Easy A's

Getting a good grade at the UA isn't necessarily a noteworthy accomplishment

By HANK STEPHENSON

Alex Gendreau, a junior majoring in dramaturgy at the University of Arizona, was confused when she got a B in an acting class. She had gone to all the classes, written all the papers and earned a high A on her final.

When Gendreau sent an e-mail to her professor asking why she got the B, the professor changed it to an A.

"She never told me why she changed the grade," Gendreau says. "It was weird."

With that A, Gendreau received the most prevalent letter grade being awarded on the UA campus: During the Spring 2008 semester, 41 percent of all undergraduate grades at the UA were A's, according to a database obtained and analyzed by the Tucson Weekly through a Freedom of Information Act request.

The database--of roughly 3,000 undergraduate courses and more than 70,000 grades assigned--revealed that 74 percent of all grades were either A's or B's. "Average" C grades made up only 16 percent of the total, while below-average D's and E's (the equivalent of an F, or failing, grade) totaled only 10 percent collectively.

The data points to two possible scenarios: Either 74 percent of students are above average, or the meaning of "average" has changed. The latter scenario is known as grade inflation.

Grade inflation (also called grade compression, because more students are compressed into the top grade categories) devalues education, according to Carl Berkhout, a UA English professor and former member of the now-defunct UA Caucus on Grading, which was formed in 1998 to discuss and address grade inflation.

"The effect is grades become meaningless," Berkhout says. "It's widely known that undergraduate grades are pretty much meaningless."

Administrators are unlikely to tell professors to give more E's, he says, because good grades make the university look good.

"There's not much incentive to change," Berkhout says. "The students aren't going to complain."

The most common grade in his classes is a C, Berkhout says with a chuckle--and the data confirms this--although there are benefits for professors who give better grades. Course evaluations are an important factor in administrative decisions regarding professors, and easy graders tend to get better evaluations, says Berkhout.

The UA is certainly not the only university to deal with grade inflation, which first came into the public eye during the
Vietnam War when, for many male draft-age students, the difference between passing and failing could mean the difference between peace or war. Like college enrollment, GPAs increased.

The subject got further attention in 2001, when a Harvard study found that nearly 50 percent of all grades were A's, up from a third 15 years earlier. That same year, The Boston Globe reported nine out of 10 Harvard students graduated with honors.

Princeton made headlines in 2004 by initiating a grade-deflation policy, restricting A's to 35 percent of total grades within departments.

Gail Burd, the UA vice provost for academic affairs, says she didn't know grades were so high at the UA.

"That's not good," she says while examining the data at a large wood desk in her office.

While Burd is reluctant to call grade inflation a problem, she says she would not like the grades to be "quite that high." An ideal grade distribution would be about 50 percent A's and B's, she says, and 50 percent C's, D's and E's.

Burd points out that upper-level courses are included in the data, and that the high number of A's and B's in those classes makes sense, because those students may be truly deserving; these students may have found something they enjoy. Plus, students in danger of getting poorer grades may drop out of the classes.

"And the faculty is probably easier than they should be," she admits.

The UA has no specific guidelines regarding grade inflation, Burd says, and there hasn't been any structured discussion she knows of since the Caucus on Grading dissolved in 2001. There probably won't be any in the near future, either, according to Burd.

"With all the things going on right now, it's not my priority," she says. "I'm worried about having enough seats and classes until we get through this (financial) challenge."

There are two strategies to grading, she says: Grades can be distributed in a bell-shaped curve, with the peak near the middle, or on a point system where students do the work, get the points and earn the grade.

"A hard-and-fast policy about how many A's we can give is not the answer," she says.

She agrees with Berkhout that it is a professor's responsibility to regulate their grade distribution fairly.

"Show them the data," she says. "Show it to the department heads. Show it to the teachers. If they see data that they're wimps, the department heads might ask why they're grading so easy."

But Olivia Mendoza, the program coordinator for the Department of Biochemistry and Molecular Biophysics, says the department isn't grading easy; the students are working hard, which is why they were awarded 41 percent A's and 28 percent B's in the spring 2008 semester.

"We have a majority of honor students in our department," she says. "These are kids who achieve the best, because they all want to apply to med school or pharmacy school or dental school or continue research in Ph.D. programs."

She adds that students who fall below a 2.5 GPA generally drop out of the department.

"Honestly, they're not easy A's (in our classes)," she says. "They really are smart kids."

Mendoza says differentiating smart students from super-smart students isn't hard, because graduate schools take a variety of factors into account beyond grades, including GRE test scores, volunteer work and letters of recommendation.

The department also looks at the grade distribution periodically, and doesn't see anything wrong with students doing well.

"A lot of professors would like to give A-plusses" to students who are truly above the average, she says.

Berkhout thinks administrators need to discuss the issue and urge professors to review their own grading practices.
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However, grade inflation is a hard trend to buck, considering the refusal by students, professors and administration to address the issue.

"There are just too many factors in favor," he says.