

# Some Observations From A Very Telling Innocuous Query: An Essay On The State Of Higher Education In America

José Castillo, Truman State University, USA  
Michael Wakefield, Colorado State University-Pueblo, USA  
Jane LeMaster, University of Texas-Pan American, USA

## ABSTRACT

*We presents a self-reflective assessment of higher education from the perspective of educators and administrators prompted by a common question addressed to many of us, perhaps hundreds of times in the year; “What’s my grade?” Upon some scrutiny, we find a series of troubling interrelated issues that more or less depict a system of higher education adrift in a sea of maladies and its course in need of correction, lest a total ‘wreck’ befall the system.*

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## A MYRIAD OF INTERRELATED ISSUES

What’s my grade?” So goes the familiar refrain to professors usually some time toward late semester. The query normally comes from either the diligent “A” student who wishes to verify that your books reflect the “A” he/she surely is maintaining, or from the student who knowingly underperforms and wants to know he/she will still squeak by with a “C,” still others quite happy with a “D.” A rather sobering reality that says, despite our best efforts, some students can’t excel beyond the mean, while others sadly choose not to excel. Upon some reflection, the query, “What’s my grade?” actually raises other, perhaps more troubling, concerns. For example, is it possible that the imposition of qualitative marks of distinction for performance in the classroom, rather than the old “pass/fail” grade system, drives some of our students to perform toward a utilitarian cut-off on an arbitrary scale, rather than the virtuous pursuit of knowledge for practical or aesthetic reasons? If in fact students are motivated by the “reward” effect of grades, the question, “What’s my grade?” can be interpreted to mean, “Have I *done* enough?” rather than the nobler, “Have I *learned* enough?” There is another disconcerting question that arises from the motivation for asking, “What’s my grade?”; namely, is it possible we are graduating citizens who by the very nature of societal and educational processes, have been implicitly told that being “average” and even “underperforming” is acceptable? This notion, of course, is anathema to the protestant ethic we often argue in part built this nation. What’s worse, as many of us have no doubt experienced, some students willfully engage in clearly inappropriate behavior, often with impunity, in order to attain laudatory marks in the classroom, demonstrating an even more troubling lack of proper “schooling.” Indeed, judging from our repeated experiences in recent years, one could say a certain zeitgeist of immorality seems to prevail among recent generations (Kerkvliet and Sigmund, 1999; Pizzolatto and Bevill, 1996). Thus, an even bigger question bears asking; “Just exactly what kind of society are these unethical citizens likely to help shape?” Should we not be fearful for the hand we play(ed) in it?

With that being said, there is a more important corollary issue to the query, “What’s my grade?” As we recognize higher education is part and parcel of a greater social, political, and economic system, it is reasonable to ask, whether forces within and without higher education have been held in check so as to maintain the purity of the ‘grade’ system? That is, while there may be no doubt that a student earning an “F” today means absolute failure to meet minimum standards, at the other end of the scale is an “A” today truly a mark of excellence, a measure of mastery of material, or are there greater forces at play that have tended to blur the lines? Given the policy change of

a few years ago to limit the numbers of “As” awarded by Princeton University (The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 30, 2005), which other top schools have subsequently adopted, it is easily arguable that grade inflation has plagued the system. A strong case for this view has been proposed by Birnbaum (1977) who looked at the phenomenon in history. He argues that grade inflation is endemic to our entire higher education system and can be traced in great measure to the Vietnam War. Faculty in the mid-1960’s were loathing to fail students, especially male students, since doing so was tantamount to delivering a potential death sentence to a young man who would undoubtedly be drafted and whisked away to an inopportune war. Giving students passing grades, essentially for activist reasons, allowed them to remain enrolled in school, thereby avoiding the draft. Birnbaum (1977) argues that graduate students given a “pass” in such fashion matriculated into the ranks of assistant professor to become the “new guard,” in turn perpetuating the more relaxed standards that were applied to their own work.

From the perspective of the type of student making the query, “What’s my grade?”, NBC News recently reported the story of four developmentally challenged students who were enrolled at the University of California—Los Angeles under the auspices of a new program called “Pathways” offered through UCLA extension (*NBC Nightly News with Lester Holt*, Saturday December 1, 2007). According to the story, the objective of “Pathways” is to provide students, some with Down’s Syndrome and Autism, “the college experience” that their disabilities would otherwise have denied them prior to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. This action by UCLA officials speaks loudly of a profound egalitarianism, which the late critic and essayist William A. Henry, III vehemently opposed. Henry (1994) argued that America’s social fabric (specifically, the “threads” of higher education) was not only frayed, but tearing all around due to America’s dogged pursuit to hold true to the words in the Declaration of Independence that “...all men are created equal” no matter the endeavor. Perhaps consequential to this egalitarianism is the contemporary view of the “student as customer.” Indeed, it bears asking; does this view not encourage pursuits from every segment of society regardless of ability or preparation, and as a result forces the hand of institutions to commit resources where outcomes are questionable at best? Perhaps exacerbating this problem, is it not the case that belt tightening and other budgetary concerns facing public institutions undoubtedly force administrations to increasingly view students as simply bodies to fill seats in order to generate funding to keep these institutions open? Hence, this perspective leads schools to admit more marginal and challenged students, while simultaneously asking faculty, who are not trained to deal with such issues, to accommodate these students and help them succeed in order to generate more tuition resulting from higher retention rates. Yet paradoxically, the push for funding this way seemingly backfires for, naturally, more students leads to larger classes—where due to time and monetary constraints, the overtaxed professor may resort to multiple choice tests as the only viable performance tool, administered sometimes in quarters so cramped that the temptation to cheat is almost literally thrown into the students’ lap. In such situations, if the questions are not easy enough, a neighbor can inadvertently provide the correct answer.

Whether it be underperforming students or egalitarianism, a result of activism or the pursuit of external funding, the picture depicted shows a higher education system that is drastically different from that of the 1800’s to which Henry (1994) harkened we return. By comparison, today’s higher education system may be described as “dysfunctional” or “schizophrenic.” Either of these characterizations is apt because, among other things, able and learning-disabled students are now deemed equally trainable within the same context, with exceptions on time limits, exam types, and test aids, imposed to “level the playing field” for the disabled student. In such a context, does not higher education simply boil down to a very constrained pursuit of knowledge at best, or, as Henry (1994) argues, does it mean “...the implicit rejection of intellectual adventure” (p. 158) at worst? To this end, Henry (1994) noted colleges (due to the “pusillanimity” of professors) now pander to students who demand that courses and programs be made more relevant and streamlined to the careers they seek, not unlike “technical” schools and “online” schools that may even (to our horror) offer on-line PhDs. However, shaping higher education in this manner explicitly rejects the “classical” education which, according to Henry, did far more than prepare students for careers; it prepared students to be good citizens and allowed them to commune among learned circles. Henry further pointed out that college now is one of “...sheer decline in the amount and quality of work expected in class...[due to] the influx of mediocrities [who] relentlessly lower the general standards ...to the level the weak ones can meet” (p. 161). These ideas echo Bloom’s (1987) criticism of the “closing” of (youths’) minds resulting from the complete rejection of classical studies brought on by a misguided call for “openness” to other approaches to education, and more contemporary careers—to wit, the growth of Criminal Justice and Crime Scene Investigation studies at top state schools. Yet, for all the preparation such “openness” speaks to, Goodman (2001) noted that while “...almost 90

percent of the 4-year colleges in the United States [once] had a language requirement for graduation [right up until the 60's]" (p.441) the number has fallen precipitously to 8% today; this at a time when the forces of globalization, whether good or bad, would dictate not that language skills be minimized in core curriculums, but rather (greatly) emphasized. Should this trend of streamlining curriculums continue, according to Bloom, it will mean "...higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students" (subtitle to his 1987 book, *The Closing of the American Mind*).

Henry and Bloom are but two recent voices in the long running argument that asserts higher education is somehow wrecked and in need of repair (Marsh, 1959; McGrath, 1953; Rumberger, 1980). Most recently, Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings' report on higher education points out:

"...disturbing signs that many students who do earn degrees have not actually mastered the reading, writing, and thinking skills we expect of college graduates. Over the past decade, literacy among college graduates has actually declined. Unacceptable numbers of college graduates enter the workforce without the skills employers say they need in an economy where, as the truism holds correctly, knowledge matters more than ever" (*A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, Spellings Commission on Higher Education, 2006, p. viii).

"Lowering the bar" to entry and ultimately performance, as well as the pursuit of the seal of approval from various external ranking organizations, are also reflective of another element; the push/need for greater government funding. University administrations, especially in state-funded institutions are cognizant of the constant pressure to attract, retain, and matriculate in order to maintain funding. Faculty are strongly encouraged to find ways to make students feel welcome, be "successful" (meaning pass) in their courses through whatever means, and get them to the next level. Encouragement can be explicit through pep talks that link enrollments to funding levels, or implicit through student perceptions registered in opinion surveys of faculty teaching, which are further reinforced in annual performance evaluations that often heavily weight such student evaluations. It stands to reason that heavily weighted student surveys of faculty performance tend to legitimize the "student as customer" concept, thereby transferring a certain amount of power in the classroom to the student (Maguad, 2007). Furthermore, as stated earlier, the chase for large enrollment numbers using the fewest faculty resources translates directly to large sections, which necessitates a different approach to testing—reliance on multiple choice objective exams, and few or no essays. The unintended consequence is that students can often graduate without having been required to write extensively, if at all, as former Secretary of Education Spellings uncovered.

By all accounts then, what we have today is a troubled higher education system, a system that, when viewed from the perspective of history, seems to have atrophied and broken down little by little over time. It is a system seemingly afflicted by the third law of thermodynamics, the entropy law that affects all matter living and inert: all things must pass from order to disorder over time. As we (Americans) have proceeded headlong into the centuries since the inception of our country, interrelated political, economic, and social forces have irrepressibly introduced increasingly more chaos into the educational system, undermining our best efforts to prepare future generations of intellectuals and professionals. More concretely, higher education in America has evolved in a way that is causing the system to obey the immutable entropy law—despite the efforts of the best and the brightest to improve the system. In the end, colleges and universities are proceeding from tidy, purposeful institutions to bastions of chaos where the expectation continues to be the charge of mass-producing "quasi-educated" individuals, regardless of the innate capacity of the individuals and the resources available to faculty.

As we proceed onward into our collective futures as players in higher education, the biggest of all questions bears asking, "Just what, exactly, is "our grade?" If, in fact, our educational systems are inexorably bound toward increasing chaos, perhaps at times, briefly mitigated by ad-hoc measures, is the present situation the best we can manage? Have we disentangled and solved all possible attending problems well enough, or have we, failing future generations, "underperformed" in higher education? Like our students, have we succumbed to the allure of a "good enough" academic instructional performance, or are we being true to the more noble educational standards of our respective disciplines?

#### AUTHOR INFORMATION

**José Castillo** is Associate Professor of business administration in the School of Business at Truman State University, Kirksville, MO. He received his Ph.D. in International Business from The University of Texas-Pan American, Edinburg, Texas. His research interests include factors affecting family-owned enterprises, social network theory and small business, knowledge management and its connection to management cognition and intellectual capital.

**Michael W. Wakefield** is Associate Professor of Management and Assessment Coordinator at Hasan School of Business, Colorado State University – Pueblo. He has multiple publications in the field of management, and has made numerous presentations on learning and assessment processes.

**Jane LeMaster** is Professor of Management and Executive Director of the Center for Online Learning, Teaching and Technology at the University of Texas Pan American. She has multiple publications and presentations on using simulation in the classroom and in online teaching and learning.

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