

## A's for Everyone!

In an era of rampant grade inflation, some college students find it shocking to discover there are 26 letters in the alphabet

By Alicia C. Shepard

Sunday, June 5, 2005; Page W19

It was the end of my first semester teaching journalism at American University. The students had left for winter break. As a rookie professor, I sat with trepidation in my office on a December day to electronically post my final grades.

My concern was more about completing the process correctly than anything else. It took an hour to compute and type in the grades for three classes, and then I hit "enter." That's when the trouble started.

In less than an hour, two students challenged me. Mind you, there had been no preset posting time. They had just been religiously checking the electronic bulletin board that many colleges now use.

"Why was I given a B as my final grade?" demanded a reporting student via e-mail. "Please respond ASAP, as I have never received a B during my career here at AU and it will surely lower my GPA."



(Randy Mays)

I must say I was floored. Where did this kid get the audacity to so boldly challenge a professor? And why did he care so much? Did he really think a prospective employer was going to ask for his GPA?

I checked the grades I'd meticulously kept on the electronic blackboard. He'd missed three quizzes and gotten an 85 on two of the three main writing assignments. There was no way he was A material. I let the grade mar his GPA because he hadn't done the required work.

I wasn't so firm with my other challenger. She tracked me down by phone while I was still in my office. She wanted to know why she'd received a B-plus. Basically, it was because she'd barely said a word in class, so the B-plus was subjective. She harangued me until, I'm ashamed to admit, I agreed to change her grade to an A-minus. At the time, I thought, "Geez, if it means that much to you, I'll change it." She thanked me profusely, encouraging me to have a happy holiday.

Little did I know the pressure was just beginning.

The students were relentless. During the spring semester, they showed up at my office to insist I reread their papers and boost their grades. They asked to retake tests they hadn't

done well on. They bombarded me with e-mails questioning grades. More harassed me to change their final grade. I began to wonder if I was doing something wrong, sending out some sort of newbie signal that I could be pushed around. Then I talked to other professors in the School of Communication. They all had stories.

My colleague Wendy Swallow told me about one student who had managed to sour her Christmas break one year. Despite gaining entry into AU's honors program, the student missed assignments in Swallow's newswriting class and slept through her midterm. Slept through her midterm! Then she begged for lenience.

"I let her take it again for a reduced grade," Swallow says, "but with the warning that if she skipped more classes or missed more deadlines, the midterm grade would revert to the F she earned by missing it. She then skipped the last three classes of the semester and turned in all her remaining assignments late. She even showed up late for her final."

Swallow gave the student a C-minus, which meant she was booted out of the honors program. The student was shocked. She called Swallow at home hysterical about being dropped from the program. To Swallow, the C-minus was a gift. To the student, an undeserved lump of Christmas coal.

"She pestered me for several days by phone," says Swallow, who did not relent and suggested the student file a formal grievance. She didn't. "The whole exchange, though, made for a very unpleasant break. Now I wait to post my grades until the last minute before leaving for the semester, as by then most of the students are gone, and I'm less likely to get those instantaneous complaints."

Another colleague told me about a student she had failed. "He came back after the summer trying to convince me to pass him because other professors just gave him a C," says Leena Jayaswal, who teaches photography. Never mind that he didn't do her required work.

John Watson, who teaches journalism ethics and communications law at American, has noticed another phenomenon: Many students, he says, believe that simply working hard - - though not necessarily doing excellent work -- entitles them to an A. "I can't tell you how many times I've heard a student dispute a grade, not on the basis of in-class performance," says Watson, "but on the basis of how hard they tried. I appreciate the effort, and it always produces positive results, but not always the exact results the student wants. We all have different levels of talent."

It's a concept that many students (and their parents) have a hard time grasping. Working hard, especially the night before a test or a paper due date, does not necessarily produce good grades.

"At the age of 50, if I work extremely hard, I can run a mile in eight minutes," says Watson. "I have students who can jog through a mile in seven minutes and barely sweat. They will always finish before me and that's not fair. Or is it?"

Last September, AU's Center for Teaching Excellence hosted a lunchtime forum to provide faculty members tips on how to reduce stressful grade confrontations. I eagerly attended.

The advice we were given was solid: Be clear upfront about how you grade and what is expected, and, when possible, use a numerical grading system rather than letter grades. If the grade is an 89, write that on the paper rather than a B-plus.

"The key," said AU academic counselor Jack Ramsay, "is to have a system of grading that is as transparent as possible."

Yet even the most transparent grading system won't eliminate our students' desperate pursuit of A's. Of the 20 teachers who came to the session, most could offer some tale of grade harassment.

"Most of the complaints that colleagues tell me about come from B students," said James Mooney, special assistant to the dean for academic affairs in the College of Arts and Sciences. "They all want to know why they didn't get an A. Is there something wrong with a B?"

Apparently there is. "Certainly there are students who are victims of grade inflation in secondary school," said Mooney. "They come to college, and the grading system is much more rigorous. That's one of the most difficult things to convey to the students. If you're getting a B, you're doing well in a course."

But his interpretation is rarely accepted by students or their parents. And the pressure on professors to keep the A's coming isn't unique to AU. It's endemic to college life, according to Stuart Rojstaczer, a Duke University professor who runs a Web site called [Gradeinflation.com](http://Gradeinflation.com). At Duke and many other colleges, A's outnumber B's, and C's have all but disappeared from student transcripts, his research shows.

Last spring, professors at Princeton University declared war on grade inflation, voting to slash the number of A's they award to 25 percent of all grades. At Harvard, where half of the grades awarded are A's, the university announced that it would cut the number of seniors graduating with honors from 91 percent to about 50 percent.

Despite those moves, Rojstaczer doesn't think it will be easy to reverse the rising tide of A's. He points out that in 1969, a quarter of the grades handed out at Duke were C's. By 2002, the number of C's had dropped to less than 10 percent.

Rojstaczer, who teaches environmental science, acknowledged in an op-ed piece he wrote for *The Post* two years ago that he rarely hands out C's, "and neither do most of my colleagues. And I can easily imagine a time when I'll say the same thing about B's."

Arthur Levine, president of Columbia University Teacher's College and an authority on grading, traces what's going on to the Vietnam War. "Men who got low grades could be

drafted," Levine says. "The next piece was the spread of graduate schools where only A's and B's were passing grades. That soon got passed on to undergraduates and set the standard."

And then there's consumerism, he says. Pure and simple, tuition at a private college runs, on average, nearly \$28,000 a year. If parents pay that much, they expect nothing less than A's in return. "Therefore, if the teacher gives you a B, that's not acceptable," says Levine, "because the teacher works for you. I expect A's, and if I'm getting B's, I'm not getting my money's worth."

Rojstaczer agrees: "We've made a transition where attending college is no longer a privilege and an honor; instead college is a consumer product. One of the negative aspects of this transition is that the role of a college-level teacher has been transformed into that of a service employee."

Levine argues that we "service employees" are doing students a disservice if we cave in to the demand for top grades. "One of the things an education should do is let you know what you do well in and what you don't," he says. "If everybody gets high grades, you don't learn that."

But, as I'd already seen, many students aren't interested in learning that lesson -- and neither are their parents. When AU administrator James Mooney polled professors about grade complaints, he was appalled to learn that some overwrought parents call professors directly to complain. "One colleague told me he got a call from the mother of his student and she introduced herself by saying that she and her husband were both attorneys," said Mooney. "He thought it was meant to intimidate him."

Though I haven't received any menacing phone calls from parents, Mom and Dad are clearly fueling my students' relentless demand for A's. It's a learned behavior. I know, because I'm guilty of inflicting on my son the same grade pressure that now plays out before me as a university professor.

Last fall when my Arlington high school senior finally got the nerve to tell me that he'd gotten a C in the first quarter of his AP English class, I did what any self-respecting, grade-obsessed parent whose son is applying to college would do. I cried. Then I e-mailed his teacher and made an appointment for the three of us to meet. My son's teacher was accommodating. She agreed that if my son did A work for the second quarter, colleges would see a B average for the two quarters, not that ruinous C.

There's a term for the legions of parents like me. The parents who make sure to get the teacher's e-mail and home phone number on Back to School Night. The kind who e-mail teachers when their child fails a quiz. The kind who apply the same determination to making sure their child excels academically that they apply to the professional world.

We are called "helicopter parents" because we hover over everything our kids do like Secret Service agents guarding the president. (My son refers to me as an Apache attack

helicopter, and he's Fallujah under siege.) Only we aren't worried about our kids getting taken out by wild-eyed assassins. We just want them to get into a "good" (whatever that means) college.

"Parents today have this intense investment in seeing their kids do well in school," says Peter Stearns, provost at George Mason University and author of *Anxious Parenting: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*. "This translates into teachers feeling direct and indirect pressure to keep parents off their backs by handing out reasonably favorable grades and making other modifications, like having up to 18 valedictorians."

High school administrators who haven't made those modifications sometimes find themselves defending their grading policies in court. Two years ago, a senior at New Jersey's Moorestown High School filed a \$2.7 million lawsuit after she was told she'd have to share being valedictorian with another high-achieving student. A similar episode occurred in Michigan, where a Memphis High School senior who'd just missed being valedictorian claimed in a lawsuit that one of his A's should have been an A-plus.

That hyperconcern about grades and class rankings doesn't disappear when kids finally pack for college. Along with their laptops and cell phones, these students bring along the parental anxiety and pressure they've lived with for 18 years.

One of my students, Rachael Scorca, says that her parents have always used good grades as an incentive. And they've continued to do so during college. "In high school, my social life and curfew revolved around A's," explains Scorca, a broadcast journalism major. "I needed over a 90 average in order to go out during the week and keep my curfew as late as it was. Once college came and my parents couldn't control my hours or effort, they started controlling my bank account. If I wasn't getting good grades, they wouldn't put money in my account, and, therefore, I wouldn't have a social life."

But most of my students tell me the pressure to get top grades doesn't come from their parents any longer. They've internalized it. "I'd say most of the pressure just comes from my personal standards," says Molly Doyle. "It's also something I take pride in. When people ask me how my grades are, I like being able to tell them that I've got all A's and B's."

During my second semester of teaching, I received this e-mail from a student who'd taken my fall class on "How the News Media Shape History" and wasn't satisfied with his grade. He (unsuccessfully) tried bribery.

"Professor. I checked my grade once I got here and it is a B," he wrote. "I have to score a grade better than a B+ to keep my scholarship and I have no idea how I ended up with a B. In addition, to that I have brought you something from The GREAT INDIAN CONTINENT."

I invited him to come to my office so I could explain why he'd gotten a B, but after several broken appointments, he faded away.

Other students were more persistent, particularly a bright young man who'd been in the same class as the briber. He'd gotten an A-minus and made it clear in an e-mail he wasn't happy with it: "I have seen a number of the students from the class, and we inevitably got to talking about it. I had assumed that you are a tough grader and that earning an A-minus from you was a difficult task, but upon talking to other students, it appears that that grade was handed out more readily than I had thought. Not that other students did not deserve a mark of that caliber, but I do feel as though I added a great deal to the class. I feel that my work, class participation, and consistency should have qualified me for a solid A."

When I ignored the e-mail, he pestered me a second time: "I know it's a great pain in the ass to have an A-minus student complain, but I'm starting to wonder about the way grades are given. I would be very curious to know who the A students were. While other students may have outdone me with quiz grades, I made up for it with participation and enthusiasm. I really feel that I deserved an A in your class. If I was an A-minus student, I assume that you must have handed out a lot of C's and D's. I don't mean to be a pain -- I have never contested anything before. I feel strongly about this, though."

I shouldn't have done it, but I offered to change the grade. My student was thrilled. He wrote, "With grade inflation being what it is and the levels of competition being so high, students just can't afford to be hurt by small things. I thought that you did a great job with the course."

But when I completed the required paperwork, the grade change was rejected by a university official. Though no one questioned me the first time I did it, grades can be changed only if they are computed incorrectly. "How fair is it to change his grade?" an assistant dean asked me. "What about other kids who might be unhappy but didn't complain?"

I e-mailed my student to let him know that he would have to live with an A-minus. "The gods who make these decisions tell me that they rejected it because it's not considered fair to all the other students in the class," I wrote. "The grade you got was based on a numerical formula, and you can only change a grade if you made a mathematical error. I'm sorry."

"That seems illogical to me," he e-mailed back. "If a student feels that a grade was inappropriate and wishes to contest that grade, that student obviously must contact the person who gave it to them. Who was I supposed to contact? What was the process that I was to follow? The lack of logic in all this never fails to amaze me!"

I told him whom to contact. I'm not sure if he ever followed through, but I saw him recently and he smiled and stopped to talk. Nothing was mentioned about the grade.

The day before this spring semester's grades were due I bumped into another professor racing out of the building. What's the hurry? I asked.

She told me she had just posted her grades and wanted to get off campus fast. But she wasn't quick enough. Within eight minutes, a B-minus student had called to complain.

A few hours after I entered my final grades, I got an e-mail from a student, at 1:44 a.m. She was unhappy with her B. She worked so hard, she told me. This time, though, I was prepared. I had the numbers to back me up, and I wouldn't budge on her grade. No more Professor Softie.

*Alicia C. Shepard is a journalist-in-residence at American University and is working on a book about Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein.*