

Grade Deflation

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Admit it. You really would like to ace every one of your courses this semester. “Grades are the currency of college,” write Jeremy S. Hyman and Lynn F. Jacobs, co-authors of “Professors’ Guide to Getting Good Grades in College,” published this month by Collins. Mr. Hyman, who has taught philosophy at the University of Arkansas, M.I.T. and Princeton, agreed to demystify the grading process.

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Q. First off, aren’t A’s easy?

A. There’s not as much grade inflation as you think. It is less of an issue at state schools and more of a problem at top schools, where about 50 percent of grades are A’s and B’s, especially in upper-division classes. But that’s changing. Princeton, for example, now limits the number of A’s in undergraduate courses to fewer than 35 percent.

Q. How is grading in college different than in high school?

A. In high school, the grade mill is running all the time. In college, professors aren’t giving much thought to grades until the sixth or seventh week of the semester. Grading is clustered into a few moments — when the grader is occupied with your tests or papers. That’s the time to sweat.

Q. You write that the end of the semester is critical. Can you explain why?

A. The last month of the semester is when students are stressed and losing momentum. Usually a research paper or presentation is due, and the final is given. What you do in the last month could add up to 60 percent of your grade. Students should shed commitments. Triage your courses. Some are not as important as others; some you may be doing better in than others.

Use course resources. When the learning is done, professors often focus students on how to get the best grade. That’s a good time to meet with him. Go to review sessions. You could save 5 to 10 hours of studying. Professors often give out sample questions for the final. If you’re a minimally rational person, you will spend three or four hours on each. They synthesize the course.

Q. What about an E for effort? That always worked in high school.

A. You have the students who don’t hand in good work but think that because they went to all the reviews, hired a tutor and did the extension problems, they should earn a good grade. They probably won’t.