

# Mark James Miller: A as the New C = Teaching as a Popularity Contest

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“A C is acceptable college work,” a professor told me many years ago, when I was a first-year undergraduate. He went on to say that a B was considered above average, and an A was reserved for truly exceptional efforts. He gave few Bs and fewer As. A C was the most common grade he gave. Nearly all of the professors he knew graded the same way.

This was in another era, when 75 percent of the instructors in American higher education were tenured, full-time teachers who could count on being employed from one semester to the next, and whose livelihoods were not put in danger by negative comments from students. Instruction in American higher education has changed a great deal since then. Teaching is becoming a popularity contest, and those teachers who are the most popular with their students are more likely to be employed next semester than the professor who is not — a result of the overuse of contingent faculty. This, in turn, has led to the modern phenomena of grade inflation.

Through the end of the 1950s, a C was the most commonly given grade in higher education, and grade-point averages fluctuated between 2.3 and 2.5. Ds and Fs were given out far more often than As.

This changed in the '60s, when grade-point averages climbed higher, a fact that some attribute to the **Vietnam War**. Professors were reluctant to fail students when flunking out of college could mean being subject to the military draft, which could then result in that student being sent to fight in an unpopular war.

Whatever the cause, when the war (and the draft) ended in the '70s, grades declined once more, close to their 1950s levels. Grades began their present rise in the '80s, a climb that continues to this day. Studies consistently find that As now account for 43 percent of all the grades given in American colleges and universities. Ds and Fs now make up only 10 percent. As are far more

commonplace than Cs. At **Brown University**, for example, two-thirds of all letter grades are As. Eighty percent of the grades given at the **University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign** are As or Bs. At **Harvard**, one professor now gives two grades — the official grade on the student's transcript, and the (often lower) grade he feels they deserve.

The present rise in grade-point averages began at the same time the current trend toward relying more and more on contingent faculty began, and that is no coincidence.

What is the connection between the growth of adjunct faculty and the rise in grade-point averages? There is actually nothing mysterious about it. A part-time instructor's continued employment often hinges on two salient factors: Student enrollment and student evaluations.

"Students vote with their feet," is an expression I have heard administrators use on more than one occasion. A part-time instructor whose classes are full semester after semester has a much better chance of being rehired than a teacher whose classes appear to be shunned by students. Add negative student evaluations to the equation and an instructor who has no job security may find herself looking for employment elsewhere when the next term begins. You don't become a popular instructor by being a hard grader or by getting reputation as a teacher whose courses are difficult to get through.

Students have always had a "grapevine" that keeps them informed of who the popular teachers are, which ones are easy graders and which ones whose courses are more difficult to get an A in. Nowadays, with the advent of social media and websites like **Rate My Professors** and **RateMyTeachers.com**, students are even more acutely tuned in to which professors they would prefer and which ones they want to avoid. Whereas a tenured instructor has little to worry about in terms of student popularity (although I'm sure few go out of their way to be unpopular), for a contingent faculty a bad student evaluation can be a kiss of death.

Make no mistake: Student evaluations are extremely important. No instructor should ignore them, especially if the same concern or complaint is heard over and over. But good teaching is more — or should be more — than just a popularity contest. While measuring good teaching is difficult and often subjective, the instructor who asks more of their students, who demands excellence, for example, may be doing more toward helping their students learn than the teacher who settles for mediocrity. But the teacher who demands excellence can end up

with comments such as, “very difficult grader”; “class began with 36 and ended with 10”; “I will never take his class again,” on his evaluation.

Comments like this can put an adjunct’s job in danger. A person whose livelihood is hanging from a wire than can be cut at any time is not inclined to take actions which might cause the wire cutters to close. Many adjuncts often say they wish they could push their students harder, but are afraid to for fear of generating student complaints or receiving negative student evaluations.

Some schools are taking steps to deal with the problem of grade inflation. In 2004, **Princeton University** mandated that no more than 35 percent of the grades given in an undergraduate course can be As. This year, the **University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill** is introducing a new grading system wherein the student’s transcript will show not just the student’s grade in a particular class but also the median grade and the number of students in that class. An A will look much less impressive if everyone in the class got one.

Few people actually support the idea of settling for mediocrity. Americans traditionally want to push for excellence. But excellence won’t be achieved when mediocrity becomes the norm. Giving adjuncts more job security and placing less emphasis on student evaluations is one way to start reversing the trend of teaching as a simple popularity contest.

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