
7-8-2018

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Recommended APA Citation

Blum, D. (2018). Experiences of Grade Inflation at an Online University in the United States: An Autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(7), 1583-1612. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3296>

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Abstract

Grade inflation is a problem at universities in the United States. To understand the cultural effect of grade inflation at a regionally accredited online university in the United States, I conducted autoethnographic research as a participant and observer. In this autoethnographic study, the purpose of my research was to explore my experiences being immersed in a grade inflation culture. I addressed a gap of autoethnographic research related to a culture of grade inflation existing at an online university in the United States. I provided seven themes serving as my discoveries related to my observations and participation as a faculty member. My discoveries supported my assumptions that a culture of grade inflation likely exists at the online university. My discoveries also contribute to the overriding theme in the extant literature that grade inflation exists. My discoveries also support the concept that grade inflation is not limited to on ground universities but also extends to online universities in the United States.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Grade Inflation, Online University, Participant Observer

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Experiences of Grade Inflation at an Online University in the United States: An Autoethnography

David A. Blum
Independent Researcher

Grade inflation is a problem at universities in the United States. To understand the cultural effect of grade inflation at a regionally accredited online university in the United States, I conducted autoethnographic research as a participant and observer. In this autoethnographic study, the purpose of my research was to explore my experiences being immersed in a grade inflation culture. I addressed a gap of autoethnographic research related to a culture of grade inflation existing at an online university in the United States. I provided seven themes serving as my discoveries related to my observations and participation as a faculty member. My discoveries supported my assumptions that a culture of grade inflation likely exists at the online university. My discoveries also contribute to the overriding theme in the extant literature that grade inflation exists. My discoveries also support the concept that grade inflation is not limited to on ground universities but also extends to online universities in the United States. Keywords: Autoethnography, Grade Inflation, Online University, Participant Observer

In this study, I explored my experiences as a participant and observer in an academic culture immersed in grade inflation. I sought understanding of the cultural effects of grade inflation at Balagan University (BU) a pseudonym, which is a regionally accredited online university in the United States. In this paper all individual names were changed to protect privacy and confidentiality.

Grade inflation is defined as a net increase in grades and grade point averages (GPA) over time resulting from alterations made in grading standards and practices not reflected in changes related to the quality of students' work (Hu, 2005; Kostal, Kuncel, & Sackett, 2016; O'Halloran & Gordon, 2015). Grade inflation weakens standards of excellence required of students within education institutions to the point where the ability to accurately assess levels of competency and student knowledge is compromised (Tucker & Courts, 2010). The intended audiences for this paper are online university students, instructors and administrators as these individuals might benefit from an autoethnography related to grade inflation. The intended audience might benefit from the discoveries of this study reading a narrative of a faculty who experienced grade inflation. The research addressed a gap of autoethnographic research related to grade inflation at an online university in the United States. The purpose of the research was to explore the author's experiences as a participant and observer in a grade inflation environment at the online university. The gap in literature is no studies exist based on an exhaustive review in multiple academic libraries and relevant online sources. I could not locate literature related to grade inflation at regionally accredited online universities in the United States.

For this study, I employed autoethnography (AE). AE is qualitative research design used to analyze individual's lives (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The purpose of AE is cultural understanding which underlies autobiographical experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Mendez, 2013). The remainder of this paper is structured as literature review, methodology, discoveries, discussion, and conclusion.

Evidence Grade Inflation Exists

The primary focus of grade inflation in the extant literature is with baccalaureate programs at on ground universities in the United States. A review of the extant literature addressed grade inflation as a widespread problem at U.S. universities. Popov and Bernhardt (2013) noted since the 1960s, (a) GPAs have been higher at more prestigious schools, (b) GPAs have risen over time at all universities, and (c) grading standards have fallen quicker at more prestigious schools. Kohn (2002) noted the issue of grade inflation first appeared in peer-reviewed literature in 1894 featuring Harvard University. However, researchers observed a rise in college grade inflation did not occur in U.S. higher education until the 1960s during the Vietnam War and the widespread cultural and social turmoil of the time (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Castillo, Wakefield, & LeMaster, 2010; Gray, 2008; Juola, 1976; Love & Kotchen, 2010; Nikolakakos, Reeves, & Shuch, 2012; Rojstaczer, 2015). Love and Kotchen (2010) noted evidence is strong and positive indicating grade inflation began to rise in the 1960s.

In the early 1960s, Rojstaczer (2015) noted grade distribution in the United States consisted of 15% “As” and 35% “Cs.” Between 1969 and 2001 “As” accounted for 43% of all letter grades earned while “Cs” accounted for 9% of all letter grades earned (Rojstaczer, 2015). Vedder (2010) noted in 1961 students spent approximately 40 hours per week in class and studying. By 2013, students spent approximately 27 hours per week in class and studying yet received higher grades than students did in 1961 (Vedder, 2010).

From the 1960s to the 2000s, “As” rose to 28% of all grades given while “Cs” went down 19%, according to Rojstaczer’s (2015) research. During this timeframe, Gray (2008) estimated 90% of university students received unearned “As” or “Bs.” In this context, unearned means grades were given to students without students putting forth the requisite effort and skill required to earn an “A” or “B” in a traditional rigorous academic environment. Gray’s research concurred with Jaschik (2009) that instructors gave higher grades without a commensurate change in knowledge obtained by students. Jaschik indicated grade inflation rather than students being better prepared was the primary reason for a higher number of “As” or “Bs” being disseminated. Juola (1976) noted an average GPA increase of .404 between 1965 and 1973. Rojstaczer and Healy (2012) noted instructors at private universities gave more “As” and “Bs” than at public universities. Rojstaczer (2003) found GPAs at private universities in 2006–2007 were 0.3 higher than at public universities. Rojstaczer and Healy (2010) recognized an average GPA increase of .13 between 1995 and 2006 at over 160 colleges and universities.

Caruth and Caruth (2013) posited grade inflation appears most common at public universities and liberal arts colleges in the southern states of the United States. The mean GPA at private schools was 0.3 points higher than public universities, and the rate of grade inflation was 25% to 30% higher at private schools (Rojstaczer, 2015). In 1966, 22% of Harvard undergraduate students received “As” (Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). Caruth and Caruth (2013) noted GPAs at private universities increased from 3.09 in 1991 to 3.30 in 2006, a 9.4% increase. By 1997, 46% of Harvard students received “As” (Kezim et al., 2005). At public colleges and universities during the same period GPAs rose from 2.85 to 3.01, a 9.5% increase (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Over the past 35 years, GPAs increased by approximately 0.15 per decade (Rojstaczer, 2015).

Green and Emerson (2007) suggested a potential factor leading to grade inflation was that “... grading is one of the least liked, least understood, and least considered aspects of teaching” (p. 495). Tierney (1999) articulated the phenomenon of grade inflation requires a “... systemic organizational change that reinvents how we structure academic work so that we are more responsive to the needs of society” (p. 2). Society and industry demand higher education administration produce students with the requisite skills and basic knowledge needed to meet business needs (O’Halloran & Gordon, 2014; Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010).

University administrations at some schools such as Princeton University have attempted at lessening grade inflation. In 2004, Princeton University implemented a new grading policy to abate grade inflation (Kezim et al., 2005). Before implementation of the new policy, 43% of Princeton students received “As” and 88% of all grades were “B” and above (Kezim et al., 2005). According to the new policy, the number of “As” awarded was limited to 35% in undergraduate classes, down 46% from 2004 but higher than 31% in the 1970s (Kezim et al., 2005). However, 10 years later, Princeton repealed the policy (Hyde, 2015). Students complained the policy intensified student competition on campus, increased student stress, and students were at a competitive GPA disadvantage with other Ivy League school graduates for employment opportunities (Hyde, 2015).

Higher education administration overall have been unsuccessful at significantly curbing instances of grade inflation at U.S. universities (O’Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Chan, Hao, and Suen (2007) noted grading standards are not uniformed as a potential reason for grading standard to vary over time. Figure 1 is a graphic representative of GPA trends from 1983 to 2013 indicating a steady increase of grade inflation over a 30-year period. Figure 2 is a graphic representative of changes in letter grade distributions over time.

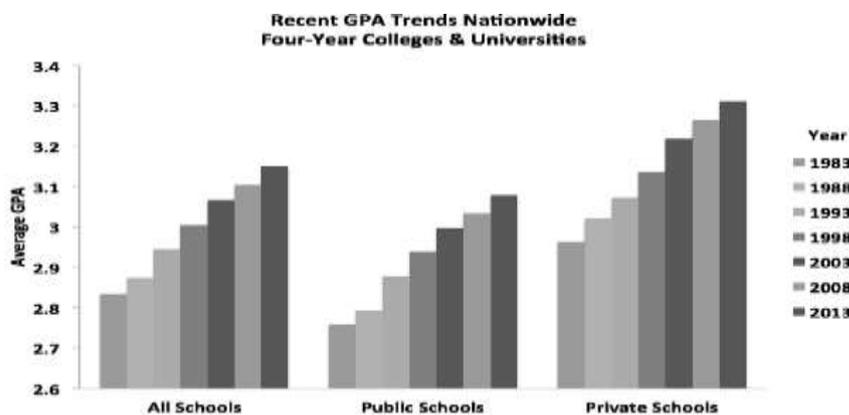


Figure 1: GPA trends in the United States at four-year colleges and universities from 1983 to 2013. Published with permission from S. Rojstaczer. Graph located at <http://www.gradeinflation.com>

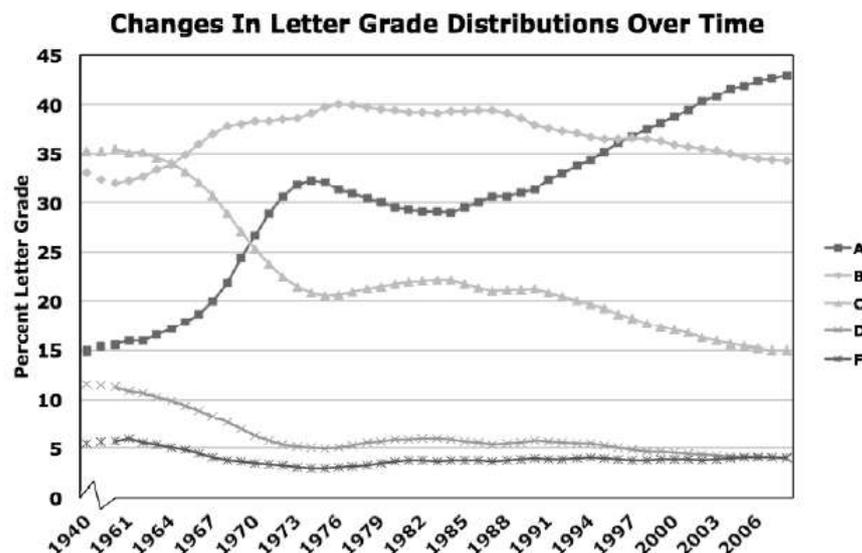


Figure 2: Changes in letter grade distributions over time from 1940 to 2006. Graph represents averages from 1935 to 1944 and 1945 to 1954, respectively. Data from 1960 onward represent annual averages in their database, smoothed with a three-year centered moving average. Published with permission from S. Rojstaczer. Graph located at <http://www.gradeinflation.com/>

Although grade inflation appears to exist in the extant literature, this is not a universally held opinion. Bejar and Blew (1981) noted an increase in grades over time could be a concern if the increase in grades is not commensurate with an equivalent increase in student achievement and knowledge attainment. Winzer (2002) noted a lack of unity of opinion reflecting conflicting views regarding the existence of grade inflation, if reports of grade inflation are exaggerated, or if grade inflation is an issue for concern. Winzer raised challenges over the potential causes of grade inflation and implications for grade inflation on students and academia and potential solutions for grade inflation. Winzer argued the extant literature is varied, occasionally contradictory, and often overlapping for the causes of grade inflation. Winzer suggested potential causes of grade inflation could be grouped into categories based on Birnbaum's (1977) explanations for grade inflation in terms of (a) institutional changes, (b) student demographics, (c) changes in grading policy, (d) faculty behavior, and (e) curriculum changes. Kohn (2002) mentioned no research and no data exists demonstrating students who earned "As" received lesser grades years previously. Gooblar (2014) argued no convincing studies provided evidence demonstrating higher grades lead to poorer learning outcomes for students.

Researcher Motivation

For approximately two years I was a faculty member at an online university in the United States where grade inflation seemingly permeated every aspect of the educational institution. As a faculty member, an educator, and as a rational human being, I could not participate in grade inflation as I equated grade inflation with cheating. I noticed students were getting "As" who could not (a) submit consistent quality work, (b) meet course objectives, goals, outcomes outlined in the syllabus and in the course room, (c) write a paragraph free of grammar, writing mechanics, and or APA errors, and (d) follow course instructions. Because of my experiences, grade inflation became a personal experience for me. After leaving the university, I began conducting research on grade inflation seeking to better understand the phenomenon.

Methodology

Autoethnography

To understand the phenomenon and the culture of grade inflation beyond the extant literature, I employed autoethnography (AE). AE is a qualitative research design used to analyze individuals' lives (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The purpose of AE is cultural understanding which underlies autobiographical experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Mendez, 2013). Mendez noted AE practitioners want readers to care, relate to, and feel for the subject matter. A researcher utilizes AE to systematically analyze and describe personal experiences to understand cultural experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). AE combines characteristics of autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011).

AE provides researchers the ability to impart a story by integrating themes and patterns giving the reader a sense that the story is truthful and relatable (Ellis, 2004). Sparkes (2000) noted AE is highly personalized and draws upon experiences of the researcher to extend qualitative understanding. Le Roux (2016) noted AE is therapeutic for the author and comforting to the reader. For the author, writing one's experiences can purge the angst and negativity associated with the event (Ellis et al., 2011). Positive experiences associated with the story can be shared to reduce prejudice, raise consciousness, understand cultural differences, and give a voice (Ellis, 2011). For the reader, the AE researcher intends to move

the emotions and position of the reader in relation to the events (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Le Roux, 2016)

With AE, the researcher is an insider who knows and understands other members of the group and is better able to gain insights into processes, phenomena, individuals, cultural, or group dynamics (Galle' & Lingard, 2010; Vickers, 2002). In this study, I linked concepts from literature with my personal experiences, participation, and observations to collect data and gain insights toward understanding the reasons for and cultural effects of grade inflation at BU.

Consistent with AE research, I retrospectively and selectively wrote about revelations derived as a participant and observer at BU (Delany, 2004; Didion, 2005; Ellis et al., 2011; Goodall, 2006). In the AE method, it is necessary to provide a brief explanation of the researcher's life as it pertains to the research so that the reader may fully appreciate the context in which the researcher presents the data (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Galle' & Lingard, 2011).

I was a BU faculty member in the business school, teaching masters and doctoral students from September 2013 to January 2016. As an instructor, my policy was for students to follow course instructions explicitly, conform to American Psychological Association (APA) publication manual 6th edition, and complete assignments in conformance with university stipulated grading guidelines. Around December 2013, I noticed most of my students possessed poor writing and critical analysis skills. Students were unprepared for work at the master or doctoral level. BU permitted faculty to review prior grades and assignments in the course load system of students who were enrolled in the instructor's courses. The course load system provided access to courses taken by the student, all assignments submitted and discussions posted by the student, weekly grades, the names of faculty members, and final grades. I noticed faculty would give students "As" for work that did not follow assignment instructions, were not in conformance with APA style and formatting, and to students who seemed to have gained little understanding from course and outside readings. Rarely would faculty give "Cs" even if the student did not complete the assignment or followed assignment instructions. Because of this observation, I became interested in the phenomenon of grade inflation.

AE has five advantages and three disadvantages. The first advantage is AE permits the researcher to obtain access to a culture to gain understanding and meanings of group members, beliefs, customs, behaviors, norms, and values known to the group (O'Byrne, 2007). In this study, AE helped to provide me a richer understanding of the effect grade inflation has on members and culture of BU.

The second advantage is being a cultural insider where the researcher can gain an understanding of the culture and therefore provide rich and descriptive data (Mendez, 2013). As an insider in a cultural setting, realities of the phenomenon often occur that might not have been thought of previously. For example, a researcher might be skeptical grade inflation is a concern in online higher education but after participating and observing the culture of an online educational institution, the researcher might consider the research beneficial and practical for the larger society.

The third advantage is ease of accessing data since the researcher refers to his or her experiences as the source of information (Mendez, 2013). Data can be collected by observing and participating in any culture the researcher can obtain access (Kawulich, 2005). Because the researcher's personal experiences are the primary source of data collection as part of investigating phenomenon, data collection is simplified (Chang, 2007; Ellis et al., 2011).

A fourth advantage is AE researchers contribute to others' lives by reflecting and empathizing (Mendez, 2013). AE can assist the researcher toward contributing to the lives within the culture and in society by making the reader reflect on and empathize with the narratives presented. Listening and observing with concern, compassion, and empathy but

without judgment and absorbing the feelings of others are critical qualities for the AE researcher (Watts, 2008).

The fifth advantage is the researcher can write from first hand experiences using his or her voice (Mendez, 2013). Wall (2008) noted AE starts with the researcher's personal story. Chang (2007) argued AE unshackles the researcher from formal academic writing to touch readers by imparting the researchers unique voice and experiences. In this way, AE researchers are freed from traditional writing conventions focusing on information and educating others using his or her voice (Mendez, 2013).

The first of the three AE disadvantages is AE practitioners must be aware of his or her feelings, biases, and attitudes as well as those of group members (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010; O'Byrne, 2007). AE practitioners must maintain professionalism and objectivity and not permit emotions to influence being a participant and or observer (Chang, 2007). AE practitioners should also be aware the influence and power personal narratives can have on emotions, attitudes, and feelings of the researcher the cultural environment under study (Malinverni & Pares, 2017).

The second disadvantage is the researcher could become excessively involved in the culture and unable to be emotionally detached leading to bias (Burnard, 2004). AE researchers must retain some objectivity and analyze criteria relative to determining cultural positive, negative consequences, and outcomes (O'Byrne, 2007). Autoethnographer bias might occur as researchers often do scant fieldwork, observe less than a statistically significant sample, and for not spending adequate time with all members of the culture (Buzard, 2003; Delamont, 2009).

The third disadvantage is that human memory is fallible (Tullis-Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2009). For most researchers, it is impossible to remember verbatim, recall, or report events as occurred (Ellis et al., 2011). Memory is selective and often prior experiences are censored (Chang, 2007). The researcher might also have difficulty remembering how he or she felt at the time the experience happened (Tullis-Owen et al., 2009). Researchers must recognize that two people can experience the same occurrence yet provide different stories and interpretations.

In conformance with the AE method, my research was based on personal experiences, personal observations, participation, review of student papers, review of data in the course load system, instructor grading patterns, and feedback provided by other instructors to students. The chosen data collection method in AE was as participant observer (Fox, 2004; Kawulich, 2005; Reed-Danahay, 2009). As a participant observer, I wanted to understand the cultural effects of and reasons for grade inflation at BU.

Participation is one of the first considerations when conducting AE research (Driscoll & Anderson, n.d.). The participant observer is immersed into the community to obtain deep knowledge about the intricacies and inner workings that would be otherwise unable to be gained from literature or documentation (Halvorson, n.d.). The participant observer by living in the environment can understand the differences and similarities between what people do and what people say they do (Halvorson, n.d.). Direct quotes were obtained but were sparingly used in this paper to ensure participant confidentiality.

Rigor

Duncan (2004), Holt (2001), Sparkes (1996), and Wall (2008) supported the AE approach as rigorous and a justifiable form of inquiry. Reed-Danahay (1997) mentioned AE is more trustworthy than ethnography because the voice of the cultural insider is assumed to be truer than a cultural outsider. Stinson (2009) argued readers should gain the impression the AE experience is convincing and is relatable.

Although AE is focused on the writer, AE complies with qualitative standards of validity and rigor (Elias, 2017). Validity in AE research refers to the confidence in the researcher's ability to collect data, analyze data, and accurately represent the culture, society, or group under study (Neuman, 2003). For researchers, validity is achieved when the study maintains what it sets out to achieve (Elias, 2017). In AE, readers validate and authenticate the credibility and believability of the autoethnographic experience (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Ellis (2004) noted the story's generalizability is tested by readers who decide if the story is relevant based on their experiences or others they know rather than by traditional sampling.

In the context of validation, data were utilized to test, advance, and or explain empirical assumptions (Wilson & Chaddha, 2010). Hand written reflective notes were the primary data collection source. I triangulated data from my observations with administration personnel responses and analysis from the extant literature. Triangulation of data increases credibility and quality of the study (Wall, 2006). To validate this study, I used ecological validity. Ecological validity is the degree to which data collected and described by the researcher truthfully reflects the culture, society, or group (Neuman, 2003). For this study, the extant literature and my observations and participation provided ecological validity.

Feldman (2003) mentioned criteria to strengthen rigor and validity in an AE study. The first criterion is to provide clear and detailed descriptions of how data was collected and what is data. The second criterion is to provide clear and precise descriptions of how the representation of the data is formed. Third is to offer multiple sources of data, and fourth, to provide evidence that the research changed and added value to extant knowledge / research.

AE has gained favor as a qualitative research method (Anderson, 2006; Denshire, 2013; Ellis et al., 2011; Le Roux, 2016). In an AE design, the researcher is a full member of the group or setting (Anderson, 2006). Researchers utilizing AE understand the culture well, have adopted some of the cultural norms and mores, and in some cases, have completely accepted the culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2003; O'Byrne, 2007).

Data Collection

AE is a valid data collection method (Aij, Visse, & Widdershoven, 2015; Boyle & Parry, 2007; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis et al., 2011; Reed-Danahay, 1997). AE permits researchers to take a systematic approach to data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, and report writing (Chang, 2007; Ngunjiri et al., 2010). Chang (2007) mentioned AE practitioners collect data by participating, observing, and document review.

Adhering to the third criterion of Feldman (2003), I collected data from (a) observing each student's course load system, (b) observing student work and participating with students in my course room, (c) participating as a faculty member in terms of speaking and conversing over e-mail and on the phone with administration, students, and other faculty members, and (d) reviewing the extant literature to verify if the phenomenon of grade inflation exists.

Conforming to Feldman's (2003) first criterion, from September 2013 to January 2016, 169 students enrolled in one of five courses I taught. Of 169 students, 65 received a letter grade. The remaining 104 students dropped or withdrew from a course before I could post final grades. To learn about how a student performed in a prior course, I entered the student's course load system a few days before the official course start date.

After entering into the student's course load system, I observed a trend where faculty posted grades higher than would be reflective of student performance and quality of work. In the course of my experience at BU, I observed several issues in the course load system. I reviewed graded student papers and noticed if feedback given to students was at the level required by the university. I observed if the student submitted assignments on time. I noticed if the student followed the assignment instructions, and if the student adhered to the course

syllabus. I detected if faculty adhered to the university's grading policies. Faculty were trained to grade student work in conformance with widely distributed grading guidelines. For faculty, the grading guidelines were a subjective evaluation of student work. BU did not provide an objective grading rubric with a predetermined range of points for meeting assignment or discussion question criteria. All courses and associated materials were pre-loaded without input from faculty. Faculty could notify administration when "hot fixes" were needed. Hot fixes were quick adjustments such as clarifying words to a discussion question or assignment instruction. BU did not permit faculty to use rubrics.

The second part of my data collection was observing student work and participating in my course room. I noticed whether students fully addressed assignment and discussion questions. I observed if students completed the number of pages required in the assignment instructions. I detected if students were late in submitting assignments. I noted if students adhered to APA style and formatting. I spotted if students had grammar and mechanics errors. I considered if students demonstrated deep understanding of course required readings including the textbook and articles. I observed if students clearly expressed their thoughts in a scholarly manner. I detected whether students analyzed, interpreted, critiqued, integrated, evaluated, and synthesized academic and scholarly information. A concern was if students adhered to BU's academic integrity policy and use of peer reviewed literature. I observed if students applied feedback in subsequent assignments. During this second part of my data collection, I was academically qualified to teach one course. However, I was qualified to determine if the student met grading guidelines, met APA guidelines, conformed to scholarly writing requirements, comported to academic integrity policy, and if the student followed written instructions.

The third aspect of data collection was participating as a faculty member in terms of communicating over e-mail and speaking on the phone with administration and students. E-mail communications with administration was rare and usually were initiated by administrative personnel or from the department Dean's office. Once or twice per year I would e-mail the Associate Dean to receive clarification on issues related to workshops, policy, and procedural issues. I never spoke to the Dean or Associate Dean on the phone. Administration staff contacted me via e-mail once per year to review my work performance. The call was recorded. When I did speak with students or administrative staff, I used Skype and the conversation was recorded via Ecamm®. BU is located in a one-party notification state for recording phone calls. Most students were also in a one-party notification state for recording phone calls. However, if a student was located in a two-party notification state, I would tell the student at the beginning of the call that the conversation was being recorded and ask for consent to record the call. As a faculty member, I was provided a "coach" to address concerns related to student needs. The coach e-mailed me once to set-up a call. I spoke with the coach once and the call was recorded. Notes from the conversation were made. The notes were used to supplement the recorded calls. As part of the notes, I wrote my thought and impressions of the conversation. Thoughts and concepts from students formed the detailed notes I took from recorded student phone calls. The page length of written notes varied but usually were one page per day for five days each week. Each note entry was numbered and indexed supported by instructor feedback, adherence to university policies, GPAs, quality of student work on previous assignments, e-mail correspondences, and verbal communications. Most of my communication with students was via e-mail or feedback on papers. I usually did not speak with students on the phone. I observed e-mail correspondences I had with students related to grades and general course issues. Once or twice per eight-week course two or three students would set up an appointment to discuss course related matters over the phone. The focus on conversations were introductory calls, APA conformance, following assignment instructions, grading issues, reading comprehension, referrals to specific university resources such as the writing center, how the student could improve in subsequent assignments, and applying feedback in subsequent assignments.

Periodically I would participate with faculty through the university's intranet to discuss issues related to university policy, procedures, and andragogy.

Data Analysis

The primary purpose of AE data analysis and interpretation is to obtain the cultural understanding of the relationship between the researcher, the participants, and the societal culture (Wall, 2006). I used raw data derived from my handwritten reflective notes, review of recorded phone conversations being a participant observer of the culture of grade inflation at BU. To organize raw data from observations and participation, I developed a coding process.

Coding Process. To organize raw data from observations and my hand-written notes, I used Microsoft Word (MS Word) to create greater intimacy and understanding of my observations and notes. Saldaña (2013) argued a code in qualitative study is a phrase or word representing essences of a portion of language or visual data. Data can be derived from observation, field notes, documents, literature, interview transcripts, videos, electronic and handwritten correspondences, photographs, artifacts, etc. (Saldaña, 2013). Coding is a process for categorizing qualitative data and for describing the implications and details of these categories (Oladele, Richter, Clark, & Laing, 2012). Ellis and Bochner (2000) and Wong (2008) noted coding is critical to the data analysis process. By coding, I identified, categorized, developed patterns, concepts, and extracted seven themes in a systematic method (Oladele et al., 2012). I determined whether the data fit in and reflected on each category, ensured each category made sense, and assessed the relationship among categories. I identified concepts and patterns through data analysis, compared and contrasted concepts in each transcribed note, and identified the concepts best describing the experiences and communication with participants (Oladele et al., 2012). I reanalyzed, reinterpreted and examined meanings from context (Genzuck, 1999). Data analysis consisted of introspection and immersion thoughts until concepts and meanings developed (Wall, 2006).

To support the classification of data, I read each line from my hand-written notes. Then I carefully re-read the data four times to ensure I understood what my observations and notes meant. I paid close attention to my voice, placed words and phrases in quotation marks and underlined, highlighted in yellow, and bolded specific phrases and words that appeared (Saldaña, 2013).

I utilized a master list in developing descriptive words and category names. After reviewing and analyzing the data over several iterations of trial and error, the information was color-coded as orange (important), blue (possible), and green (not important / relevant). The color-coding processes permitted me to track and control data allowing for interpretation, enhanced understanding of the analyzed data to ensure that the information was relevant, and complemented the autoethnographic study. After completing the initial coding, I organized, summarized, and looked for relationship, patterns, and concepts among data segments. After completing the coding process, concepts, and sub concepts emerged.

The coding process continued in a cyclical fashion in terms of coding and recoding, code to category and vice versa, and category to data (Saldaña, 2009). After the themes emerged, I re-reviewed my notes and extant research / literature to double-check I accurately interpreted meanings from data (Genzuck, 1999). Once completed, I wrote my interpretations and conclusions. Participant responses provided a deeper understanding of the subject matter as advocated by Qu and Dumay (2011).

Adhering to Feldman (2003) fourth criterion for rigor in AE, themes were (a) training and giving feedback, (b) reasons faculty provided scant feedback, (c) student writing and academic integrity, (d) use of student evaluations, (e) experiences working with students as a faculty member in a grade inflation environment, (f) observations of students as a faculty

member in a grade inflation environment, and (g) reflections on reasons for termination. After themes emerged, I re-reviewed field notes and extant literature to double-check I accurately interpreted meanings from data. Once completed, I wrote my interpretations and conclusions (Genzuk, 1999). In conformance with Feldman's fourth criterion, themes might provide evidence adding value and possibly changing extant knowledge / research.

AE was the optimal design to collect data relevant to my experiences, participation, and observations to better understand grade inflation at BU. Other qualitative designs such as case study, phenomenology, ethnography, and grounded theory were inappropriate because with these designs, I could not acknowledge the inextricable link between personal experiences and observations within the cultural context of grade inflation (Maydell, 2010; Wall, 2006).

Discoveries

Brief Background of Balagan University

BU is a for-profit online regionally accredited educational institution located in the United States focused on revenue generation and student retention based on my observations as a participant observer and from comments made by former students and faculty at independent online websites such as <http://www.onlinedegreereviews.org>, <https://www.gradreports.com>, and <https://www.degreeinfo.com>. BU's management's purpose appears to strive for increased revenues and to maintain high student retention rates by treating the student as a customer rather than fostering an environment of academic freedom and seeking truth. To this endeavor, administration sought to enhance graduation rates and to quicken degree completion based upon internally disseminated data and from data available from the university website. BU attracts potential students who can pay tuition via federal student aid, employment reimbursement programs, self-funding, or from current or former military service.

Admittance to BU is simple. Prospective students provide personal information such as employment information (if any), military affiliation (if any), the desired academic program, official transcripts, and anticipated start date. Students do not need to provide a writing sample for admission to determine if the student can write a grammatically correct and cogent paragraph. Standardized exams such as the GMAT or GRE are not required for admission. The primary purpose of enrollment appears to ensure potential students enter the system to sign up for courses so enrollment numbers remain high because high enrollment translates to revenue. The purpose of this research was to explore my experiences as a participant and observer in a culture of grade inflation toward understanding the cultural effects of grade inflation at BU. Seven themes developed from analyzing data from (a) observing the student's course load system information, (b) observing student work and participating with students in my course room, and (c) participated as a faculty member speaking and conversing over e-mail and on the phone with administration, students, and other faculty members.

Theme 1: Training and Giving Feedback

Shortly after being hired, I received faculty training. Training lasted about three months (October 2013 to December 2013). The asynchronous online training focused on policies, procedures, navigating the proprietary software, and how BU wanted faculty to provide feedback to students. The odd element during training occurred when I read a recent policy change. The new policy affirmed faculty who gave a student a "F" would receive payment for teaching the course superseding the earlier policy that faculty who gave "Fs" would not get paid. Learning that a prior policy existed where faculty would not be paid for giving a student

a “F” was my first indication of a culture of grade inflation might exist at BU. Although not an attorney, I am unsure an educational institution could refuse to pay an employee who otherwise met the requirements of employment for giving a student the grade of “F.”

After training, I received students. The student name and which course the student enrolled were provided in an e-mail received approximately three weeks before the beginning of the course. Students and instructors at BU engaged in 1:1 directed study. About two weeks after receiving the student e-mail, I searched the course load system to review and learn about how the student performed in prior courses.

When I reviewed prior student work from the 169 students who were present the course load system during my time at BU, I noticed approximately 95% of students received an “A” or “B.” About 4.9% of students received a “C.” Only one student received an “F,” and that was because the student failed to submit assignments after Week 2 of the course. Most student GPAs were 3.8 or better on a 4.0 scale. However, I did notice two students with GPAs less than 3.0. I had four students of 169 students who had a 4.0 GPA before being enrolled in one of my courses.

During my time at BU, I noticed in the course load system most instructor feedback consisted of a few sentences or one or two paragraphs of timely but canned, irrelevant, non-formative, and not constructive feedback. Faculty would state, “great job,” or “I liked what you did here.” Few faculty provided feedback related to the subject matter (accounting, finance, marketing, etc.). On rare occasions, feedback from faculty would include basic comprehension and writing skills lacking in the student’s work. One faculty member wrote, “Your writing is not at the graduate level. See what resources are available to you at the writing center.” Sometimes instructors would mention APA nonconformance issues such as incorrect APA citation in text or a citation in text existed without a corresponding reference list entry. One faculty member wrote, “Your citations and references need to match. Refer to the APA manual.” The faculty member did not refer the student to which section in the APA manual to review.

BU required instructors per written policy to provide detailed and meaningful feedback to guide students to (a) identify what the student did right, (b) where the student did not conform to course requirements and why (c) recognize where room for improvement exists, (d) explain what next step(s) the student needs to do to improve, and (e) explain why the next step(s) is important to achieve course goals, objectives, and outcomes. Feedback was considered critical because feedback was the mode by which students received instruction. My feedback complying to university guidelines would typically be one to two pages single spaced. Here is an example of the type of feedback I provided to students.

Hi Student,

Thanks for your Week X submission. For assignment X, the learning outcome was to evaluate the value and performance of investments. The goal of the assignment was to work with fundamental analysis and provide examples.

Feed Back

In the first question, you were asked to provide methods to assess the macroeconomic environment and the industry, which you did not. Although you mentioned some valid points, as a doctoral learner you needed to fully address the role of interest rates, the consumer price index, balance of payments, and federal fiscal and monetary policies. To conform to fundamental analysis, you

needed to provide company, industry, and economic analyses for PepsiCo, Inc., which you did not.

For the second question, you were asked to identify, which you did but you did not clearly address the value of financial ratio analysis in the context of common stock investing. You did not explain the value of the ratios for someone investing in common stock.

You were to provide a discussion on decomposition of ROE including a deeper evaluation of decomposition into the common-size income statement, which you did not. You needed provide the five-step DuPont model formula. You mentioned the decomposition of ROE using the five-step DuPont model, but you did not fully explain decomposition of ROE and did not provide a deep evaluation of decomposition into the common-size income statement. As I mentioned in my tracking change comments, providing an example of a common-size income statement would have greatly enhanced your paper. Here is a link of an example of a common-size income statement:

<http://xxxxxxx>

For the third portion, you were asked to explore the concept of the intrinsic value and compare intrinsic value to the notion of a market price, which you did mention. You were asked to present and describe the following valuation model approaches: Discounted Dividend Model (DDM), Price-Earnings Ratio Model, and Free Cash Flow Model. You attempted but did not clearly explain DDM, the Price-Earnings Ratio Model, and Free Cash Flow Model. DDM is a time tested fundamental financial theory for evaluating a company based on the concept that a stock holds value equal to the discounted sum of all the prospective dividend payments.

You seemed not to have gained a basic understanding of the use of fundamental analysis. Most of your examples were inaccurate. Your understanding of the material appeared to be scant. Please contact me if you need help. I am here to guide you through this course.

Success in this course is contingent upon you applying all my feedback in subsequent assignments. If you are not 100% sure of what is expected of you or do not fully understand an assignment, contact me.

The paper length of the activity was to be 5 to 7 pages, for which you were in conformance. I noticed either on purpose or otherwise you posted the assignment three times. For subsequent assignments, please post once. You were asked to provide five resources, which you did. You were to demonstrate thoughtful consideration of the ideas and concepts presented in the course and provide new thoughts and insights relating directly to this topic, which you did not. Your response should reflect scholarly writing, and current APA standards, which you did not.

Academic writing is authoritative, precise, direct, impersonal, objective, and formal. When writing in an academic style, your writing is balanced truthful and evidentiary substantiated from literature. In addition, few to none quotations are used. Making the transition to the scholarly style of writing is challenging for learners in a doctoral program. Writing in a scholarly or academic style is like learning a new language. Scholarly style has a different vocabulary, grammar, and syntax that you will need to become familiar.

To start learning to write in a scholarly manner, please review the Writing Style section of the APA Manual 6th edition starting on page 65 (3.05) and ending on page 70 (3.11). Please also review this link: <http://xxxxxx>, which provides a good review of academic writing. The XXX Center provides further guidance. Your APA in-text citations, heading levels, and references list were in conformance. See my tracking change comments for additional feedback. One continuing concern I would like to impart to help as you progress and succeed in your next activity:

Concern: Missing in-text citations.

Guidance: As I mentioned in my Week X feedback, you must have an in-text citation for every sentence directly quoted or paraphrased containing the thoughts, ideas, and words of others not in the realm of common knowledge. Citing only direct quotes, just using references, or citing at the end of a paragraph does not suffice.

You must cite to support your assertions with trusted sources from subject matter experts found in peer reviewed journals and government websites. Citing is a fundamental requirement in all your assignments in this course, subsequent courses, and in writing your dissertation. Any information an average 10-year would know would not need to be cited; such as the sky is blue, Arizona is a state, or dogs bark. When in doubt, cite at the end of every sentence. Taking the words, ideas, and thoughts of others without giving credit is dishonest and stealing. Please review the University's Academic Integrity Policy and the XXX Center for further guidance.

Value: Citing is imperative. Failure to adhere to the University's Academic Integrity Policy can prevent you from completing the program and achieving your goals. Citing after each sentence will protect you when you are writing your dissertation from potential charges of plagiarism and is a good habit to get into now. Refer to section 1.10 of the APA manual for additional guidance. Citing your sources will help you earn a higher grade in this class

Assessment

Based on the grading guidelines and my feedback, you addressed few required parts of assignment X. You had little understanding of the readings and other resources you chose. The writing was somewhat clear. You had some grammar, mechanics, and APA style errors. Point total for assignment 3 is 6.9/10.

If you have any questions about my feedback and any aspect of assignment X, please do not hesitate to contact. I look forward to your assignment X submission due on Sunday.

Dr. Blum

BU had written policies instructors were required to follow. Instructors needed to verify if students were making adequate progress toward completing course outcomes and goals. Faculty were charged with evaluating and assessing whether students demonstrated that each assignment question or statement met course assignment outcomes, goals, and page length requirements. Each instructor was to impart additional content knowledge and resources as necessary. Each student was to receive requisite skills, resources, advice to make improvements to achieve course goals, objectives, and outcomes from implementing faculty feedback and

reviewing course materials such as handouts and textbooks. Students were urged to read and apply feedback in subsequent assignments. None of the instructors I noticed in the course load system conformed to BU's standards or came close to the level and detail of feedback I provided.

Theme 2: Reasons Faculty Provided Scant Feedback

Providing feedback was how instructors taught students at BU. I observed as a participant observer four reasons faculty provided scant feedback. First, many instructors were not knowledgeable about the subject matter nor academically qualified to teach courses assigned. From internal documentation and reviewing online sources such as LinkedIn, I observed faculty at BU who had doctorates, but most did not have a doctorate in the field of study they were teaching. For example, faculty members would have a PhD or a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and teach a sustainable business, marketing, accounting, and or finance course. Only one instructor, Jacob out of approximately 50 instructors whom I observed in the course load system, had a doctorate in a business field. Since I did not have access to all faculty members, I do not know how many other faculty members had earned doctorates in a business field such as accounting, leadership, management, finance, or marketing. Reviewing internal documentation and LinkedIn, few instructors produced intellectual contributions to extant knowledge. BU did not require faculty to publish in discipline-related reputable peer-reviewed academic journal outlets. I submitted an article to a publisher that required payment for publishing work and had a weak peer-review process. After I published the article, BU granted me an honorarium for completing the article. From my experience receiving e-mails from administration, faculty were asked to provide service to their field. Based on online profiles from BU, LinkedIn, and faculty members' websites from other universities, few instructors were involved with professional development activities or had professional experiences relative to the course(s) taught. BU required based on accreditation requirements of scholarship activity based on Boyer's Model once every three years of employment. BU encouraged presentations over published work.

Many faculty members came from online universities and/or degree mills. I knew of one "doctor," Tim, who obtained his degree from an unaccredited school located in a Central American nation. I knew of another "doctor," Rick who bought his degree and obtained transcripts from a service. Because instructors were not familiar with the course material, faculty were essentially graders and were hard pressed to offer constructive, relevant, and meaningful feedback.

In my case, I was asked by BU administration to teach five courses. Of the courses I taught, I was academically qualified to teach one. I did not have the requisite professional or academic experience to proficiently teach the other four courses. To achieve a degree of mastery over the subject content, I researched concepts, theories, and basic knowledge required to understand course material. I learned the material as I taught the course. Like myself, by reviewing faculty in the course load system and from online faculty websites, most instructors at BU taught at least one course with zero academic or practical training in the subject matter.

The second reason for providing little feedback appeared to be many instructors held students in contempt, disdain, and did not care about student success. I noticed from reviewing papers in the course load system, instructors provided disparaging comments in feedback to students. For example, one instructor stated, "... this is a train wreck." Another instructor stated, "You are not ready for graduate level work." Yet another instructor stated, "I have no idea what you are writing here." One instructor actually stated, "We have a writing center for a reason. You need to go there." However, these same instructors habitually gave students "As."

The third reason for providing scant feedback could have been to avoid student appeals. During my tenure at BU, I had nine students appeal a grade. Most students who earned a “F” or “C” desired to pass the course or receive a higher grade without doing the requisite work to earn the preferred grade. Students who received at least 73 /100 points passed a masters or doctoral level course. Students who received 72 /100 or lesser points received a “F.” Students who appealed never provided written substantiation for the grade change. Instead all but one student wrote insults and diatribes to and about me regarding their hurt feelings as reasons why they should have received a better grade. The one student who did not insult me wanted her grade increased because she thought she should. Only one student, Pat, was successful in appealing a grade. Pat, who claimed to be blind by voluntary disclosure and was provided information regarding disability resources, refused disability accommodation. Like other students who appealed, Pat did not provide one bona fide reason for changing the grade. Months later, after speaking to an administrator, Alice, regarding an unrelated issue, I found out the Dean’s Office was concerned Pat would file legal action due to disability concerns against BU if she did not receive a higher grade. The Dean changed Pat’s grade from “C+” to “B-.”

The fourth reason for providing meager feedback was low pay. Faculty were paid a very low rate per student compared to other universities. Jack, a faculty member, told me he considered his pay as vacation money. Jeff, a colleague at BU, told me the modest pay was not worth spending more than 20 minutes reading, providing feedback, and posting the grade.

Theme 3: Student Writing and Academic Integrity

As I reviewed student work, I noticed how graduate students could not write standard U.S. English in masters and doctoral level business courses. I am not referring to formal academic writing, I am talking about students unable to form a cogent paragraph free of grammar, spelling, and or simple APA errors. Some students wrote in British English when BU required U.S. English as written policy. Joan, a faculty development manager, told me, “... we are aware most students are ill prepared for graduate work.” Joan candidly mentioned, “You have to remember the university is a for-profit business. We need to maintain enrollment and have stable retention rates.” Although BU appeared to want students to obtain minimal academic standards of writing and critical analysis skills by offering assistance via the writing center and in written internal documentation, university administration did not appear interested in implementing and enforcing policies enabling rigorous writing standards to exist.

A related issue was plagiarized work. During my first year at BU, I observed high Turnitin (TII) originality scores on student papers. The higher the originality score, the greater likelihood the submitter’s text matched prior submitted work. A high originality score does not necessarily indicate plagiarism. BU policy required faculty to notify the Office of the Dean for occurrences where faculty suspects a student’s paper might be an act of potential plagiarism. Although BU did not provide a specific TII percentage as unacceptable, I would only submit papers with potential acts of plagiarism with originality scores of 65% or higher as my experience was scores below 65% would not considered for review as a potential act of plagiarism by the Dean’s Office. In my experience working at other online universities in the United States, most potential acts of plagiarism use a benchmark for originality scores of 15% or less as acceptable for most assignment papers.

The primary reason for potential acts of plagiarism was students failed to cite paraphrased work or used the copy and paste function to post blocks of work without quotation marks and citations. During my first year, for every case of potential plagiarism I submitted, the Office of the Dean determined the student committed an act of plagiarism. The Dean gave a written warning to the student, asked the student to contact the writing center to learn about

how not to commit plagiarism in the future, and gave the student zero points for the paper. However, during my second year a new Dean arrived. The Office of the Dean designate, Charles, gave the same advice to students as the previous Dean but would not give the student a zero. Rather Charles asked the student to resubmit the paper this time providing citations and quotations where appropriate. On one occasion a student's paper received an originality score of 100%, meaning the entire paper was copied and pasted from others without any paraphrasing, yet Charles ruled the student could resubmit the paper.

The consequences of Charles permitting students to resubmit papers was I had to reschedule the students' due dates for the remainder of the course for subsequent assignments. Charles was open-ended regarding when the student could resubmit the assignment. By observing how students disregarded academic integrity policy in subsequent papers, my impression was Charles' actions taught students BU was not serious about academic integrity rather BU only cared about placating students and giving students what the students wanted so students would remain at BU and continue to pay tuition.

Theme 4: Use of Student Evaluations

The primary tool BU used to grant future teaching appointments were student results from course evaluations. Starting with Week 8 of a course, each student would receive a survey to provide course content assessments and instructor performance. The evaluation would be accessible to the student for two weeks after the course concluded. Students were told the evaluations were anonymous and the instructor would not be provided results until after grades were posted and the course ended.

At the end of my first year at BU, I received a review of my performance. According to the results from the evaluations between 17% and 30% of students in classes I taught responded to the course evaluation. Carol, who worked in BU administration and was my coach provided me feedback comments on my annual review based from student evaluations. Carol stated, "Your feedback is timely, and you are responsive to students. Your turnaround time in grading papers is excellent." Carol noted the primary critique was my tone in giving feedback. As Carol stated, "I personally like the feedback you give but your tone is off putting to students." Carol elaborated, based on the evaluations, "Students thought you were unsupportive because of your tone and your feedback had little meaning." Carol told me BU received a high number of complaints about my tone. Carol alluded that I provided too many "Fs." Carol stated, "You are a good mentor and I would hate it if you were let go." I asked Carol if students complained about my grading. Carol stated, "We have received only a few student complaints about their grades." Carol mentioned because several students did not like my style of providing feedback, did not like my tone, and opted to contact the Dean's office directly, students would likely give me poor scores on the end of course evaluation. During my performance review Carol did not discuss whether my students achieved course goals, outcomes, and objectives, or if the written, analytical and overall quality of student work was acceptable to stated university standards.

Theme 5: Experiences Working with Students as a Faculty Member in a Culture of Grade Inflation

On the first day of class, students received a welcome letter via e-mail outlining my expectations and permission for them to contact me with any questions or concerns. Each week and on each assignment, I would ask students if they understood what was being asked of them in an assignment. Every week I reiterated if a student had any questions to please ask. I made

myself available through e-mail and telephone calls. Less than 10% of students contacted me anytime during my two-year experience at BU.

In the welcome letter, students were informed passing the course was contingent on how well he or she (a) understood and completed the assignment, (b) applied my feedback in subsequent assignments, (c) expressed himself or herself in a scholarly and academic manner (d) conformed to APA requirements, and (e) submitted assignments on time each week. Each preceding item was a required element from BU administration in assessing student work. However, not one student could consistently meet the preceding expectations during the eight-week course. BU required faculty to use subjective and interpretative concepts outlined in graduate grading guidelines to assess whether students met course outcomes, objectives, and goals. BU did not use rubrics and did not permit faculty to use grading rubrics.

BU's grading focus was on student completion of assignments, not how well students mastered or understood the subject matter. Of the 65 students who completed a course, I determined 9.2% were prepared and qualified to do work at the graduate level. I arrived at this determination based on the preparedness and ability of the student to (a) understand and complete each assignment, (b) apply my feedback in subsequent assignments, (c) express himself or herself in a scholar / academic manner (e) conform to APA style and formatting, (f) submit assignments on time each week, (g) have higher order thinking skills, (h) indicate the ability to critically think, analyze, interpret, integrate, evaluate, and synthesize academic and scholarly information, and (i) displayed mastery of the subject matter.

Observing the course load system and from my participation and experiences, students generally did not care about receiving feedback. Approximately 80% of students did not implement any aspect of my feedback. I could tell students ignored my feedback because the student continued making the same mistakes each week. To verify whether a student read the feedback, periodically I would ask the student, within feedback, to contact me responding to, "Please e-mail after reading this feedback that you read the feedback." No student who received my statement responded. The stated teaching focus on internal documentation at BU was on the implementation and application of feedback in subsequent assignments. In addition to restating what the student needed to do to successfully completing a course, I emphasized to each student that (a) having good time management skills, (b) using peer-reviewed and authoritative resources in assignments, (c) not presenting personal opinions in assignments, and (d) writing in standard essay format were keys to successfully passing the course.

During my two years at BU, approximately 25% of students complained to me about the grade received on an assignment. Students seemed indifferent whether they followed assignment instructions, wrote grammatically correct sentences, provided opinions not substantiated by literature, applied my feedback as required by the university, or complied with APA style including the use of citations. In many cases, doctoral students could not differentiate between peer-reviewed and non-peer reviewed articles and would argue blogs were a good source to use in academic papers.

Theme 6: Observations of Students as a Faculty Member in a Culture of Grade Inflation

Based on my observations, students wanted "As" or "Bs" whether earned or not. From reading student papers, students rarely followed assignment instructions preferring to write what they felt rather than doing the necessary research in order to adequately complete the assignment. From reading papers and speaking to several students on Skype, the majority of students enrolled in my courses seemed not to understand successfully completing assignments required independent work and using resources such as the textbook(s), the university library, and locating authoritative sources online. Doctoral students had difficulties understanding, critiquing, synthesizing, evaluating, analyzing, and applying course material. Some students

seemed to be unable to read and understand written assignment instructions. Most students appeared to lack basic writing skills necessary to complete their degree program. Almost all students work was in colloquial form and / or did not cite assertions made in the realm of common knowledge. For example, this doctoral student wrote:

A successful capital cycle allows a healthcare organization to have the latest and greatest when it comes to caring for sick patients. The technology, equipment, and staff are all top notch in the healthcare field. An organization financial reputation is pertinent when it comes to making an organization more marketable and competitive. As everyone is aware, the healthcare industry will always have a need for executive, administrators, physicians, nurses, and other staff members. An extremely reputable organization will attract the best professionals in that field based on the organization's dealings.

I asked students via e-mail why they did not follow instructions. Most students articulated that they did not need to follow instructions as prior instructors apparently did not read or were indifferent to what the student wrote. One student, Jasmine, wrote, "I thought I was doing the assignment right but you say I am doing it wrong." Likely because of poor enforcement of BU policies by faculty, students did not seem interested in learning. Students appeared to think by paying tuition they should receive a passing grade irrespective of the quality of work presented in the course. I surmised if the instructor is disengaged from student learning, why should the student be engaged in learning? I spoke with a few students who confirmed most faculty members did not enforce BU policies. One student, Kent, told me, "I write what I like and never had a problem before." Another student, Bruce, said, "I am writing about finance, what is the problem. I thought I met what you wanted me to do."

From a faculty viewpoint, it was easier to give the student the grade the student wanted and likely receive positive scores on the end of course evaluations. Therefore, the primary focus of faculty was to give an "A" or "B." Because I insisted and required students to conform to written and widely disseminated BU polices and standards, two students asserted I was "strange." I asked each student what they meant by strange. One student, Gloria, thought I was strange because I was a hard grader and required that she follow assignment instructions verbatim. Another student, Cynthia, thought I was strange because she did not receive an "A" or "B" on each submitted assignment.

I had four students who had 4.0 GPAs before entering one of my courses. At the end of my course, one student received a "B," another received a "B-," and two received a "C+" based on meeting my stated expectations derived from BU guidelines. Students rarely possessed pride in their work. Students would submit a two page paper for a 5 to 7 page assignment and expected at minimum a "B" from phone conversations I had with Cory. Students who did not meet learning outcomes and goals for each assignment became angry when they did not receive an "A" or "B."

When students did not receive the number of points they thought they should have on an assignment, students would e-mail me complaining or begging for more points. No student ever presented a substantiated reason to support additional points. Wilbur stated, "Please add a few points so I can pass." Sylvester articulated, "I did what you wanted me to do and you still gave me a F. What you do have against me."

From my observations of reading the tone of student work and speaking with some students on Skype I noticed a trend where students felt entitled to pass the course with a passing grade regardless of the quality of work submitted or whether the student achieved course outcomes, goals, or objectives. Students appeared to think of themselves as customers who are entitled to receive high unearned grades in exchange for paying tuition. I told students in e-

mails that earning good grades is important for staying in the program and obtaining financial aid. I noted after graduation no one cares about the grade earned in a course. Adding an extra point or two to an assignment grade would not help the student to successfully complete their program. Students did not respond back.

Theme 7: Reflections on My Termination

Reflecting on my participation and observation as a faculty member, an educator, and as a rational human being, I could not in good faith participate in grade inflation. To better understand what grades students received in each course taught, I developed an excel spreadsheet with the course letters and number, grades earned, and number of students who received a specific grade. I updated the spreadsheet at the end of each course. Table 1 features grades earned by students during the period I was employed at BU.

BU terminated my employment, from my perception, because I refused to give students undeserved “As” and “Bs.” The official reason for my termination was because of a reduction in force. In early 2017 I noticed BU placed an advertisement in a variety of online employment websites looking for candidates to fill the exact position I held. In my mind the advertisement confirmed that I was not terminated because of a reduction in force, rather because I did not dispense “As” and “Bs” like candy.

Upon reflection, I think three reasons exist for my termination. The first reason as outlined on Table 1, 52.31% of students received a grade of “F.” Students received a “F” because they (a) submitted inconsistent work, (b) failed to meet course objectives outlined in the syllabus and in the course room, (c) did not achieve course goals, and (d) fell short of my written expectations explained on the first day of class.

Table 1
Grades Earned by Graduate students from 2013 to 2016

Letter Grades	Course 1	Course 2	Course 3	Course 4	Course 5	Total Grades	% of Total
A	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%
A-	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.00%
B+	0	0	0	1	1	2	3.08%
B	0	1	0	3	0	4	6.15%
B-	4	2	0	1	2	9	13.85%
C+	0	0	2	0	1	3	4.62%
C	5	0	1	4	3	13	20.00%
F	9	7	3	11	4	34	52.31%
Total Grades	18	10	6	20	11	65	
Total Students	49	28	15	48	29	169	

Note. Author’s data-based on as a participant and observer at the BU from September 2013 to January 2016. Courses 1, 2, 4, and 5 were doctoral level courses. Course 3 was a master level course.

The second reason was my low student retention rate. My retention rate was 38.46%. Based on observations, online searches, and discussions with administration, BU’s student retention rate appeared to be approximately 80%. I think my retention rate was low for three reasons. First, students would submit a couple of assignments, receive a series of “F” grades,

and withdraw from the class. Second, students did not post a discussion question response or submit an assignment during the first week of class and were automatically dropped by the system. Third, for unknown reasons to me the student decided to drop or withdraw from the course.

Third reason was for my termination was I had an unknown number of complaints filed against me with the Dean's Office. Those students who did contact me via e-mail or by Skype asking for assistance often passed a course. Students who would not contact me preferred to complain to the Dean's Office often times failed a course.

I had high expectations for students and me students were made aware of my expectations via e-mail at the beginning of the course. Here is an example of my expectations I e-mailed each student.

Communications and Office Hours

Anytime during the next eight weeks you have any questions or concerns about the course, which requires a verbal conversation you can set up a date and time to talk. My preference is to speak via Skype®. If you do not have a Skype® ID, please set up an account at <http://www.skype.com/en/>. Calling Skype to Skype is free. Once you have set up the account, click on the contacts section, locate my ID (XXXXXXX), and ask to be added to my contacts. If you are unable to set up a Skype account because of technology issues, you may call me at XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Please note I am available from 10:00am to 11:00am Eastern Time on Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. I am not available on Monday, Friday, or Saturday. If these times do not work for you, please e-mail me with alternative times and dates. I will do my best to accommodate. My appointment scheduler is located at XXXXXXXXX. All calls must be booked 24 hours in advance.

For questions or concerns that can be handled by e-mail, please e-mail me at XXXXXXXXX

General Items

Please read the syllabus thoroughly and carefully. The syllabus is available on your Learner portal. The syllabus is a contract, and you will be held accountable for its contents. Please read the syllabus from top to bottom.

Papers and PowerPoint presentations are run through TurnItIn to check for plagiarism. Be sure you know and understand the Balagan University Academic Integrity Policy and APA manual 6th edition section 1.10. ***Unintentional plagiarism is still plagiarism.***

Grading Criteria

Your grade in this course is contingent upon how well you complete the assignment, understand, express, and comport your work to APA form and style, including in-text citations, and references list. This course does not use a rubric for grading and point allocation purposes. Your grade on each assignment and discussion question is based on the graduate grading guidelines available at your learner's portal under University Documents.

To succeed in this course you will need to do the following:

Time Management. You made a commitment to pursue a doctorate, which is the highest form of scholarship. We all have struggles and hurdles to overcome. My expectation is you will manage your time effectively. My advice is for you start early in the week and take time every day to do a part of your assignment that is due each Sunday. Do not wait until the weekend to piece something together. You need to anticipate and plan ahead. You must understand your limitations, use time management skills made available to you by the University, and learn to work around problems.

Late Policy. If you are unable to submit your assignments by the due dates stated in the course room no need exists to contact me that you will be late or to request an extension for time to submit your assignment or discussion post. **Per University policy, no assignment will be accepted after the Saturday past the due date. Any assignment submitted after the Saturday past the due date will receive zero points. Per University policy, no assignments will be accepted after the end date or extension date of this course, no exceptions.**

Follow Directions. Successfully completing this course requires you to follow the assignment instructions **word for word**. To help you, I urge you to use diagrams and or outlines to breakdown each part of the instructions. Using APA conforming heading levels will help you. Refer to section 3.03 of the APA manual 6th edition.

Doctoral Level Writing. All of your writing in this course must be scholarly/academic. If your writing is not at the doctoral level I encourage to you consult with your academic advisor for resources and assistance. You must write at the doctoral level to complete your comprehensive exam and the dissertation process to become an academic doctor.

Peer-Reviewed Literature. All of your resources must be from peer-reviewed journal articles, course resources, 10-K reports, and government websites. Wikis, blogs, dictionaries, nongovernmental websites, book chapters, etc. are not to be used in this course.

APA Compliance. The writing style and document formatting used at XXXXX is APA 6th edition. You are responsible to adhere to APA in this course and throughout your academic experience at XXXXX. In this course I am looking for:

- Your use of APA conforming in-text citations in all your assignments. Refer to sections 6.03, 6.04, 6.06, 6.08, 6.20, and Table 6.1 on page 177. **Please note, you must cite every sentence, which is directly quoted or paraphrased containing the thoughts, facts, ideas, opinion, theory, words, and any piece of information from others not in the realm of common knowledge.** Refer to section 1.10 and the University's academic integrity policy.
- Your references list must conform to APA. Refer to sections 6.27, 6.28, 6.30, 6.31, 6.32, 7.01 and 7.02.
- Your writing style must conform to APA. Review sections 3.01 to 3.23.

- Your mechanics style must conform to APA. Review sections 4.01 to 4.49.
- Your use of APA conforming heading levels in all your assignments. Refer to section 3.03.
- Your use of figures and tables must conform to APA. Review chapter 5.
- Proofread and edit your work before submission. Read your paper out loud to catch grammar and mechanics errors.

Apply Feedback. Abiding to XXXXs *Teaching Through Feedback* method and applying all my feedback in subsequent assignments is key to achieving success in this course. I urge you to review the 10:47 video at this hyperlink XXXXXXXX.

Ask Questions. You are highly encouraged to ask specific questions and or express your concerns via e-mail related to course content and your academic performance in the course. If you do not ask questions I presume you 100% understand what is being asked of you each week and you are 100% confident you have the knowledge and understanding to successfully complete each assignment and are 100% aware of my expectations of you.

Feedback and Resubmissions

I will provide you substantive and extensive feedback. My feedback is designed to enhance your success in this course, subsequent courses, and completing the doctoral process. Please note, **there will be no previews, re-do's, or revisions except required by the Office of the Dean and or University policy.** Your first submission should be your best. As a doctoral learner you are expected to check and re-check your work for all errors. Your learning is your responsibility. I am here to successfully guide you through the course and help you obtain the basic skills needed to complete your dissertation. If you have questions regarding any aspect of a discussion question, assignment, or my feedback, please contact me via e-mail.

Bulk Loading

By policy, bulk loading, submitting one or more assignments before receiving feedback on an earlier assignment is not permitted. I hold firmly to this policy. I will provide you feedback and your grade within University timeframes. I urge you to leave time to receive my feedback on one assignment before submitting the next assignment.

Comments, Questions, and Dialogue

I am here to help you on your academic journey. Any time you have a question or need additional clarification on the course requirements or feedback, please contact via e-mail. I look forward to working with you in this course and learning from you as well! Again, if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask.

My reflection is BU is an educational institution which places high emphasis on revenue generation, has easy enrollment procedures, focuses on maintaining high retention rates, and does not enforced its own written academic policies, procedures, and processes. The phenomenon of grade inflation likely exists at BU.

From my participation and observation at BU and from a review of the extant literature, grade inflation has a corrosive effect on students, faculty, and administration. Based on my observation and participation in a culture of grade inflation, and review of the literature, students pay tuition and expect to receive “As” or “Bs.” Often times when students do not receive “As” or “Bs,” the student dropped or withdrew from the course, filed a complaint with the Dean’s Office, submitted a grade appeal form, and / or provided negative comments on end of course evaluations to seemingly punish me.

To avoid student wrath, most faculty provided what students wanted so students would essentially leave faculty alone and give favorable student evaluations enhancing employment viable of faculty. Favorable evaluations translate into job security. Administration obtains high retention rates translating into increased revenue satisfying management / ownership. In the culture of grade inflation at BU, students pay and receive desired grades, faculty receive high course evaluation scores to remain employed, and administration gains high retention rates.

Discussion

The discoveries of this study supported my assumptions that a culture of grade inflation likely exists at BU. My discoveries also add to the overriding theme in the extant literature that grade inflation exists. My discoveries also support the concept that grade inflation is not limited to brick-and-mortar schools but also extends to online universities. Once any university engages in grade inflation, the value of a 4.0 GPA, even from a reputable school, might no longer carry the same weight as it once did. Grade inflation at less reputable schools and many online universities such as BU could earn the school the classification as a degree mill, essentially making the degree earned worthless (Marquis, 2013).

Specifically, time spent on academic work is more relevant for part time faculty than tenured positions (Stanoyevitch, 2008). Part time faculty often spend as little time as possible on grading preferring to scan the student’s work and give the student an “A” or “B” to minimize student complaints, refrain from having useless conversations with students over earning more points, and placate students with an “A” or “B” to ensure students stay in the program and avoiding to become the ire of administration seeking high retention rates (Hu, 2005). Generally part-time faculty receive no benefits from the educational institution so time is money (Stanoyevitch, 2008). Online part time faculty who do not conform to grade inflation are often subject to termination.

University administrators often ignore grade inflation especially if participating instructors receive strong and positive student evaluations and are favored by the Dean (Stanoyevitch, 2008). BU administration will not tackle grade inflation primarily as Joan indicated because changing the status quo might negatively affect student retention and enrollment enhancing the risk of lowered profitability. Hu (2005) noted likability and personality of the instructor, course difficulty, and the format and delivery of the evaluation could influence student evaluations. Administrators often do not realize grade inflation undermines the value of college teaching and provides a distorted view of enrollment numbers, actual retention rates, and even can negatively affect the university’s allocation of resources (Johnson, 2003).

Possibly most insidious, grade inflation denies students feedback necessary to assess strengths and weaknesses (O’Halloran & Gordon, 2015). Grade inflation negates students

knowing where they rank in class (Tucker & Courts, 2010). Grade inflation is a motivation destroyer for students to do their best work. Grade inflation diminishes the work done by the best students relative to that of average classmates. Grade inflation tends to deteriorate student work ethic (Stanoyevitch, 2008).

The purpose of my research was to explore my experiences as a participant and observer in a culture of grade inflation toward understanding the cultural effects of grade inflation at BU. In the course of analyzing my data I developed seven themes from (a) observing the student's course load system information, (b) observing student work and participating with students in my course room, and (c) participated as a faculty member speaking and conversing over e-mail and on the phone with administration, students, and other faculty members.

The course load system at BU was unique to any other university where I am a faculty member. Observing how other faculty members provided feedback and graded student papers in the course load system was invaluable toward my understanding the cultural effects of grade inflation at BU. The course load system helped me to better understanding student strengths and weaknesses by observing student work before students officially started a class in determining how to address the needs of students to help each student succeed. Observing student work and participating with students in my course room was important towards understanding the cultural effects of grade inflation at BU.

Upon reflection, students seemed to be victims and customers of grade inflation. Students were victims in that they were cheated from receiving a quality education and customers by paying for good grades in anticipation of career advancement. My participation as a faculty member speaking and conversing over e-mail and on the phone with administration, students, and other faculty members was critical for my understanding of the cultural effects of grade inflation at BU. My thoughts were faculty and administration wanted to please the customer, which was the student. Administration wanted students to stay to maintain retention rates and faculty members wanted to retain their jobs. Faculty who accurately graded students and faithfully adhered to BU written standards and policies faced termination

The primary challenge of grade inflation for students is having a feeling of mastery in the subject matter where no mastery has been achieved (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Students complete courses and are granted degrees then enter employment with little to no qualified skills or basic knowledge (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). From my experience within the grade inflation culture at BU, students were highly disengaged from learning, studied less, were less literate in the English language, had a sense of entitlement in believing paying tuition assured a degree, and lacked critical and higher order thinking skills. Students at BU felt they did not have to work to get good grades. BU faculty gave grades expecting students to give acceptable course evaluation scores along with little to no student complaints thereby ensuring continued employment.

Ultimately the loser in a grade inflation environment is society. Society in general pays the price of grade inflation relative to unqualified personnel leading to lower productivity output, less quality of work, individuals unwilling to work hard to accomplish a task, and less competency (Marquis, 2013). For society, grade inflation is manifested in the apparent dissatisfaction with educational results from the loss of confidence in the education system to prepare individuals for the world of work (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Universities are servants of and are accountable to society (Caruth & Caruth, 2013).

The effect of grade inflation influences society by the ever-increasing shortage of qualified workers in the United States ready to take on the most technologically advanced jobs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics fields (Marquis, 2013). Society has a responsibility for grade inflation by encouraging a culture of instant gratification (Marquis, 2013). Students want immediate positive feedback regardless of whether the feedback is commensurate with the reality of a situation (Love & Kotchen, 2010). Ultimately grade

inflation impacts society because students learn high rewards come with little work and effort, which does not develop students with the fortitude and ambition required for the United States to effectively compete in a challenging rapidly shifting global economy (Love & Kotchen, 2010; Marquis, 2013).

Students who are victimized by grade inflation often do not learn requisite skills to be productive workers (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). A potential consequence of grade inflation is students are not as engaged in the nation's political life (Marquis, 2013). The effects of grade inflation might create an uneducated citizenry where individuals are unable to critically think about the issues of the day. Receiving unearned "As" does not establish the foundation for a lifetime of learning that is required for an informed citizenry (Caruth & Caruth, 2013).

Employers are victimized by grade inflation because employers are unable hire the level of talent, knowledge, diligence, competence, work ethic, level of understanding, and abilities needed to increase profitability and enhance wealth resulting in a less productive workforce. Inflated grades mislead employers and can distort hiring and compensation decisions (Young, 2013). With grade inflation existing across nearly all academic institutions, employers find it difficult to evaluate and compare applicants by merely reviewing transcripts and GPAs (Windemuth, 2014). The greatest challenge of grade inflation for university administrators, faculty, students, society, and employers is the inability to determine between exceptional individuals and mediocre individuals.

Upon reflection, the issue that was perplexing for me was that during the initial faculty training, BU appeared to emphasize an intolerance for grade inflation, yet in practice, primarily because BU is a for profit business, grade inflation appears to be rampant. My concern and thoughts are if the culture of grade inflation continues and no strong articulation of standards is forthcoming, the worst-case scenario might happen. The U.S. Congress might step in and create laws for national standards for college curricula enforced by testing in core subjects. Accrediting agencies and federal funding might force schools to address grade inflation, which would entail the functional loss of academic freedom. If grade inflation continues, universities might become mere extensions of high school.

As educators, leaders, and practitioners we can abate grade inflation. In this paper, I provided my observations as a participant at an online university where no part of the university appeared unaffected by a culture of grade inflation. Students being treated as customers must end, the student-instructor dynamics must be positively changed, the use of student evaluations of instructors be altered, and strong academic policies must be enforced. We can lessen grade inflation and make students appreciate the real value of the grades they are earning, not as indicators of something finished, but of something that is just the beginning. Universities can regain the role of opening minds of students in the search of truth. We need to start curbing the culture of grade inflation that is plaguing higher education in the United States. However, if grade inflation continues unabated, educational institutions will continue to cheat students and continue to hire corrupt, not academically qualified, and ineffective instructors and administrators.

Limitations and Future Research

Six limitations exist. First, the study took place at one online university in the United States. Results might be different at another online university or at an on-ground educational institution. The second limitation was a lack of prior research on the phenomenon of grade inflation at online universities in the United States. The third limitation was I was not privy to all students and all faculty as I could only observe the course load system and the students assigned to me. The fourth limitation was reduced access to speaking with administration personnel as such personnel preferred e-mail communications. The fifth limitation was my

discoveries were self-reported, therefore, other researchers are limited to independently verify my findings. The sixth limitation was I taught masters and doctoral students. Possibly, grade inflation is not as obvious at the associate and bachelor's degree levels.

Future research could involve proposing solutions to abate grade inflation at U.S. online universities. Future researchers could explore whether additional reasons exist for grade inflation. Researchers could expand the work of Winzer (2002) and Kohn (2002) to explore whether grade inflation does not exist. Future researchers could explore the rising costs of attending university effect on grade inflation. Researchers may test my discoveries by utilizing a quantitative research design with a statistically significant sample size.

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Article Citation

Blum, D. A. (2018). Experiences of grade inflation at an online university in the United States: An autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*, *23*(7), 1583-1613. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss7/7>
