

Grade Inflation at Southeastern?

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Any discussion of grade inflation requires a few definitions so that the inquiry may be focused. The definitions used in this paper are from research at the University of Wyoming and follow:

- **Grade Increase** - Grade increase is a rise in average grades over a period of time. An increase does not equate with inflation.
- **Grade Compression** - Grade compression is a clustering of grades on the grade range. In the conversation about grade inflation, the term usually describes aggregation at the high end.
- **Grade Inflation** - Grade inflation is an increase in grades without a corresponding increase in the quality of student work.
- **Grade Disparity** - Grade disparities are discernible differences in grading patterns among or between departments, college, or groups of instructors. Disparities do not equate with inflation.

Anecdotal evidence abounds in the conversation about grade inflation. Although this kind of evidence provides compelling personal stories, it does not suffice to demonstrate a trend upward in grading, let alone justify a conclusion that grades are inflated.”¹

... “the phenomenon [grade inflation] presents itself both as an increase in students’ grade point averages at graduation as well as an increase in high grades and a decrease in low grades recorded for individual courses.”²

The first data set that will be considered is the overall cumulative GPA of the graduating classes for the past twelve years – Figure 1. As may be seen from Figure 1, both the GPA and the ACT have been increasing over time. Using a t-test, both the GPA and the ACT average changes from 1995-96 to 2006-07 are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

When the GPA is placed in ratio to the ACT we see that in 1995-96 the ratio was 6.924. In 2006-2007 the ratio was 7.003. This shows that the ACT average for the graduating classes has grown at a slightly faster rate than the average GPA.

Figure 1

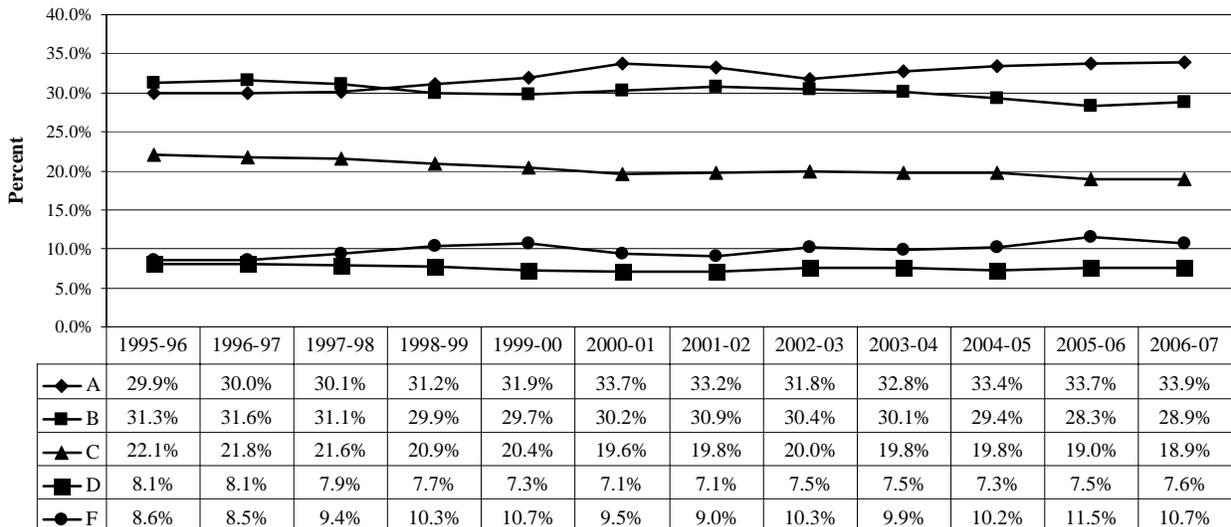
Graduating Class Cumulative GPA and ACT Averages



Another data set to consider is that of earned grades (A through F) for the entire undergraduate population for the study period. Those data are reported in Figure 2.

Figure 2

Percentage Distribution of Earned Course Grades Over Time



From Figure 2 above the following percentage changes are calculated comparing 1995-96 to 2006-07:

- Grades of A increased from 29.9% of the total to 33.9% of the total.
- Grades of B decreased from 31.3% of the total to 28.9% of the total.
- Grades of C decreased from 22.1% of the total to 18.9% of the total.
- Grades of D decreased from 8.1% of the total to 7.6% of the total.
- Grades of F increased from 8.6% of the total to 10.7% of the total.

An interesting point from the literature on the general topic of grade inflation is from Princeton University: “Princeton's new grading expectations, adopted by the faculty in April 2004, posit a common grading standard for every academic department and program, under which A's shall account for less than 35 percent of the grades given in undergraduate courses and less than 55 percent of the grades given in junior and senior independent work. The standard by which the grading record of a department or program will be evaluated is the percentage of A's given over the previous three years.”⁵

While it is true that Southeastern does not have grading expectations of the Princeton type, if one was to apply the Princeton benchmark for A’s to Southeastern’s data from Figure 2 we see that the most recent three year average for grades of A are within the Princeton expectations.

The percentages below are broken out by lower and upper level courses in figures 3 and 4 which follow.

From Figure 3 below the following percentage changes are calculated comparing 1995-96 to 2006-07:

- Grades of A increased from 27.7% of the total to 31.1% of the total.
- Grades of B decreased from 29.8% of the total to 27.3% of the total.
- Grades of C decreased from 23.0% of the total to 19.7% of the total.
- Grades of D decreased from 9.3% of the total to 8.9% of the total.
- Grades of F increased from 10.3% of the total to 13.1% of the total.

Figure 3

Lower Division Course Grades Over Time

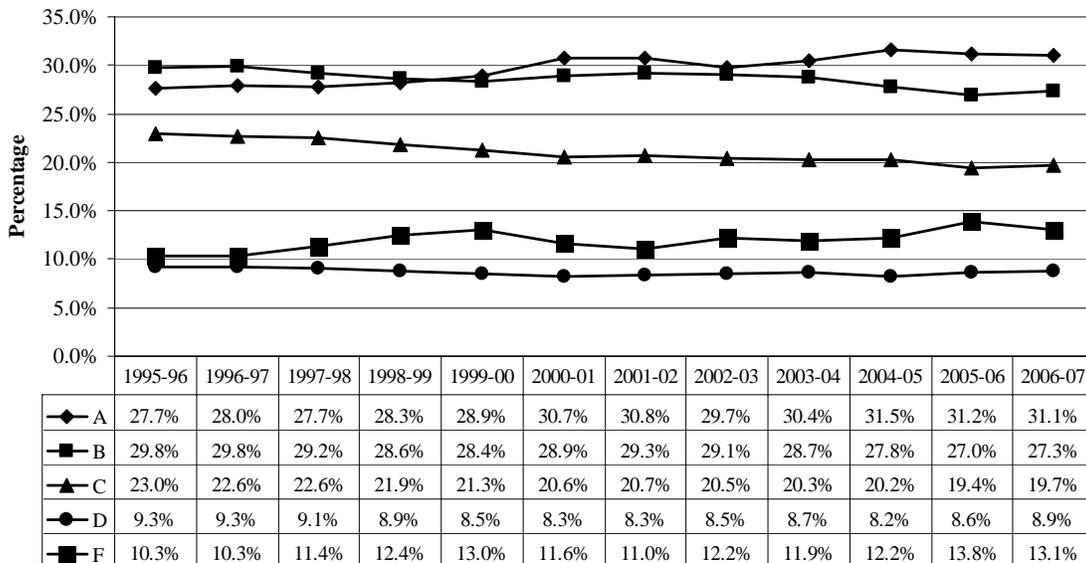
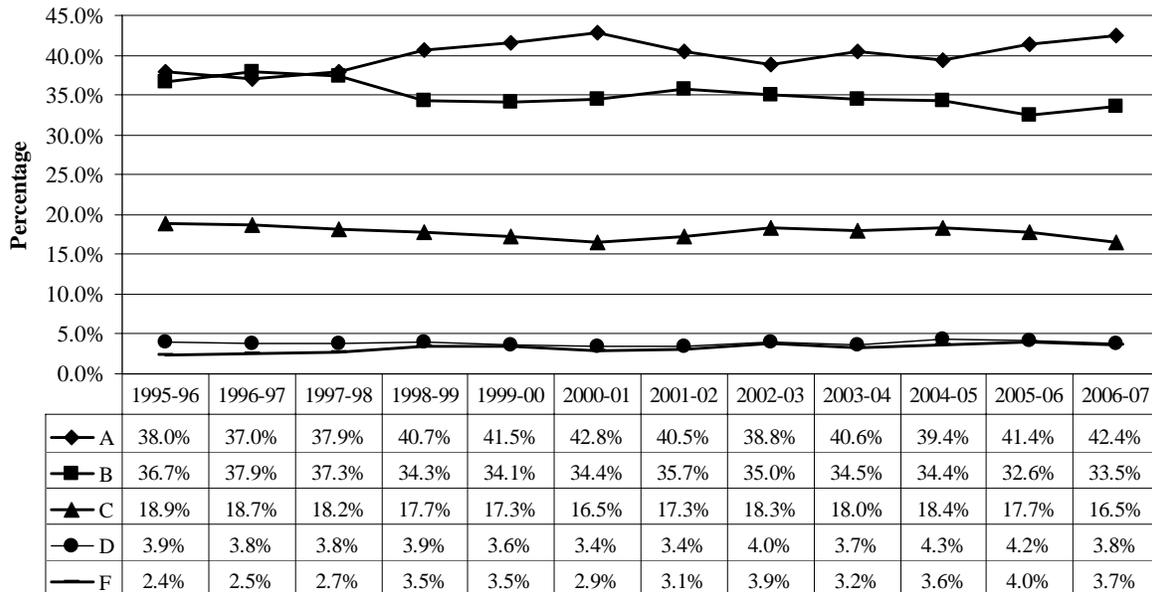


Figure 4

Upper Division Course Grades Over Time



From Figure 4 above the following percentage changes are calculated comparing 1995-96 to 2006-07:

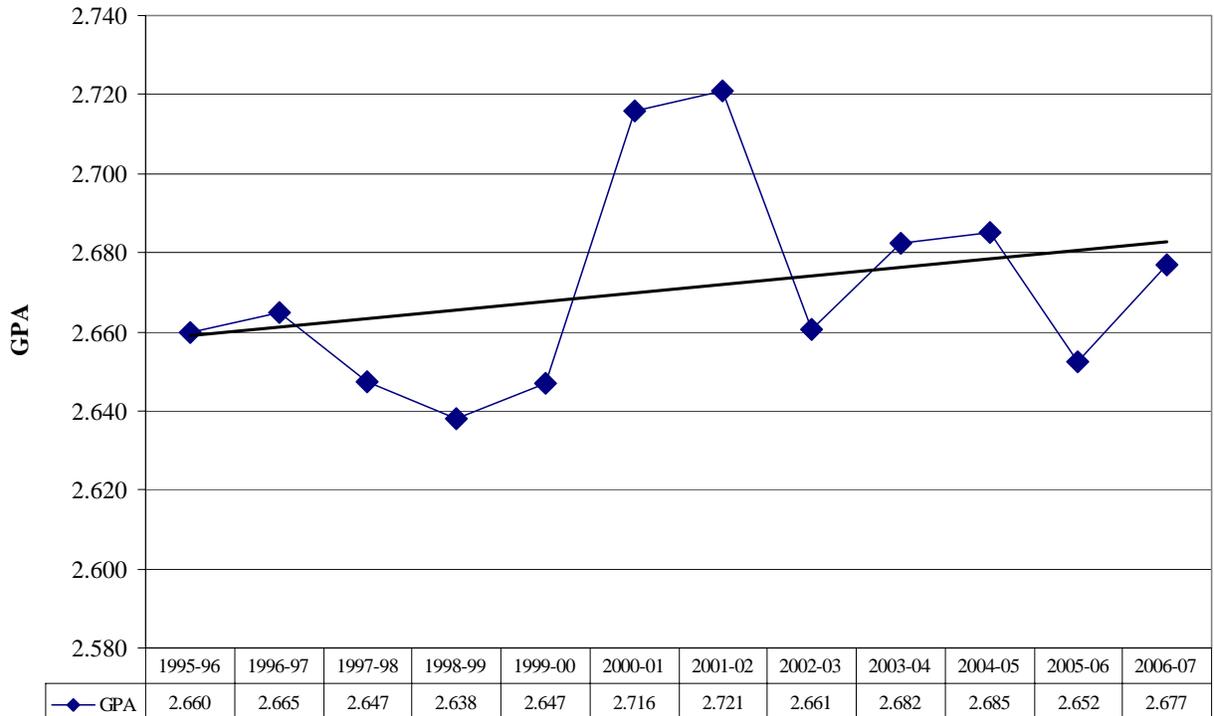
- Grades of A increased from 38.0% of the total to 42.4% of the total.
- Grades of B decreased from 36.7% of the total to 33.5% of the total.
- Grades of C decreased from 18.9% of the total to 16.5% of the total.
- Grades of D decreased from 3.9% of the total to 3.8% of the total.
- Grades of F increased from 2.4% the total to 3.7% of the total.

From Figures 3 and 4 it is interesting to note, but not unexpected, that the grades of A and B in upper division courses comprise a larger percentage (75.9%) of the grades at that level than do the grades of A and B (58.4%) from lower division courses.

While the above calculations may be informative they do not give us information as to what changes, if any, have taken place in the overall course GPA. From Figure 5 we see that overall GPA has moved up and down over time. However, the trend line shows some growth over the twelve years of the study. Conventional wisdom suggests this growth in GPA is consistent with increasing admissions standards and, possibly, rising expectations. Research supports this assertion.³

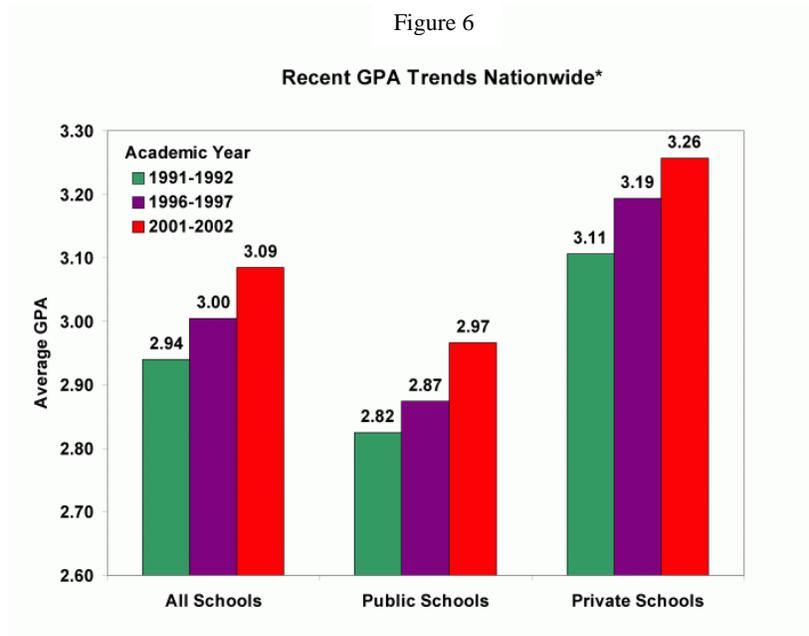
Figure 5

GPA Calculated From All Undergraduate Courses Offered In An Academic Year (With Trend Line)



The chart below is from GradeInflation.com.

Figure 6



*Average undergraduate for Alabama, California-Irvine, Carleton, Duke, Florida, Georgia Tech, Hampden-Sydney, Harvard, Harvey Mudd, Nebraska-Kearney, North Carolina-Chapel Hill, North Carolina-Greensboro, Northern Michigan, Pomona, Princeton, Purdue, Texas, University of Washington,

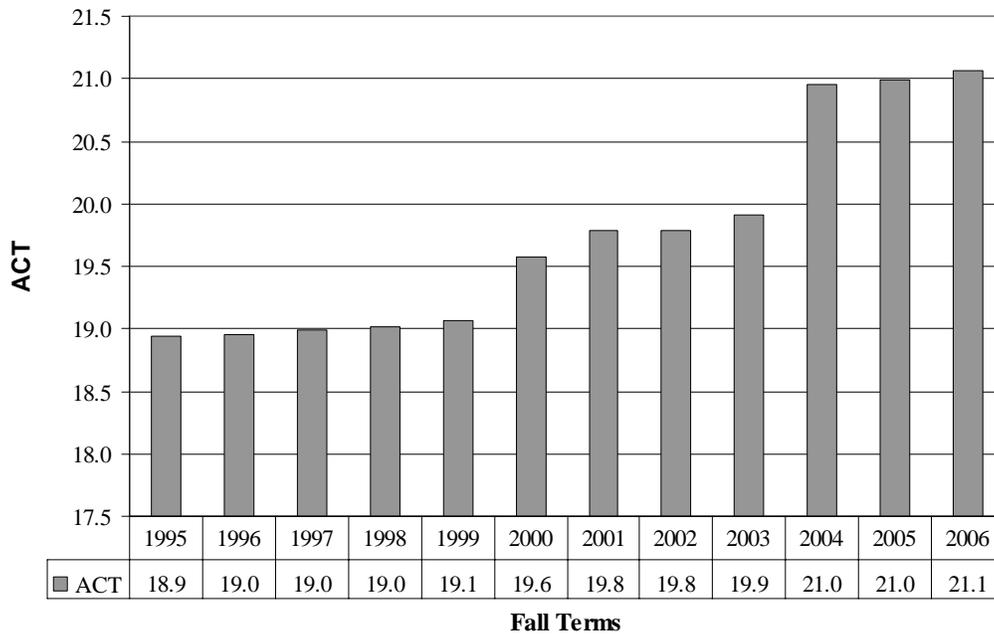
Utah, Wheaton (Illinois), Winthrop, and Wisconsin-La Crosse. Note that inclusion in the average does not imply that an institution has significant inflation. Institutions comprising this average were chosen strictly because they have either published their data or have sent their data to the author on trends over the last 11 years”.⁴ These institutions are not being offered as comparable institutions to Southeastern, but their data are being used because it is available. However, Southeastern’s data compares quite favorably to these institutions.

Using the public schools reference data from Figure 6, we calculate the increase in course GPA from 1996-97 to 2001-02 has increased 3.5%. For this same time period, Southeastern’s course GPA has increased only 2.1% (from 2.665 to 2.721) or forty percent below the comparative average increase. This suggests that Grade Increase should be less of a concern at Southeastern than it is for many in the survey group. Further, it is interesting to note that the academic year 2001-02 for Southeastern exhibited the highest overall course GPA of the twelve year study period.

Another aspect of the inquiry that may prove illuminating is what has happened to the freshman cohort average ACT scores over the study period.

Figure 7

Freshman Cohort ACT



From Figure 7 above we do see that the average ACT score has increased (11.2%) over the study period. It could be argued that the ACT score is not a complete surrogate measure of student quality. However, research suggests that increasing ACT scores relate positively to an increase in the quality of student work.³ Given the findings of the ACT report, the increasing scores may explain some, if not all, of the Grade Increase experienced by Southeastern.

Observations – From the data provided in this inquiry we have seen that Grade Increase is exhibited by grades at Southeastern. However, from these data one should not conclude that Grade Inflation exists because the benchmarks used here do not speak directly to possible changes in the quality of student work

and according to the definitions used in this research no conclusion should be drawn regarding grade inflation.

References:

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<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2005/06/03/lombardi>
- 3- Noble, Julie; Sawyer, Richard; ACT Research Report, 2002, Predicting Different Levels of Academic Success in College Using High School and ACT Composite Score
- 4- National Trends in Grade Inflation, American Colleges and Universities,
<http://gradeinflation.com/>
- 5- Princeton University, News@Princeton,
<http://www.princeton.edu/main/news/archive/S12/71/58E12/index.xml?section=newsreleases>