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Nine Potential Solutions to Abate Grade Inflation at Regionally Accredited Online U.S. Universities: An Intrinsic Case Study

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Abstract

Grade inflation must be abated. The effect of grade inflation weakens academic standards to the point where accurately assessing levels of competency and student knowledge is difficult to determine. Using intrinsic case study design, I contacted 411 online instructors in the United States exploring potential solutions to abate grade inflation. Of 411 faculty members contacted via personal e-mail, 27 instructors at three regionally accredited online universities in the United States agreed to be interviewed by the use of an interview protocol and recorded via Skype. The research question guiding the study was “What are potential solutions to abate grade inflation?” The research addressed a gap in research related to potential solutions to abate grade inflation at online universities located in the United States. Concepts developed from data analysis were (a) use rubrics, (b) revising student evaluations (c) re-evaluating academic policies, (d) instituting objective exams, (e) instructor training program, (f) take instructors out of grading, (g) pass / fail grading, (h) ranking rather than GPA, and (i) best practices.

Keywords

Grade Inflation Solutions, Revising Student Evaluations, Intrinsic Case Study, Academic Policies, Best Practices

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Nine Potential Solutions to Abate Grade Inflation at Regionally Accredited Online U.S. Universities: An Intrinsic Case Study

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Grade inflation must be abated. The effect of grade inflation weakens academic standards to the point where accurately assessing levels of competency and student knowledge is difficult to determine. Using intrinsic case study design, I contacted 411 online instructors in the United States exploring potential solutions to abate grade inflation. Of 411 faculty members contacted via personal e-mail, 27 instructors at three regionally accredited online universities in the United States agreed to be interviewed by the use of an interview protocol and recorded via Skype. The research question guiding the study was “What are potential solutions to abate grade inflation?” The research addressed a gap in research related to potential solutions to abate grade inflation at online universities located in the United States. Concepts developed from data analysis were (a) use rubrics, (b) revising student evaluations (c) re-evaluating academic policies, (d) instituting objective exams, (e) instructor training program, (f) take instructors out of grading, (g) pass / fail grading, (h) ranking rather than GPA, and (i) best practices. Keywords: Grade Inflation Solutions, Revising Student Evaluations, Intrinsic Case Study, Academic Policies, Best Practices

Grade inflation is a problem at online universities in the United States (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Castillo, Wakefield, & LeMaster, 2010; Gray, 2008; Kohn, 2002; Love & Kotchen, 2010; Nikolakakos, Reeves, & Shuch, 2012; Rojstaczer, 2015). Grade inflation is an objective increase in grades and grade point averages (GPA) over time from alterations made in grading standards and practices independent of student ability and actual performance (Hu, 2005; O’Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Grade inflation has been most prevalent at public universities and liberal arts colleges in the southern United States (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). However, Rojstaczer and Hartley (2012) noted grade inflation tends to be more widespread at private universities.

One reason for grade inflation at U.S. universities as postulated by Caruth and Caruth (2013) Donaldson and Gray (2012) Hu (2005), and O’Halloran and Gordon (2014) is a dysfunctional reversed customer-based model based on student evaluations of instructors. The basis of this dysfunction is faculty members act as employees of the students and students’ act as customers of the university (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Donaldson & Gray, 2012; Hu, 2005; O’Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Students get “paid” by faculty via unearned grades ensuring the student receives satisfaction for payment (Hu, 2005). Grade inflation appears to weaken standards of excellence required of students within educational institutions to the point where accurately assessing levels of competency and student knowledge is often difficult to determine (Tucker & Courts, 2010).

Grade inflation is manifested in academia, among students, in society, and for employers potentially affecting online universities worldwide. In academia, grade inflation degrades institutional reputation (Chan, Hao, & Suen, 2007; Ehlers & Schwager, 2016). Once the university engages in grade inflation, the value of a 4.0 GPA, even from a traditional reputable school, might no longer carry the same weight as it once did therefore lowering institutional reputation (Marquis, 2013). Grade inflation at less reputable schools and many

online universities could earn the school the classification as a degree mill, essentially making the degree earned worthless (Haynie, 2013; Marquis, 2013). Grade inflation lessens academic rigor and lowers the overall quality of the education received (Marquis, 2013). As student grades rise, the education received becomes less effective and meaningful (Marquis, 2013). The degree earned is not valued as robust by society and is often not much more than a mere piece of paper for the student (Tucker & Courts, 2010).

Grade inflation deprives students feedback required to assess strength and weaknesses and devalues the performance of better students relative to that of average classmates (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Grade inflation means students never know where he or she ranks in class and are unable to objectively evaluate what has been learned (Hyde, 2015). Because "As" and "Bs" are readily dispersed, students become unaccustomed to work hard to obtain good grades (Marquis, 2013). Grade inflation does not help students build the grit, fortitude, dedication, perseverance, persistence, discipline, humility, the ability to sacrifice, ambition, and a can do what it takes attitude necessary to successfully compete in a changing and challenging global economy (Marquis, 2013).

For society, grade inflation is manifested in the dissatisfaction with educational results from the loss of confidence in the education system to prepare individuals for the world of work (Franz, 2010). Grade inflation means graduates lack requisite skills, knowledge, and willingness to struggle to accomplish a task (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Grade inflation negatively influences society by an increasing glut of unqualified workers in the United States who are not capable of taking on the most technologically advanced jobs in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Marquis, 2013; Yang & Yip, 2003).

Employers are affected by grade inflation because organizations cannot hire the level of talent, knowledge, diligence, skills, fortitude, dedication, competence, work ethic, understanding, and abilities needed to increase profitability and enhance wealth resulting in economic losses and a less productive workforce (Franz, 2010; Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005; Love & Kotchen, 2010; Yang & Yip, 2003). Graduates who experienced grade inflation tend to be less prepared for the rigors of the world of work (Oleinik, 2009). An effect of grade inflation is employers place less value on a college education in favor of work experience thereby opting not to hire graduates from universities where grade inflation appears rampant (Marquis, 2013). Inflated grades mislead employers as to veracity of the candidate and can distort hiring and compensation decisions (Young, 2013).

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 rationale for this study is based on the premise grade inflation is a concern for students, academia, society, employers and potential solutions are needed to abate the effects of grade inflation at online universities not just in the United States but worldwide.

The intended audiences for this paper are online university instructors and administrators as these individuals can affect positive change toward abating grade inflation. The intended audience might benefit from the findings of this study by having potential solutions and best practices to abate grade inflation in their university. The gap in research relates to the phenomenon and potential solutions of grade inflation at online universities in the United States. The gap in literature is no studies exist based on an exhaustive review of grade inflation at online universities in the United States. The purpose of the study was to explore the potential solutions to abate grade inflation with online instructors at three online regionally accredited U.S. universities. The research question guiding this study was what potential solutions exist to abate grade inflation at regionally accredited online universities in the United States. For this study, I conducted semistructured interview questions of faculty members at

three online universities by Skype® located in the Midwest and the Southwest regions of the United States. The remainder of this paper is structured as literature review, methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

A review of the extant literature addressed grade inflation as a widespread problem at U.S. universities. As mentioned previously, to my knowledge based on an exhaustive review of the extant literature, scant to no peered articles exist regarding grade inflation at regionally accredited online universities in the United States. The focus on this literature review is with baccalaureate programs at on ground universities in the United States. Kohn (2002) acknowledged grade inflation initially appeared in literature in 1894 at Harvard University based on the "*Report of the Committee on Raising the Standard, Harvard University, 1894.*"

Pervasive, rampant, and prevalent grade inflation in on ground U.S. higher education baccalaureate programs became a concern starting in the 1960s (Juola, 1976; Love & Kotchen, 2010; Nikolakakos et al., 2012; Rojstaczer, 2015). Grade inflation became noticeable when some males with higher grades could remain in university and defer being drafted in to the Vietnam War (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Castillo, Wakefield, & LeMaster, 2010; Gray, 2008). By giving students higher grades to avoid serving in the War, the genesis of the phenomenon of modern day grade inflation began (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Castillo, Wakefield, & LeMaster, 2010; Gray, 2008). Since the 1960s evidence is strong and positive indicating grade inflation exists (Love & Kotchen, 2010).

Rojstaczer noted in the 1960s grade distribution in the United States consisted of 15% "As" and 35% "Cs." However, by 2008, 43% of students received "As" and 16% received "Cs" (Rojstaczer, 2015). Jaschik (2009) indicated grade inflation rather than students being better prepared than previous generations for the reason students were receiving better grades. Green and Emerson (2007) noted one potential factor leading to grade inflation was "... 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). Higher education administration in the United States face demands from industry to produce students with the requisite skills and basic knowledge needed to meet business needs (Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010; O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Although some schools such as Princeton University have attempted at lessening grade inflation, higher education administration has been unsuccessful at significantly curbing instances of grade inflation at on ground U.S. universities (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014).

Evidence for Grade Inflation

Gray (2008) estimated 90% of university students receive a grade of "A" or "B." Gray's research concurred with Jaschik (2009) that instructors give higher grades without a commensurate change in knowledge obtained by students. For example, in 1961 students spent approximately 40 hours per week attending class and studying. By 2003, students spent approximately 27 hours per week in class and studying (Vedder, 2010). Students are spending 67.5% less time studying and attending class yet are receiving better grades. Rojstaczer (2015) noted "As" grew from 7% to 26% and "Cs" fell from 25% to 9%, respectively between 1969 and 1993. Rojstaczer suggested GPAs increased on average by 0.6 from 1967 to 2001. Rojstaczer and Hartley (2012) noted "As" represent 43% of all letter grades given, an increase of 28% since 1960 and an increase of 12% since 1988. Grades lower than "C" account for less than 10% of grades given (Rojstaczer & Hartley, 2012).

Rojstaczer (2015) noted public and private schools indicated trends of grade inflation since the 1960s, the mean GPA at private schools was 0.3 points higher than public schools, and the rate of grade inflation was 25% to 30% higher at private schools. Caruth and Caruth (2013) noted GPAs at private colleges increased from 3.09 in 1991 to 3.30 in 2006, a 9.4% increase. 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 0.15 per decade (Rojstaczer, 2015).

In 1966, 22% of Harvard undergraduate students received “As” (Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). By 1997, 46% of Harvard students received “As” (Kezim et al., 2005). Vogue and Higbee (2004) noted faculty members at Duke had not given a “C” grade in over two years. Many professors at Duke felt pressured in awarding “As” and “Bs” because giving lower grades would negatively influence their standing at the university (Vogue & Higbee, 2004). By giving lower grades professors were rated poor by students and administration (Vogue & Higbee, 2004). Love and Kotchen (2010) noted average grades at Duke, Northwestern University, and the University of North Carolina, increased from 0.18 to 0.24 points per decade from the 1960s to the 2000s on a 4.0 scale.

In 2004 Princeton University implemented a new grading policy to abate grade inflation (Kezim et al., 2005). Prior to implementation of the new policy, 43% of Princeton students received “As” and 88% of all grades were above “B” (Kezim et al., 2005). According to the new policy the number of “As” awarded were limited to 35% in undergraduate classes, down 46% from 2004 but higher when compared to 31% in the 1970s (Kezim et al., 2005). However, by 2014 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). Figure 1 is a graphic representative of GPA trends from 1983 to 2013. Figure 2 is a graphic representative of changes in letter grade distributions over time.

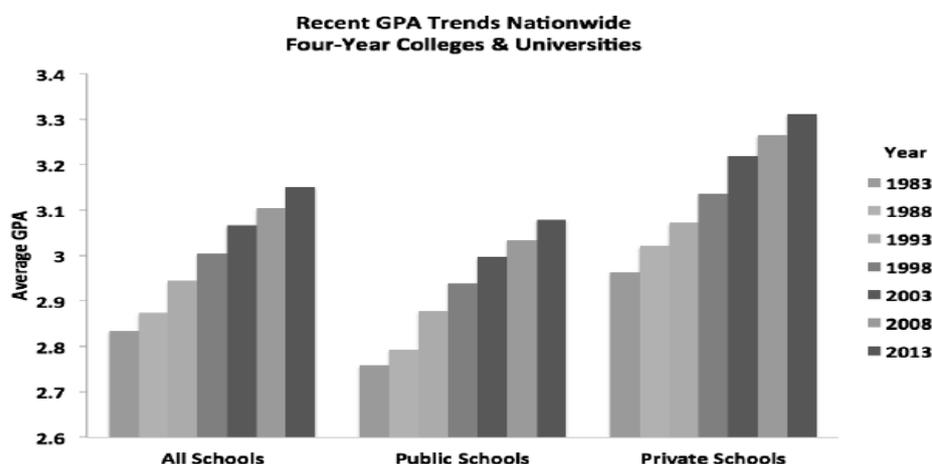


Figure 1: GPA trends in the United States at four-year colleges and universities from 1983 to 2013. Published with permission from S. Rojstaczer. Graph located at <http://www.gradeinflation.com/>

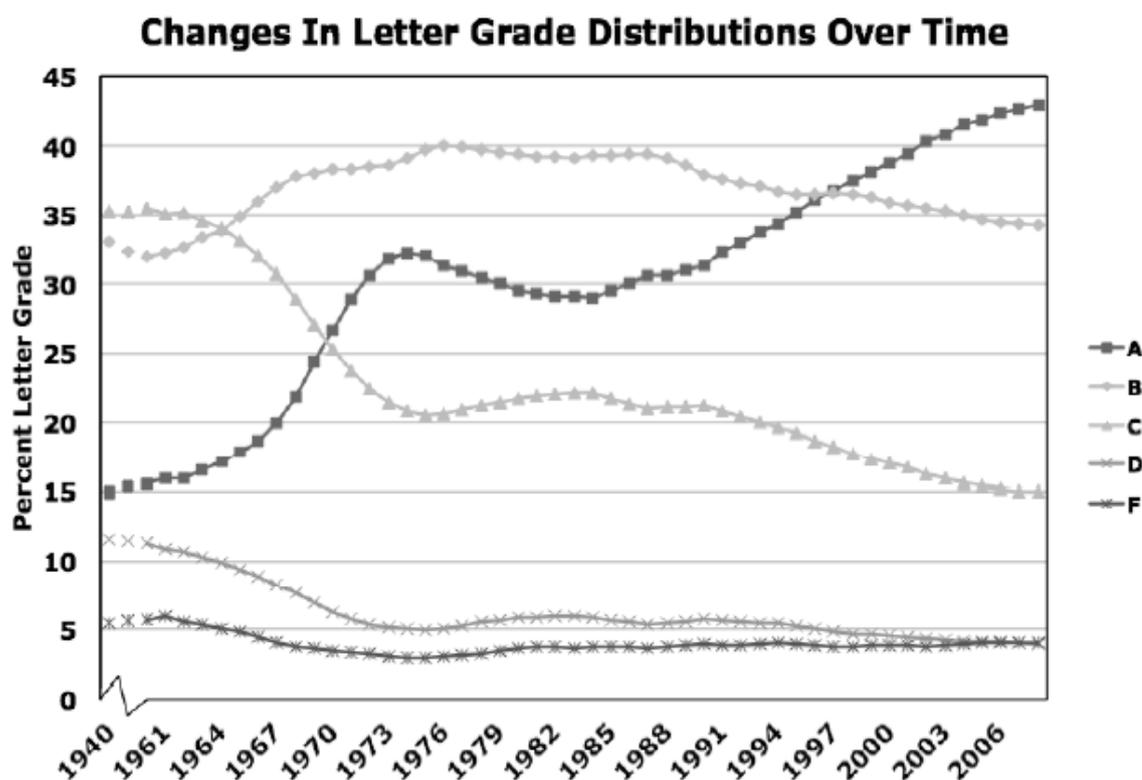


Figure 2: Changes in letter grade distributions over time from 1940 to 2006. Graph represents averages from 1935 to 1944 and 1945 to 1954, respectively. Data from 1960 onward represent annual averages in their database, smoothed with a three-year centered moving average. Published with permission from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

Challenges of Grade Inflation

The challenges of grade inflation exist in higher education (Hu, 2005; Stanoyevitch, 2008). University administration reliance of and the rise in the number of part-time and adjunct faculty members whose job security is nonexistent and experience low compensation is another consideration for grade inflation (Stanoyevitch, 2008). Time as a valuable resource 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, useless conversations with students over earning more points, or becoming the ire of administration seeking high retention rates (Stanoyevitch, 2008). Often part-time faculty receive no benefits from the educational institutional so time is money. University administrators often ignore grade inflation especially if participating instructors receive strong and positive student evaluations and are favored by the Dean (Stanoyevitch, 2008). Hu (2005) noted likability and personality of the instructor, course difficulty, and the format and delivery of course 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).

The primary challenge of grade inflation is students 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; Stanoyevitch, 2008). Within the grade inflation environment students are highly disengaged from learning, study less, are less literate, and lack critical thinking skills, yet grades continue to rise (Tucker & Courts, 2010). Simply, students do not have to work to get good grades (Marquis, 2013).

Students might consider themselves lucky to be a victim of grade inflation, however, society pays the price 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). A potential consequence of grade inflation is students are unable to engage in the nation's political life. The effects of grade inflation might create an uneducated citizenry where individuals are unable to critically think about the issues of the day (Marquis, 2013). Receiving unearned "As" does not establish the foundation for a lifetime of learning that is required for an informed citizenry (Caruth & Caruth, 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 reality (Marquis, 2013). 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). Grade inflation for employers might lead to economic losses (Young, 2013).

O'Halloran and Gordon (2014) argued challenges of reducing grade inflation requires colleges and universities to enact educational reforms. Dowling (2003) asserted a challenge of grade inflation is no honest measure of academic grading exists. Caruth and Caruth (2003) noted honesty in grading has been replaced with dishonesty where grades provided by instructors are meaningless. The greatest challenge of grade inflation is university administrators, faculty, students, society, and employers are unable to determine between exceptional students and good students or between good students and mediocre students (Oleinik, 2009).

Grade Inflation Controversy

Grade inflation is a controversial topic because grade inflation characterizes differing issues such as (a) higher grades provided while academic standards have lowered, (b) student as customer, (c) administration reliance of student evaluations of instructors, (d) students spending less time studying, and (e) rising costs of attending university (Caruth & Caruth, 2013; Hu 2005; O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Another controversy related to grade inflation is students are in class less and study less yet an upward trend in grades exist since the 1960s (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). However, time series studies based on transcripts report smaller increases in GPAs (Kezim et al., 2005; O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014; Rojstaczer, 2015). If grade inflation continues unabated, educational institutions will continue to cheat students and continue to hire corrupt instructors rather than opening minds of students in the search of truth (Oleinik, 2009).

Winzer (2002) noted a lack of unity of opinion reflecting the conflicting views regarding whether grade inflation exists, 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. However, Vedder (2010), Rojstaczer and Hartley (2012), and Rojstaczer (2015) demonstrated students who earn "As" received lower grades before the 1960s. Conversely, Gooblar (2014) argued no convincing studies provide evidence demonstrating higher grades lead to poorer learning outcomes for students. Although Winzer (2002), Kohn (2002), and Gooblar (2014) are dissenting voices, evidence from the extant literature appears to suggest grade inflation exists.

The gap in knowledge and research methods is no or scant literature exists addressing solutions to abate grade inflation at regionally accredited online universities in the United States. The purpose of this study is to address gaps in knowledge and research. This study attempted to fill this gap by interviewing 27 instructors at three regionally accredited online universities in the United States. These participants provided nine potential solutions to abate grade inflation coupled with addressing the gap in knowledge and research is the unique contribution of this paper to literature.

Researcher Context

For approximately two years I was a faculty member at an online university in the United States where grade inflation 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 understand if my experiences were unique, and what if any potential solutions to abate the phenomenon of grade inflation existed. Based on my experiences as a faculty member in a grade inflation environment, conducting this research, and reviewing the literature; grade inflation exists and has a corrosive effect manifested in academia, with students, in society, and with businesses.

Methodology

Case Study Design

I employed an intrinsic case study with the qualitative approach. Qualitative researchers conduct research embracing multiple truths and realities from samples sufficient to confirm themes and from an individual perspective (Hanson, Balmer, & Giardino, 2011; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010). Qualitative researchers explore topics not previously understood leading to further investigation to enhance understanding of the phenomenon (Hanson et al., 2011). The reason for using the qualitative approach was to inductively explore potential solutions to abate grade inflation at regionally accredited online U.S. universities from the perspective of those who help make grade inflation possible, university instructors.

I chose to do an intrinsic case study. Yin (2014) noted in a case study, the researcher investigates an existing phenomenon with an in-depth inquiry within a real-world context. Yin argued case study is optimal when the emphasis of the study is for participants (a) to respond

to “how” and “why” questions, (b) the researcher is unable to manipulate the behavior of participants, (c) uncovering context relevant to the study, and (e) boundaries between context and phenomenon are unclear. Case study design was selected to understand potential solutions online university instructors might have to inform best the research question. Yin noted explanatory, exploratory, descriptive, single, holistic, multiple as common case study designs. Stake (1995) suggested intrinsic, instrumental, and collective as case study types. Stake mentioned in an intrinsic case study the researcher only wants to better understand the case because the case is of interest to the researcher. The researcher does not seek to understand a general phenomenon or build theory (Stake, 1995). Intrinsic case study was optimal for this study because I did not seek to develop theory, to embody other cases, or demonstrate a specific problem or characteristic (Stake, 1995). I was interested in exploring and understanding potential solutions to abate grade inflation at regionally accredited U.S. online universities.

Participants Selection Process

I applied and received approval from University Institutional Review Boards (IRB) at three online universities located in the Midwest and the Southwest regions of the United States to contact faculty members by personal e-mail and to interview faculty members using an interview protocol via Skype®. The purpose of the study was to explore potential solutions to abate grade inflation. I retrieved e-mail addresses of faculty member located from each university website, which formed a purposive sample of 411 potential participants. Each faculty member received an e-mail message from my personal e-mail address on October 10, 2016. On each e-mail message, I introduced myself and explained I am exploring potential solutions to abate grade inflation at their university. I noted time constraints in doing the interview and only ask for about 20 minutes of their time. I mentioned that if the faculty member agreed to participant in the study, he or she would receive a summary of the findings once published. Some participants had concerns about confidentiality, which I addressed. I asked via e-mail if the faculty member was interested in being interviewed to please fill out the attached consent form and return to me by e-mail. The consent form contained additional information about the study. Afterwards, I stated I would contact the participant to set up a mutually agreed to time and date to talk. The faculty member could contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via email with any questions.

Recipients who e-mailed back and asked not to be contacted again were deleted from the master list. Individuals who agreed to be interviewed were removed from the master e-mail list and placed on a To Call list. Faculty members who did not opt out or who did not agree to be interviewed were contacted by personal e-mail on October 15, 2016. Out of 411 sampled participants, 18 e-mailed back as not interested, 366 made no contact back from the October 10 and November 11 submissions, and 27 agreed to be interview via Skype®. No e-mail addresses bounced back.

Data Collection

Once a date and time was mutually established, I called each of the 27 faculty members who agreed to participant in the study at the phone number the participant requested. For this study, I used an interview protocol of six semi-structured questions to collect data to better understand what faculty thoughts, interpretations, and beliefs were regarding solutions to abate grade inflation at regionally accredited online U.S. universities. The semi-structured interviews started on October 17, 2016 and concluded November 16, 2016. Questions were field tested by five colleagues at two on ground universities before asking the questions to participants. I utilized semi-structured interviews to recognize broad concepts, patterns, and to

direct the topic conversation in a systematic and consistent manner designed to elicit elaborate responses from participants (Qu & Dumay, 2011). The questions were:

- To what extent have you observed the phenomenon of grade inflation at your university?
- What factors do you think contribute to grade inflation?
- What specific potential solutions would you offer to abate grade inflation at your university?
- What potential solutions do you think are optimal in reducing grade inflation at online U.S. universities?
- What potential solutions to abate grade inflation have been implemented at your university?
- What best practices would you suggest online universities implement to abate grade inflation?

I used Skype® and recorded each conversation with eCamm, which is a call recorder of audio and video content used for Skype. Participants residing in two-party consent states received notification of recording at the beginning of the call. All participants consented to recording. No interviews were conducted face-to-face. All calls were recorded to accurately capture participants' words and thoughts. Interviews were conducted in a professional and collegial manner. Participants in the study responded to semi-structured focused interview questions asked in a conversational manner (Yin, 2014). Participants could complete stating their thoughts before a follow-up question or addressing the next semi-structured question posed. I wrote detailed notes as part of a journal for each participant who responded to an interview question or follow-up question(s). Interviews were between 15 and 45 minutes. Cachia and Millward (2011) argued utilizing telephone or similar device for qualitative data collection was a viable option.

Data saturation was met at 27 participants due to the depth and richness of data collected. Data saturation occurs when sufficient data has been collected and further coding is not practical to replicate the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Mason (2010) argued 15 participants was the smallest acceptable sample to achieve data saturation. Hanson et al. (2011) confirmed 10 to 20 participants were sufficient to confirm themes, patterns, and concepts. Qu and Dumay (2011) argued semi-structured interviews use was prevalent in qualitative research. Berta and Laporte (2010) noted semi-structured interviews were helpful in understanding phenomena. Rhee, Zwar, and Kemp (2012) utilized semi-structured telephone interviews from 23 participants in a research study.

The purposive sampling of 411 was representative of online university faculty members in the United States. Purposive sampling is appropriate because faculty members at regionally accredited online universities in the United States are a specialized group who possess experiences and specific knowledge capable of addressing the research question (Parlalis, 2011; Rezaei & Bagheri, 2011). Participant selection was based on: (a) faculty member at a U.S. based regionally accredited online university, (b) was available to be contacted via Skype®, and (c) was over the age of 18. The purposive sample method based on participant relevance, experiences, and knowledge related to the research question (Orser, Elliott, & Leck, 2011). After the interviews ended, I reviewed my handwritten notes. After all interviews were completed, I personally transcribed the eCamm recorded responses from participants. I then started data analysis.

Data Analysis

The primary purpose of qualitative research is to understand a particular phenomenon involving an investigative process where the researcher over time makes sense of the issue. (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To this end, I interviewed participants, completed a coding process, and attempted to establish research with rigor to understand what potential solutions exist to abate grade inflation at U.S. online universities. Personal reflections and self-observations in the form of hand-written interview notes and interpretations from the transcribed data serve as important components in qualitative work (Hampson, Hicks, & Watt, 2016).

Coding Process

To organize raw data from observations, I initially used NVivo 11 to facilitate coding. I used NVivo 11 to sort, filter words, and phrases into context. I printed out the sort from NVivo 11 and proceeded to classify the data. After reviewing data retrieved from NVivo 11, I decided to re-code the interview transcripts and my hand-written notes using Microsoft Word (MS Word) to create greater intimacy and understanding of the participant's words, ideas, and thoughts. Saldaña (2013) argued a code in qualitative study is a phrase or word representing essences of a portion of language or visual data. Data are 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 nine potential solutions to abate grade inflation 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 analyzed interview responses by a process of interpreting and examining meanings from context (Genzok, 1999). Data analysis consisted of introspection and immersion thoughts until concepts and meanings developed (Wall, 2006).

I selected NVivo as the coding method. The researcher can use NVivo coding as the sole coding method for data analysis for small-scale studies (Saldaña, 2013). NVivo was selected because the method helps researchers prioritize and places high regard for the participant's voice (Saldaña, 2013). Each of the 27 interviews were analyzed in a systematic process. To support the classification of data, I read each line from the interview transcripts and my hand-written notes, re-listened to the audio recordings relevant to potential solutions to abate grade inflation. Then I carefully re-read the data four times to ensure I understood to the best of my ability the thoughts, ideas, and meanings spoken by the participants. I paid close attention to the participant's voice, placed words and phrases in quotation marks and underlined, highlighted in yellow, and bolded specific phrases and words that appeared to specifically address potential solutions to abate grade inflation (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 red (important), yellow (possible), and blue (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 qualitative intrinsic case 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.

Charmaz (2006) noted NVivo coding might provide a crucial check whether the researcher comprehended the significance of the participant meanings. The coding process continued in a cyclical fashion in terms coding and recoding, code to category and vice versa, and category to data (Saldaña, 2009). After the concepts emerged, I re-reviewed my notes, extant research / literature, and transcribed interview responses to double-check I accurately interpreted meanings from data (Genzuek, 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).

Rigor

Simon (2011) noted in qualitative studies the term rigor is more often used than the term validity. I did not want my personal views and biases affect how I interpreted the interview transcripts. Merriam (2009) and Stake (2010) noted case studies such as intrinsic case study provides insight and rich descriptive data of a phenomenon rather than generalize findings. Researchers must ensure credibility of studies to establish trust with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To certify my findings had rigor, I ensured the study had credibility, confirmability, was triangulated, and was member checked.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) opined that ensuring credibility is one of most important aspects in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research. Johnson and Rasulova (2016) argued study is credible when the researcher is confident from data saturation and data triangulation that study findings are believable and contains a plurality of truths and represents multiple realities imparted by participants to extend common themes, concepts, and actions. To enhance credibility, Krefling (1991) suggested focusing on participant sampling. In this study, I did purposive sampling. Johnson and Rasulova and Krefling mentioned purposive sampling is suitable for qualitative research permitting the researcher to have data rich cases providing relevant data.

A researcher uses confirmability to question whether the findings are supported by participants and not by researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance confirmability, I asked three colleagues at an online university in the United States who did not participate in the study to be external reviewers. The reviewers signed confidentiality agreements and confirmed my findings. Johnson and Rasulova (2016) noted being ethical toward obtaining truth based on reflecting on participants thought, ideas, and words can lead to understanding and different perspectives by having a respectful and integrity-based relationship the researcher has with participants.

To ensure rigor data must be triangulated (Fusch & Ness 2015; Leung, 2015). Tellis (1997) and Snow and Anderson (1991) noted triangulation is utilized by researchers regarding theory development and data collection. Tellis argued triangulation is necessary because of the ethical need to confirm the validity of the data collection process from multiple sources of information. Fusch and Ness (2015) noted triangulation is one method to ensure study validity. In this study, I triangulated data from 27 different participants. Denzin (1970) identified four forms of triangulation. The first type is data (Denzin, 1970). A researcher uses data triangulation in various sampling strategies at different periods and with disparate people (Denzin, 1970). The second form is investigator (Denzin, 1970). Investigator triangulation refers to more than one researcher or coder who gathers and interprets data (Denzin, 1970). The third type is theoretical, which incorporates multiple theoretical positions of the phenomenon (Denzin, 1970). The fourth form is methodological, which utilizes more than one data collection method (Denzin, 1970). For this qualitative case study, the triangulation form

was data by (a) utilizing semi-structured interviews, (b) field testing interview questions, (c) confirming field notes with participants, (d) use of external reviewers, (e) reviewing audio-recorded transcriptions four times, (f) review of the extant literature, and (g) comparing responses from 27 online faculty members at three different regionally accredited online universities in the United States. Data type was chosen to enhance the veracity of data collected and to provide a clearer understanding the phenomenon under study.

The last part to ensure rigor was to do a member check. Member checking improves and is crucial to ensure rigor in terms of credibility of data (Carlson, 2010; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Neuman, 2003; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). In member checking, the researcher includes the thoughts and voices of participants based on the analyzed and interpreted data. The purpose of member checking is to control researcher bias during and after data analysis (Anney, 2014). For this study, I e-mailed 10 participants at random who participated in the study a summary of my preliminary findings. Eight individuals responded via e-mail affirming my results as accurate, valid, persuasive, and objective. Maxwell (2005) noted participant validation as critical to excluding misinterpretation from participant data. After data collection, data analysis, and ensuring the rigor of the study, I proceeded to write my findings. As I wrote each potential solution, I referred to my coded transcripts, hand-written notes, and feedback from those who member checked by findings.

Findings

I propose nine solutions to abate grade inflation at regionally accredited online universities in the United States. The research question guiding this study was what potential solutions exist to abate grade inflation at regionally accredited U.S. online universities. Concepts developed from data analysis were (a) use rubrics, (b) revising student evaluations (c) re-evaluating academic policies, (d) instituting objective exams, (e) instructor training program, (f) take instructors out of grading, (g) pass / fail grading, (h) ranking rather than GPA, and (i) best practices. Two participants thought grade inflation did not exist or was not a factor. Concepts are in order based on respondent popularity.

Use Rubrics

Twenty-five participants thought implementing standardized grading rubrics ensures all students are graded by the same criteria. Two participants did not think the use of rubrics was a potential solution to abate grade inflation. Faculty members who argued in favor of rubrics thought the rubric should contain quantitative and qualitative criteria based on what students learn and what they were supposed to learn based on course goals and objectives. Donaldson and Gray (2012) mentioned the rubric should have three components. First are defined performance criteria / elements (Donaldson & Gray, 2012). Second would be detailed descriptions of performance (Donaldson & Gray, 2012). Third would be a rating scale, say 1 to 5 points (Donaldson & Gray, 2012).

One participant argued, "In my opinion, grade inflation is a consequence of not having clear expectations for student achievement and the ability to effectively communication our expectations to students. The rubric helps to ameliorate both issues." Respondents who favored rubrics thought the rubric should outline what the student needs to do to earn "A." The rubric also lowers the pressure on instructors to give "As" or "Bs" when students fail to meet "A" or "B" criteria. Participants suggested using a rubric provides structure and effective feedback to let students know what they did well not and so well.

Twenty-five participants thought rubrics would reduce grade inflation, 20 thought rubrics would improve objectivity in grading, and 18 thought rubrics foster greater consistency

in grading. With a rubric, students gain an enhanced understanding for the reasons why they received a grade. Participants mentioned rubrics provide a more level playing field for diverse group of students.

Revising Student Evaluations

Twenty-two participants mentioned student evaluations as the prime factor for grade inflation. Often student evaluations of instructors measures instructor effectiveness and is used as the basis of faculty retention. Participants strongly believed student evaluations were not effective as a measure of faculty teaching abilities. Often student evaluations are a popularity contest students have for faculty. Participants were unanimous that administration and faculty pay attention to student comments. Of the 22 respondents who mentioned student evaluations, 15 favored restricted use of student evaluation based on general qualifications of students. These participants thought students were qualified to evaluate the pace of the course, determine clarity of course instructions, and present personal opinions. None of the 22 participants thought students could assess and measure teaching effectiveness, andragogy, and pedagogy. One participant summed up the thoughts of 18 participants by stating, "Good teaching is hard to measure but that doesn't mean that we should give up trying to assess and measure teaching effectiveness."

Eight participants pointed out the most effective way for faculty members to obtain student high evaluations scores was to offer students challenging work, to help students to master course goals and outcomes, and to encourage students to value and appreciate learning. On the other hand, 19 participants thought giving students "As" or "Bs" whether earned or not was the surest way to earn positive student evaluations. Twenty participants thought they received higher student ratings in classes with less than 15 students. Twenty-three faculty members were concerned students would use evaluations to complain to administration in order to punish instructors. One participant mentioned being intimidated and bullied by a student into giving the student an "A" on an assignment

Re-Evaluating Academic Policies

Sixteen participants thought policies permitting liberal drop / add, course retakes, and forgiveness policies should be re-evaluated and might contribute to grade inflation. The participants agreed a student should be able to drop a course within the first week of the class. One participant argued, "Unless the student has some dire personal or financial issues, he or she starts a course, the student should finish the course. It is about finishing what you begin." Six of the 16 participants favored the elimination of course retakes if the student continues in the course beyond the first week unless extraordinary circumstances exist. As one participant said, "If a student can complete 70% to 75% of a course and still withdraw because they are not receiving the grades they think they should, what does that teach the student." One participant stated, "Forgiveness policies permit students to eliminate courses from their GPA calculation in which a grade lower than "C" was received. At my university, a student can receive forgiveness up to four courses, which I think is ridiculous."

All but one of the 16 faculty members insisted consistency in implementing drop / add, course retakes, and forgiveness policies must be university-wide not just reside in specific departments. Implementing university-wide policies including late submissions across the university might abate grade inflation rather than leaving policies to the discretion of an instructor. One participant stated, "My job is to teach and adhere to course requirements not to develop and enforce policies." Another respondent mentioned, "Leaving room for interpretation at the instructor's discretion leads to subjective grading and might potentially

enhance grade inflation.”

Instituting Objective Exams

Fifteen faculty members favored objective exams in courses to curb grade inflation. Twenty-six respondents mentioned written assignments are often the only material online instructors should evaluate if students met course objectives and goals. As one participant stated, “My students do a couple of discussions posts and write an essay paper, that’s it. When I was a student I had quizzes each week, a mid-term, a final, and an essay paper.” According to 25 participants, grading essays is too subjective even though rubrics are used. Objective grading criteria tends to reduce the effect of grading subjectivity (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Stanoyevitch, (2008) noted objective exams provide a generally unbiased measurement to compare the effectiveness of instructors. Fourteen participants favored multiple-choice quizzes and fill-in-the blank exams over weekly essay assignments. Eight participants wanted to do away with weekly subjective written essay assignments favoring one comprehensive written essay paper at the end of the course. Thirteen faculty members thought essay assignments were an unreliable indicator of student mastery of course outcomes and goals. Two faculty members admitted to being inconsistent in grading essay papers. Fourteen participants thought objective exams provided a more accurate assessment whether a student has learned what they were supposed to learn based on course goals and objectives. However, 88% of faculty raised concerns objective exams limit higher order thinking. One faculty member stated, “In an online environment all objective exams are open-book exams. I am not comfortable with that.” Another faculty member stated, “I dislike reading papers every single week. I would welcome an objective exam once or twice during the course.”

Instructor Training Program

Thirteen faculty members interviewed saw the need for faculty training to ameliorate grade inflation. Faculty earned academic appointments by having a Masters or terminal degree. Four of the 27 faculty members mentioned they obtained formal training, licensing, or specific guidance before their joining their university. Four of the 13 participants who thought instructor training could abate grade inflation suggested a course in grading students be included in all doctoral students’ course curriculum. One faculty member said,

I went to an online university. I wish my doctoral program had a course or two on how to teach university students, especially online. I would probably have been better prepared to deal with student issues with such a training course.

Two faculty members had experience in course design and suggested an instructor training course would involve (a) objective factors, (b) provide clear explanations of grading criteria, (c) provide clear indication of expected results and factors by which students will be measured, (d) provide immediate and ongoing feedback to students throughout the term, and (e) how to accurately assess student performance. When asked what is meant by objective factors, the faculty member clarified that objective factors related to the concepts and skills faculty members need to master to be an effective instructor. As one respondent said, “Instructors who learn to improve communications with students become better facilitators and evaluators of student work.”

Take Instructors Out of Grading

Twelve participants favored removing instructors from the grading process. Three respondents liked replacing course instructors with professional evaluators. The concept as espoused by faculty members was to separate instructors who teach content from those who evaluate and grade student performance. Instructors focused on student knowledge attainment, meeting course outcomes and goals, and learning content but not grading student work. One respondent noted, “The university hires trained evaluators who use a university-approved rubric with the goal to grade consistently on assignments.” Evaluators are unknown to the student, never meet the student, and have no relationship with the student. The three participants mentioned evaluators provide extensive written comments and feedback on each assignment and explain why the student received the grade earned or a pass / fail. The goal is to permit instructors to teach and not having to deal with students nagging about grades. One participant who advanced taking instructors out of grading stated, “I don’t like grading. Grading can lead to confrontation, which is not conducive to learning. Working to increase student knowledge and comprehension of the material is paramount.” Another participant said, “I am a subject matter expert in my field and I want and help facilitate my student’s learning rather than spending time grading.”

Ten of the 12 participants who favored taking instructors out of the training process proposed artificial intelligence software. The aggregated reason was artificial intelligence has no emotional bias and might improve grading. The software after being calibrated automatically grade essays providing immediate response to student work. When I mentioned the use of artificial intelligence software to subsequent participants, one participant seemed interested in the idea but raised concerns of transparency of grading process issues, human scoring to ensure validity of software generated scores, and quality control.

Pass / Fail Grading

Ten participants favored the idea of moving toward a variation of a pass / fail system to abate inflated grades. Tucker and Courts (2010) argued benchmarks based on outcomes and goals relative to student competence need to be developed for a pass / fail system. One participant opined, “The pass / fail system should be similar to how employees are evaluated at work, you did okay or not.” Under the pass / fail system all a student needs to do to pass is meet basic course outcomes, goals, and objectives. Students would receive a pass or fail instead of a traditional letter grade.

Eight of the ten faculty members who advocated for a pass / fail grading system thought the system would be advantageous to students and faculty because the level of assessment is only limited to a pass or fail. Students who receive a “C” or higher would typically pass, while those who earned a “D” or “F” would fail. In some cases, only an “F” is considered a failing mark. With just two grades to consider, instructors have fewer options to choose from when evaluating a student’s performance. Students, on the other hand, receive the education they paid for and / or earned without the added stress and pressure of competing for higher grades.

The 10 faculty members mentioned the pass / fail grading system has a positive impact on student mood, stress, and overall anxiety. Participants argued the pass / fail grading system has several advantages. One advantage was the student’s actual grades do not appear on transcripts meaning GPA is not affected. The pass / fail system lessens student stress about receiving higher or lower grades. Students can be more relaxed and be more open to learning leading to potential great employment opportunities and enhanced responsible citizenship. One participated stated, “I noticed students enroll in pass / fail courses where otherwise they would not normally take because they don’t want to worry about failing the course.” Another faculty

member opined, “Without the emphasis on letter grades, students tend to learn only what they need to know to pass the course rather than challenge themselves and go beyond their comfort zones. Essentially students pass / fail themselves.” Six participants noted most students like to take what they perceive as challenging courses in the science or math pass / fail. As one participant said, “Students often have an easier time learning difficult concepts when all they essentially have to do is earn a “C.” However, the pass / fail system does have some negative attributes.

Seven participants thought the greatest negative aspect of a pass / fail grading system was instructors are unable to determine what grade the student earned creating a loss of achievement in students. Three participants articulated no distinction exists between an “A” and “C,” therefore some students are not satisfied with just doing enough to pass. Nine of the 10 participants who advocated for a pass / fail system were concerned students would become lazy and lose focus on learning. The 10 participants agreed being lazy and being unfocused is not commensurate with success in the real world. Faculty noted a lack of incentives in the pass / fail system. By not having a traditional letter grade, students do not have an incentive to do more than what is required to pass the course. The pass / fail system can lead to a loss of competitive advantage not only in universities but also in society.

Ranking Rather than GPA

Seven participants suggested providing a rank on student’s transcripts rather than GPA might abate grading inflation. Six of seven faculty members mentioned ranking could also ameliorate the influence merit-based financial aid has on grade inflation because providing a rank reduces the emphasis on GPA. Merit-based financial aid is potentially the primary reason for grade inflation (Hu, 2005). To receive or continue financial aid, students must maintain a passing GPA (Carpenter, 2013). The requirement to maintain a suitable GPA and the financial incentive to ensure students enroll and complete courses contributes to grade inflation at universities (Crockett, Heffron, & Schneider, 2011). Financial aid is the primary source of funding for online universities and an indication of student retention by universities (Dynarski & Scott-Clayton, 2013). Two participants agreed university administration requires albeit subliminally grade inflation is necessary to ensure as many students as possible achieve and maintain certain GPAs to continue to receive financial aid.

Ranking provides employers and other educational institutions a better assessment of the student abilities (Zumbach, 2013). Five participants mentioned universities should include additional information about course grades on transcripts. One participant stated, “To combat grade inflation, we should place an emphasis on class rank, and require performance percentiles appear on college transcripts.” Information about the number of students in the class and the average grades earned appear next to the letter grade on the transcript. One participant mentioned students receive variations to the transcript. One variation noted was along with the individual grade, the mean or median grade for the class and the number of students in the course. Another variation the participant mentioned was the use a grading system whereby the grade for the class is composed of two parts. The first number is the student's grade in the class and the second is the overall grade for the class. The participants said, “For example, the grade and the transcript would be 3.5/3. This student earned a ‘B+’ in a class where the overall average grade was 3.0.”

Best Practices

No consensus formed among participants as to the best practices universities can implement to abate grade inflation. Thirteen participants agreed universities needs to be

determine how general education standards are set and enforced, particularly about the independence of the individual faculty members and the lack of review of workload. Twelve participants advanced the concept universities consider doing pre-and-post-testing, post-graduation interviews, and graduate tracking to evaluate student success. As one participant mentioned, "We don't know much about our students when they enter our school and know less what happens to them when they leave." Eleven participants thought universities should focus on metrics separate from grades paying attention to the nexus between grade inflation, student evaluation of instructors, and academic review. One participant stated, "I have seen instances of grade inflation at my school. While I do not think student evaluations are a primary because they do contribute to some faculty member concerns and give students grades they think the student want." Eight participants thought educational institutions should require students to provide scores from standardized objective exams such as GRE or GMAT as part of the admissions process. One participant mentioned, "Most of my students are unprepared for graduate work. They cannot write or critically analyze."

Faculty members provided three best practice recommendations toward revising student evaluations to abate grade inflation. First, instructors should track grades from the initial course the student took to subsequent courses to determine whether the first instructor was a hard grader, an effective instructor, or an easy grader. As one faculty member stated, "If we can see how previous instructors graded the student we can adjust our grading and better assess student performance." Second suggestion was for administration to evaluate instructors by incorporating student comments with valuing teacher effectiveness, instructor communications with students, instructor subject matter knowledge, enthusiasm, feedback quality, delivery method, and peer review. Third, administrators should indemnify faculty who provide honest appraisals of student work to protect faculty from negative student action resulting in faculty termination or disciplinary action. As one participant stated, "I hesitate to give a grade lower than a "C" and comprehensive feedback as I fear otherwise I will lose my job."

Discussion

The results of this study provided nine potential solutions to abate grade inflation. While I presented nine potential solutions, no single or easy solution exists to abate grade inflation. In addition, the results add to the overriding theme in the extant literature that grade inflation exists.

The solution that might effectively abate grade inflation is revising student evaluations. At many university's student evaluations play a significant and deciding role in assessing teaching effectiveness, decisions about contract renewals, more courses to teach, higher pay, promotions, and teaching awards (Stanoyevitch, 2008; Tucker & Courts, 2010). Instructors who inflate grades tend to have enhanced job security and greater financial benefits than instructors who grade honestly and do not inflate grades (Stanoyevitch, 2008). Instructors who practice grade inflation tend to be more forgiving of students hoping that such leniency results in higher numbers of positive faculty evaluations (Caruth & Caruth, 2013).

Another concern with student evaluations is students are not qualified to assess an instructors teaching abilities. Universities need to balance students' comments with instructor performance, which could affect instructors' evaluations. The use of student evaluations must be minimized. Faculty performance could be evaluated yearly in a peer review process within the university by a panel of peers. The panel could consist of instructors within the same department or program as the instructor being reviewed. Reviewers would normally be faculty members who have significant expertise in teaching methodologies (Bandy, 2016). Peer review members would evaluate improvements in teaching development and make assessments

of instructors focusing on program outcomes (Fernandez & Yu, 2007). The review would include student evaluations, teaching portfolios, teaching philosophy documentation, self-assessments, observations of course room activities, and other materials deemed appropriate by review members (Fernandez & Yu, 2007).

Peer review in an online environment would formulate in a collegial discussion review of in-course observations between instructor and student and all communications between faculty, student, and administration. Bandy (2016) suggested peer review has numerous benefits in encouraging teaching excellence, creating a collegial environment, and an enhanced culture of professional development. Peer review fosters an environment of innovation and integrity within the education institution.

Student evaluations are often inaccurate, easily manipulated by students and administration, lack psychometric properties, reliability, and validity (Ali, 2013; Schneider, 2013). Six study participants suggested replacing student evaluations with teaching portfolios updated annually. Portfolios generally consist of (a) curricula vitae, (b) overall student evaluation appraisal, (c) self-evaluative statements made by the instructor in review, (d) peer observations of the instructor in terms of interactions, grading, student responsiveness, policy violations, and other evidence deemed appropriate, and (d) evidence of study learning (Bandy, 2016). Ali noted teaching portfolios document evidence of teaching from a variety of sources including evaluation and provide context for documentary evidence. Stark and Freishtat (2014) mentioned selecting and organizing material for a portfolio can help one reflect on and improve one's teaching. Ali argued portfolios are a step toward a more public professional view of teaching as a scholarly activity. Arreola (2007) suggested portfolios help instructors see teaching as an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation, and reflection. Marsh and Roche (2000) thought teaching portfolios capture evidence of one's entire teaching career. To abate grade inflation, administrators need to enforce appropriate actions against faculty who inflate students' grades or decrease the course materials in order to escape low scores in their student evaluations (Crumbley, Flinn, & Reichelt, 2010).

Objective exams are an important factor to abate grade inflation. In most online courses, students receive grades from written essay assignments. Very few courses provide for multiple choice or fill-in-the blank responses. Because grading essays is subjective, course designers need to have a greater mix of objective and subjective exam materials to accurately assess student performance. As noted by participants although objective exams might mitigate aspects of grade inflation the cost of implementing objective exams could be lower higher ordered thinking by students.

Faculty whose academic background is other than education have no training to teach university courses. Earning a master's degree and some professional experience in many cases is the entry requirement into teaching at many online universities. Instituting an instructor training program for all doctoral students could abate grade inflation, as instructors would learn how to accurately assess and grade students. In a training course either outsourced or developed within the university, instructors could learn to improve communications with students and be a better facilitator and evaluate student work. Faculty would be able to impart clearer explanations of grading expectations and what are the overall expectations of students in the course. The training course could cover better practices to provide continual extensive and targeted feedback each week of the term.

Taking instructors out of grading was possible the most interesting solution proposed by participants. The use of external evaluators unknown to the students and grading software might abate grade inflation. If students do not know who their grade evaluators are, students find it more difficult to complain. Theoretically, external graders would provide accurate assessments and feedback to enhance student learning. However, the majority of participants did not think alternative solutions such as external graders or software could mitigate grade

inflation. The grave concern participants had was software might replace humans as the primary instructors and evaluators of student performance.

Faculty interviewed for this study seemed conscious that solutions to abate grade inflation are partial and not wholly persuasive. The potential solutions favored by most participants were revising student evaluations, instituting objective exams, start an instructor training course, use of rubrics, and reevaluating of liberal academic policies.

As educators, we should imbue in students the ability to (a) develop critical thinking skills (b) be able to facilitate the acquisition of lifelong learning skills (c) develop a deep understanding of course materials, and (d) connect the dots toward understanding how the course material is relevant professionally and academically to the student each week. Faculty should provide clear, direct, and focused feedback on evaluating student's work based on completion / understanding, expression, grammar, and writing mechanics. Each faculty member should strive to help students to learn, rather than "spoon feeding" knowledge. Faculty should "light their candle," not just "fill their bucket."

One limitation in this study was scant extant research exists of grade inflation related to online universities. Second limitation was the use of an interview protocol administered over Skype® rather than face-to-face interviews. By not having face-to-face interaction, I was unable to observe participant's body language and nonverbal signals, potentially decreasing rapport and trust (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Conclusion

As indicated in this study no single solution exists to abate grade inflation. Ninety three percent of faculty interviewed thought the present grade evaluation system requires revision. As educators, leaders, and practitioners we can abate grade inflation. In this paper, I provided nine potential solutions to abate grade inflation. We can abate 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.

If grade inflation continues and no strong articulation of standards and solutions are forthcoming, the worst-case scenario might happen. The U.S. Congress might have to step in and create laws for national standards for college curricula enforced by testing in core subjects. Accrediting agencies and federal funding could force schools to address grade inflation, which would entail the functional loss of academic freedom. Students' degrees might lack recognition and substantiation thereby not accepted by employers or other educational institutions. The nine potential solutions to abate grade inflation garnered from faculty members at three different regionally accredited online universities in the United States is a call to action to abate grade inflation now.

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