Study suggests admissions decisions reward grade inflation

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Questionable Admissions

Applicants from institutions with grade inflation are favored over those who had more rigorous instructors, study finds.

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By

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When colleges crack down on grade inflation, students invariably complain that they will be at a disadvantage when they apply to graduate school without as many A grades as might otherwise be the case.

The students may be correct.

New research in the journal *PLOS ONE* has found that admissions officers appear to favor applicants with better grades at institutions where everyone is earning high grades over applicants with lower grades at institutions with more rigorous grading. The research is based on an experiment involving 23 admissions officers and on long-term, real data on applicants to four competitive M.B.A. programs.

For the experiment, scholars from the business schools of Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley, and a researcher from CivicScience (a polling research organization), gave the admissions officers fake portfolios on applicants to an M.B.A. program. The admissions officers (from unidentified undergraduate and graduate admissions offices) were told that all the applications came from those about to graduate from colleges that admitted smart students of roughly equal academic ability. The transcripts for these fake applicants included not only the hypothetical students' grades, but also measures of the grade distribution at the institutions, showing that some of these institutions generally awarded high grades and others did not.

The results? Applicants with high grades were much more likely to be offered admission -- even when the context

provided should have indicated that many of the other students were as academically able, but happened to go to institutions that didn't just hand out A grades.

When interviewed, the admissions officers all said they looked for context on grades in terms of the reputations of undergraduate institutions as being easy or tough graders. But they didn't act on the context they were provided.

Those results, of course, come from only 23 admissions officers. But the researchers also looked at real admissions decisions made by four selective M.B.A. programs (admitting 16-39 percent of their applicants) -- looking at data for more than 30,000 applicants. The pool covered applicants from several years of admissions cycles and excluded those who did not earn bachelor's degrees in the United States. The business schools provided a range of information about the applicants -- including scores on standardized tests, years of work experience, grades, gender, race, etc. In addition, the researchers gathered information on the grading norms at the undergraduate institutions the applicants attended.

When controlling for a range of factors, the researchers found the same thing as with the 23 admissions officers. When comparing comparably qualified applicants, it was better to have earned high grades at a college where that was relatively easy to do than to have earned less high grades at institutions with tougher grading. Applicants at colleges with grade inflation are winning more than their share of slots, in other words.

Don Moore, one of the co-authors of the paper and associate professor at Berkeley's Haas School of Business, said in an interview that while the study looked at real and hypothetical admission to M.B.A. programs, he would "bet big money" that the findings would be true for other forms of admission in higher education as well.

That's because of "correspondence bias," in which people across most groups will judge individuals based on what they see at a particular point in time without knowledge of the larger context that might explain that behavior. Moore said there was no reason to believe that admissions officers for business schools were more likely than any others to have this bias.

Moore acknowledged that the paper's findings could be upsetting to those academics trying to reverse grade inflation. "The disquieting strategic implication of this finding," he said, "is that if a school wants to get its alumni into graduate school, it should grade more leniently."

But Moore stressed that there were other responses possible to the findings -- responses he hoped colleges would adopt. "Admissions officers should not look at grades at face value," he said, but should ask for -- and consider -- overall grading patterns and class rank.

Asked whether he is a tough grader, Moore said he awards grades "consistent with the norms of my institution."

The other authors of the paper are Samuel A. Swift of the Haas School at Berkeley, Francesca Gino of Harvard and Zachariah S. Sharek of CivicScience.

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