is seen in some corners as a significant problem.

College grades have, in fact, been rising for decades: a clear, if only somewhat officially documented, trend. Longtime professors have seen it, too.

"There's no evidence that students are smarter today - more knowledgeable, more skilled, more informed – than they were in 1965, when a C was still close to the most common college grade," said Mark Bauerlein, an emeritus professor of English at Emory University. "It could be that there are people in the Trump administration who understand that the grade-inflation problem is simply part of the intellectual decay that has certainly happened in higher education."

But these two ideas – that grades should measure a particular student's "demonstrated mastery of a subject" and that it's also suspicious when there are *too many* high grades - are in tension. When colleges tackle grade inflation, the most obvious fixes are to grade on a curve or cap the number of A's a professor can distribute. But those methods compare students' performance to that of their peers. That's a different kind of evaluation than comparing students to a standard – and one that's at odds with the idea that grades reflect any given student's grasp of the material.

Both perspectives – that grades should compare students to a standard, or to one another - are in circulation at colleges themselves. And they map onto two visions of the role of instructors, notes Thomas Guskey, a professor emeritus of education at the University of Kentucky who has written several books on grading and helped lead a team that synthesized 100 years of evidence on the issue for the American Educational Research Association. "Is your purpose to select talent?," he said, "or is it to develop talent?"

If lots of their students get A's, developers might see a success story. Selectors might think they didn't push the top students hard enough. Developers tend not to be worried about grade inflation. Selectors are.

Those who worry about grade inflation point to studies showing that while grades have risen, today's students are not performing at a higher level than those in the past when measured in other ways, like on a consistent final exam. Grades are rising, students aren't performing better; hence, grades are inflated.

But some academics who study grades aren't sold on inflation as the right interpretation. Grades might go up for good reasons: because a particular college has grown more selective, say, or its instructors are teaching more effectively.

What about the critique that results on other measures of learning, like final exams and standardized tests, don't support the rise in grades? "That is actually a really classic trap," said

Ethan Hutt, an associate professor of education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the co-author of *Off the Mark: How Grades, Ratings, and Rankings Undermine Learning (but Don't Have To)*.

"The fact that grades and test scores do not match one-to-one is not evidence of inflation," he said. "It just is evidence that they're measuring two different things."

Recentering Rigor

High grades are especially common at the closely watched name-brand institutions. No great surprise: Applicants get into such colleges in part by earning high grades in high school, where grades are also on the rise.

Some individual colleges have worked to bring average grades down - but this rarely lasts for long, because it turns out students aren't the only ones who prefer high grades. Still, some professors say that when everyone gets an A, students invest less in academics and more in other pursuits where they have the chance to distinguish themselves, and that it cheapens the grades of top performers.

And, perhaps important in the context of the compact, rising grades are also seen by conservative critics of higher ed as evidence that students are unserious, and colleges have lost their way. Curbing grade inflation, then, is one way to try and recenter rigor.

Frederick M. Hess, a senior fellow and the director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, linked the pro-Palestinian student-protest movement to grade inflation and a lack of sufficient academic expectations at elite colleges in a 2023 article in the *National Review*, calling out "studies" majors on gender and race in particular. "There's the sense here," Hess said in an interview with *The Chronicle*, that "by focusing on rigor, you are also addressing the areas where those of us on the right fear that there's been the most drift into self-indulgence and ideology."

Jody Greene, a professor of literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz who recently served as associate campus provost for academic success and was the founding director of its teaching center, agrees that the conservative critique – that "privileged kids at elite schools are getting off too easily" - informs this part of the compact. But it's being fused, Greene said, with a second conservative critique: "Underprivileged kids at elite schools are getting off too easily," because expanding access and student-success efforts have changed who gets into and through college. This second critique links to conservative efforts to abandon holistic admissions and dismantle DEI programs. The two critiques, Greene said, "don't actually fit together all that well."

Despite that awkwardness, by including the section on grades the administration has seized on an issue that many people in and outside of higher education do worry about - one that can't be easily solved by individual professors or even institutions, and hence is ripe for intervention.

Peter Burkholder is among those who want to see grade inflation tackled. Indeed, he's tried to bring attention to the issue at and beyond Fairleigh Dickinson University, where he's a professor

of history. Burkholder interpreted the part of the compact that's about inflating and deflating individual students' grades as concern that professors are biased, grading with an eye to students' political views. Research has not supported this idea, he noted. And while biased grading might happen occasionally, he added, colleges have grade appeals processes – and he'd expect a student who appealed on these grounds to win.

Burkholder also worried about the proposed accountability measures. Grade dashboards might be fine, he said. "But then, who interprets those? And who says, OK, this is acceptable, and that's not? I think this would give the Trump administration a tremendous amount of power." How granular, he wondered, would the data be? College-level, or departmental, or even individual faculty? And what could that unleash, in a system of carrots and sticks, at a time when people report things professors say in class so that professors lose their jobs?

The compact, Burkholder said, does include a loophole, suggesting a college could justify "any unusual upward trends" in grades, though it's unclear how it would do so. That might offer some comfort in a good-faith negotiation, he said. But that, he said, does not seem to be what colleges are being offered.

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please email the editors or submit a letter for publication.

About the Author

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