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# Opinion | As a professor, I'm pressured to give out high grades like candy — and not just by students

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The campus of Queen's University, in Kingston, Ont., where Kerah Gordon-Solmon teaches philosophy and sometimes butts heads with administrators.

Lars Hagberg/The Canadian Press

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**By Kerah Gordon-Solmon, Contributor**

Kerah Gordon-Solmon is an associate professor of philosophy at Queen's University.

**Grade inflation is real, and it's coming for your children.**

**The good news is your children will have beautiful transcripts. The bad news is those transcripts will have about as much value as a participation trophy. The worse news is this can be true even at the university level. And**

the worst news: inflated grades are effectively mandated from the top. To fix the problem, you'd have to alter the mindsets of institutional bureaucrats — that is, move immovable objects.

I'm an associate professor of philosophy at Queen's University, and I've been a full-time faculty member since 2009. The call, as they say, is coming from inside the house.

Until a few years ago, essays were the medium in which humanities students proved their mettle. With the rise of AI, however, educators can no longer assume a close connection between the typewritten work a student submits and their grasp of the material (or their writerly voice). Accordingly, we humanities types assign fewer essays. We use old-school methods like handwritten and oral exams. We also increasingly grade students' in-class participation.

We fine-tune as we go. University bureaucrats circle overhead.

Not long ago, I taught an undergraduate seminar in which the grade distribution came out pretty normal: more A's than a decade ago, sure, but a healthy number of B's, C's and D's, too — enough variance to reflect meaningful differences among students' performances. I felt as if I'd cracked a code, successfully adapted to this brave new inflationary world.

One student, whom I'll call Bruce, got an A-. He felt he deserved an A, so he made his case to a high-ranking administrator, who then contacted me. The administrator's concern: Bruce had received a less-than-perfect grade for attendance and participation despite having shown up to every class. How could I explain the disparity?

My answer: students were evaluated on the quality of their in-class contributions, not just attendance. Top marks went to those who'd distinguished themselves from week to week.

In response, the administrator was unequivocal: I had been unfair. It was forbidden to grade the quality of students' participation; I must revise everyone's final mark to ensure the "attendance and participation" component reflects attendance only. Any student who came to every class deserves a perfect score.

This was not an order but an admonition. Because I have tenure, I felt safe declining to acquiesce.

Professors everywhere are facing similar pressures (if not enforceable

decrees) from university authorities to grade more generously. Students care a lot about their marks, and I don't begrudge them advocating for themselves. But the administrators who run the place should help us hold the line on academic standards, not bulldoze it.

Of course, with a little ingenuity, I could redesign my courses to make A's all but inevitable for every student. My work life would be easier. Enough students would be happier.

I just can't do it. Grades are a tool for setting expectations. *This is how high the bar is.* They also act as an incentive. That aspirational A+ is achievable with a little more elbow grease. *Keep going.*

There's another reason I won't simply give up and start distributing A's like Halloween candy. [It's something Premier Doug Ford said recently about higher education](#): "A lot of the students, you're picking basket-weaving courses, and there's not too many baskets being sold out there." In other words, if it's not STEM, it won't impart skills valued by the labour market; therefore, it's worthless.

Humanities departments (philosophy, English, history, etc.) have been debunking that premise practically since they came into existence, and certainly before Ford became premier of Ontario. Jobs require soft skills, too, after all — clear and organized thinking, the ability to distil difficult concepts into plain language, the capacity to stress-test one's own reasoning to ensure the chain is sound. The humanities have a great track record of inculcating these, Ford's snipes notwithstanding, and I don't want to be the generation that gives up the good fight.

But to fixate on the skills we can most easily pitch to employers brushes past a deeper truth, which any professor will share if you catch one of us after a drink or two: academic standards are part and parcel of academic disciplines. When I listen to Ford, for instance, I do so with a philosopher's ear, parsing his wordslop in order to extract the premises and clock the assumptions that underlie them. A historian might hear notes of past politicians' rhetoric. In either case, we've internalized certain specialized habits of mind — honed specific cognitive muscles, tuned our reflexes — and we guide our students to do the same.

It's the rough equivalent of training for a marathon or perfecting your yoga practice. When you set out to master a skill, you come to understand the values internal to it, values that are inaccessible from the outside. The

challenge of incremental improvement becomes invigorating, not aversive. The payoff is the expansion of your cognitive capacities and your interior world. And yes, it will make you a more valuable employee. *Fine.*

This is what university students are paying for, some out of their own pockets. Their professors owe them the respect of holding them to real standards. No one proudly displays a participation trophy.

Opinion articles are based on the author's interpretations and judgments of facts, data and events. More details

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