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The Myth of Entitlement: Students' Perceptions of the Relationship Between Grading Practices and Learning at an Elite University

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Abstract

While the existence of grade inflation in the American system of higher education is well documented, the argument that student entitlement drives this dynamic remains unproven. Drawing on an abductive analysis of twenty-nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted by undergraduate co-authors, this study addresses these questions: (1) How do undergraduates on one elite campus understand the meaning and function of the grades they have received in college and (2) Do these students think that grading practices impact their undergraduate learning experience, and if so, how? Our results show that entitlement is not a fixed generational attitude so much as a conditional sentiment that individual professor's grading practices can either disarm or inflame. Our study extends qualitative inquiry on students' perceptions of grades and develops a student-centered "peer-to-peer" method that can be applied to a wide range of other issues in the sociology of higher education.

Keywords

Elite Universities, Grades, Sociology of Higher Education, Student-Centered Qualitative Research Methods, Discourse Analysis, Consumerism in Higher Education

The Myth of Entitlement:
Students' Perceptions of the Relationship between Grading and Learning at an Elite University

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While the existence of grade inflation in the American system of higher education is well documented, the argument that student entitlement drives this dynamic remains unproven. Drawing on an abductive analysis of twenty-nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted by undergraduate co-authors, this study addresses these questions: (1) How do undergraduates on one elite campus understand the meaning and function of the grades they have received in college and (2) Do these students think that grading practices impact their undergraduate learning experience, and if so, how? Our results show that entitlement is not a fixed generational attitude so much as a conditional sentiment that individual professor's grading practices can either disarm or inflame. Our study extends qualitative inquiry on students' perceptions of grades and develops a student-centered "peer-to-peer" method that can be applied to a wide range of other issues in the sociology of higher education. Keywords: Elite Universities, Grades, Sociology of Higher Education, Student-Centered Qualitative Research Methods, Discourse Analysis, Consumerism in Higher Education

Introduction

This study was inspired by a troubling moment experienced by the 1st author in the classroom. I was teaching a required, research-based writing and public speaking seminar to sophomores at an elite private university. It was nearing the end of the term, when I had the unenviable task of handing back essays with grades that were not all A's. As I parceled out the essays, the only sound in the classroom, at first, was that of pages rustling, with almost no audible breathing. Then a muffled sniffle rose into a cry. A student I admired and who was contributing productively to the seminar was sobbing softly onto a paper that sported a B+. Her perfect poise, earned through years of ballet training, had been undone. Much like someone delicately escorted out of a funeral, she was lifted from her seat and walked out of the classroom in the embrace of her roommate.

Watching this intelligent student exit my class in mourning, I keenly felt the disconnect between my understanding of what constituted a "good" grade and that of my students. In demoralizing moments like this one, it's easy to view students through the lens of consumerism and interpret a seemingly overwrought show of emotion like this one as a sign of entitlement. Yet, when undergraduates trained in qualitative research methods talk to other undergraduates about their experiences with and feelings about grades, a different narrative surfaces. This narrative sheds light on the usually hidden travails experienced by today's undergraduates as they navigate the uneven terrain of grading across campus.

My inability to understand my student's perception of a B+ is reproduced on a much wider scale in both public and academic debates over consumerism, student engagement, and grade inflation in higher education. While grade inflation and student disengagement have been documented in numerous, exhaustive quantitative studies (Arum & Roksa, 2012; Grove

& Wasserman, 2004; Hersh & Merrow, 2005; Hunt, 2008; Jewell, McPherson, & Tieslau, 2013; Johnson, 2003; Kuh, 2003; McCormick, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2013; Oleinik, 2009; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; Sonner, 2000; Yang & Yip, 2003), very little scholarly attention has been paid to students' perceptions of the grades they receive or the grading practices they experience, inflated or not. In the absence of conclusive evidence, it has been assumed that students prioritize grades over learning: "The appearance of achievement becomes more important than the achievement itself," write Pollio and Beck (2000, p. 84). Preoccupied with the national data unmasking pervasive grade inflation, these studies neglect to examine students' experiences on individual campuses, where comparative departmental grading metrics have not been made publicly available.

Our study develops a student-centered "peer-to-peer" qualitative method to begin to fill in these gaps. Our peer-to-peer method trains undergraduate co-authors to gather and analyze data on student's experiences with local grading practices. Drawing on an abductive analysis of twenty-nine in-depth, semi-structured personal interviews, our team posed these questions: (1) How do undergraduates on one elite campus understand the grades they have received and (2) Do these students think that grading practices impact their undergraduate learning experience, and if so, how? Our results showcase uncensored student perspectives on a surprisingly varied range of grading practices. These practices at times invite grade fixation and, at other times, inspire a growth mindset. Students' attitudes towards the relationship between grades and learning vary depending on the grading practices of particular disciplines, courses, and instructors, as opposed to reflecting an underlying consumerist sense of entitlement. These variations suggest that students' attitudes towards grades are situational as opposed to generational. Despite experiencing inconsistent grading practices, students agree that how professors' chose to grade is an important factor in their learning.

Literature Review

Considering that they are stakeholders in the industry of higher education, students' lack of representation in the literature on grading and consumerism is a significant omission that this study begins to address. In the absence of students' voices, much of the current scholarship, as well as the broader public debate, begins with the supposition that students approach college as a consumer good and view inflated grades as an entitlement and commodity (Delluchi & Smith, 1997a, 1997b; Smith, 2000; Wildavsky, 2000). Oleinik (2009) argues that students endorse a gift economy in which good grades are handed out in exchange for awarding favorable evaluations to professors, who are said to be more invested in research than teaching.

These negative assumptions about today's students characterize scholarship as well as broader public debates over the state of higher education. For example, in a *New York Times* op-ed, a professor of English at Emory lamented that today's college students are distracted by "the gym, text messages, and rush week" (Bauerlein, 2015, para 16). Where earlier generations revered their professors, he frets that now "they're content with teachers" but "aren't much interested in them as thinkers and mentors" (para 4) This op-ed is but one illustration of how what we term "the myth of entitlement" negatively skews perceptions millennials.

We are not the first to question the evidence used to substantiate the notion that today's students are entitled consumers. Several recent qualitative studies interrogate the idea that students view themselves as consumers purchasing their degrees (Millican, 2014; Nickolai, 2014; Rosenthal, 2008; Warren, 2013). Writing on free-market logic and college students, Saunders (2014) critiques the extant literature for being "methodologically weak" and, as a result, falling short of demonstrating that "students actually express a customer's orientation towards their education" (2014, p. 212). Similarly, Nickolai (2014) notes that "little empirical

research has systematically investigated the degree to which different groups of students actually express these attitudes" (p. vi). In agreement with Saunders (2014) and Nickolai (2014), Rosenthal (2008) also recommends additional research in higher education that privileges the voices, perceptions, and experiences of undergraduates. Our study directly responds to these calls for student-centered inquiry.

Research that includes students' viewpoints demonstrates that entitlement and grade fixation take a back seat to learning. Millican observes that, "alongside wanting 'value for money' and 'a good social life and a good degree' students are heavily motivated by experience and keen to be challenged" (2014, p. 635). Similarly, Pollio and Beck (2000) conclude that both students and instructors share a desire for learning to be prized over and above grades. Our research validates these conclusions: Our participants were eager to be challenged and articulate about how undergraduate education, at its best, can spark intellectual, professional, and personal growth. In addition, our study demonstrates that undergraduates can contribute to the sociology of higher education as researchers and co-authors.

Role of the Researchers

This study began in casual conversations between the principal investigator (PI) and former students over the meaning and function of grades. Three of these students eventually became the study's co-authors. The PI has a background in research on grade inflation and has published a personal narrative account of her own efforts to adopt rigorous, fair grading practices (Lewis, 2014). In writing this essay, the PI became aware of the lack of students' voices in the extant literature on grade inflation and, more broadly, in the economics and education research on millennial students' orientation towards higher education.

The students involved in these early conversations expressed an interest in gathering data on their peers. Once this interest was expressed, the PI secured a research award from Stanford University's Program in Writing and Rhetoric and developed an application for interested students. The application solicited information on why each undergraduate wanted to participate in the study and what relevant research experiences they might offer. Twelve students applied. The three co-authors were selected based on their academic accomplishments, previous research experiences, and relevant self-expressed motivations to participate.

Once the three co-authors were selected to join the study, they become undergraduate research fellows (URF). The PI then led training in qualitative research methods and ethics for the URFs, who first passed CITI Group 2 training (an online certification on the history and ethics of human subjects research offered online for free through Stanford University's Institutional Review Board). Beyond the CITI Group 2 certification, the URFs' training was provided by the PI who focused primarily on the foundations of Maxwell's (2013) interactive approach. Fellows were also introduced to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and abductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Once these methods had been introduced and discussed in one-on-one conferences with the PI, the URFs participated in developing the literature review, defining the core research questions, and drafting interview questions. For the duration of the study, the URFs were compensated through the research award at a pay rate equivalent to other work-study campus positions.

For researchers interested in co-authoring with undergraduates, we note a regrettable limitation of the written account of our research. Due to time constrains, a lack of geographic proximity during the summer, and the duration of the review process, this article evidences an undesirable division of labor. As the first-person narrative that opens the article shows, the PI is the primary speaking voice. The URFs earned their co-author credits by conducting all but one of the interviews and participating robustly in analytic and reflective memo writing, open and selective coding, and collaboratively developing the results presented. The actual writing,

however, was left to the PI. By the time the PI was made aware of the value of including more undergraduate writing by insightful peer reviewers at *The Qualitative Report*, it was too late. The URFs had graduated. For future researchers interested in further developing these methods, we suggest utilizing a collaborative drafting and revision process that takes the unpredictable timeline of review into account.

Methods

To ensure that the research performed was fully consistent with the ethical standards articulated in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its subsequent amendments and Section 12 ("Informed Consent") of the ASA's Code of Ethics, this study was approved by Stanford University's Institutional Review Board. All human subjects gave their informed consent in writing prior to participation and adequate steps were taken to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

As described above, our study develops a novel student-centered "peer-to-peer" method that trains undergraduates to answer questions of personal relevance in collaboration with a Ph.D.-holding PI. Our study's peer-to-peer approach draws on interactive (Maxwell, 2013), grounded (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and abductive (Timmermans &Tavory, 2012) qualitative methods. These related approaches prioritize reciprocity, recursivity, and abduction—or "organic"—theory making, which is defined as "a creative inferential process aimed at producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence" (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 167).

From September of 2014 to May of 2015, the URFs conducted twenty-nine in-depth, semi-structured personal interviews with students enrolled at the same elite university. Student participants were recruited by the URFs, who primarily relied on extracurricular listservs. Participants were compensated with $20 gift cards to the campus bookstore. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and was complemented by survey data on each participant's GPA, time spent studying per week, major, and departments in which classes had been taken. At the start of each interview, surveys were conducted online on Qualtrics. In the interest of ensuring both confidentiality and comfort, interviewees selected interview locations, which included dorm rooms, private study spaces in the library, and tutoring rooms in the writing center.

During data collection, the URFs audio recorded and transcribed the interviews they conducted and wrote analytic memos. The PI also read transcripts as they were completed and wrote analytic memos. During this phase of the study, the research team met regularly to review emerging findings. These discussions focused on the potential meaning of newly identified themes found in multiple interviews and gave the team an opportunity to ruminate on outlying perspectives.

Our simultaneous data collection and analytic induction occurred out over three iterations. In the pilot, the fellows conducted seven interviews that were followed by open coding and analysis by the principal investigator. During open coding, a number of prominent themes emerged, including what we termed "academic ethic," "fairness," "feedback," "easy As," and "weeding and filtering." Responding to the robust presence of these themes, we added several new interview questions, after which the fellows conducted a second round of interviews. During this stage of data collection, the PI wrote memos for each new interview immediately following transcription.

After all the interviews were gathered, two of the fellows participated in selective coding, during which they traced the main themes found during open coding while also actively noting surprising or significant moments outside the scope of the demarcated themes. The fellows also wrote memos for every second-round interview they coded. The initial themes

were again found to be robust. While the second round of interviews reinforced our preliminary findings, it also introduced complications that prompted the addition of several more interview questions and inspired a final capstone round of six interviews that helped push the project from selective, strategic coding towards saturation.

During collective abduction, we discussed the possibility that students on an elite campus might be tempted to perform the role of good student, even in a confidential conversation with a peer. While this could be a factor in a small handful of our interviews, we do not feel it rises to the level of validity threat because so many of our participants were visibly energized during discussions of optimal learning; noticeably demoralized while recounting experiences where learning was thwarted; easily able to offer a great depth of detail with regard to their personal academic ethic; and plainly sincere in their desire to help us better understand their experiences. As one participant stated at the end of her interview, "It's very fun talking about this stuff! There's a bubble surrounding it that no one really wants to talk about."

Once data collection was complete, the URFs manually traced and color-coded themes revealed in the initial memos and began to write what Maxwell terms "reflective" memos designed to tease out broader implications and ideas, which are developed in the results section below.

Results

Academic Ethic

The vast majority of the students we interviewed expressed a strong preference for learning and growth over and above what they term "easy A's." We describe this preference as characteristic of these students' academic ethic, which is to say their commitment to learning. "I want to learn," explained Peter, "effort matters more than the grade you're getting."[1] "It's less about the grade and more about the content—what you can take away from it," argued Sam. In explaining why learning mattered more to them than grades, our participants focused on both value and intellectual curiosity. As Shane argued, "I am at [an elite institution], units are so valuable. I'd honestly rather be learning [than receive an "easy A"].

Beyond this kind of pragmatism, a number of participants expressed a passion for learning about subjects of personal interest. Here are three representative examples of comments from students about the contest between grades and sating intellectual curiosity:

> Learning about subjects that interest me matters more than maintaining my GPA. Because I feel like, when I get out of here, which one will matter more? The numbers will disappear eventually, but it's all about the concepts that will never disappear because I enjoyed learning them so much.

> At first, I used to let grades define my level of intelligence, my "student-ness." Now I see grades as, I still care about grades, but I've come to a point where I would rather be covered in the material, be indulging in the material rather than focusing on grades.

> It's definitely more important to explore things that are interesting than protect my GPA. That's why I am here. I am supposed to explore my interests and come

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[1] Participants referenced with pseudonyms.

out like, "Oh my god, I learned so much." Trying to preserve my GPA would
be the wrong way to approach college.

In each of these statements, undergraduates explicitly reject the notion of prioritizing high grades over engaging in material of personal interest. The terms of endearment with which they celebrate effortful growth are remarkable. The idea that students "enjoy" encountering new concepts and even that they consider immersing themselves in course material to be an "indulgence" stands in stark contrast to the popular narrative of entitlement and disengagement.

Grading Practices that Maximize Learning

When we asked students a series of questions about what kinds of grading practices best support learning, they tended to underscore the importance of rigor, fairness, and feedback. When describing their best learning experiences, they also emphasized the value of being invited into the real work of the discipline being studied. They expressed a strong preference for courses that adhere to a high standard of disciplinary excellence and that encourage original thinking.

Our participants overwhelmingly expressed a preference for being challenged. They connected feelings of satisfaction and reward with achieving high marks in difficult courses: "I value As in the courses I put more effort into"; "In the really hard classes, you do feel a greater sense of accomplishment"; "If I am interested in the concept, and I think it's difficult, then getting an A grade makes me feel good"; "She's a really hard grader, but that's because she demands a lot out of her students and I respect that… I would treasure my A in her classes more." As these statements underscore, the emotional value of grades—or the ability of a high grade to inspire feelings of pride—is contingent on the student's awareness of having lived up to a meaningful challenge.

It is important to note that rigor alone does not produce optimal learning. Instead, participants argued that in addition to challenging them, experiences in which they grew the most always included clear expectations and critical feedback: As Rifath stated, "Having fair grading practices is probably what's best for learning." Usefully, our participants had a clear, widely shared definition of what constitutes fairness. "A grade is fair," explained TS, "when it's given for the reason that it is said to be given for." "I appreciate classes that are very clear on the metrics you'll be measured by," stated Russ. "Decide where areas of high expectation will be at the outset," Nina suggested to teachers. "Make them clear and explicit early. Remain inflexible on these expectations." As these remarks demonstrate, explicit and consistent expectations maximize learning.

On the flip side, changing expectations and unclear feedback can frustrate even the most growth-oriented students. "I've had TAs who are a little more strict when it comes to how they grade," explained Nick. "One said, 'I graded you really hard this time, so you might not get the grade you expected.'" Nick found this comment "kind of annoying" because "you should just be graded at a certain level of expectations given at the outset, not necessarily be surprised by the expectations after you've been graded." Elijah relayed a similarly frustrating experience:

The professor wasn't clear about what he wanted. Every time I submitted a draft, he said it wasn't good. He would give a lot of weird analogies of what a good thesis is, for example, so I would try and every time he would just say it wasn't good. He would explain why it wasn't good, but because it was so vague and unhelpful, he might as well have said nothing.

As these statements highlight, grading practices that are unclear or contingent on the professor's whim "annoy" students, even those otherwise eager to learn. As the above quotations suggest, the quality of feedback given to students plays a central role in their ability to understand, enact, and even appreciate the skills or principles being taught; this kind of feedback appears to be a minimum requirement for inspiring a growth mindset.

In addition to valuing clear expectations, students emphasized the importance of critical feedback to growth. Both Sarah and David noted a connection between receiving feedback and understanding grades:

> The best way to give out grades is not only just give someone a letter grade, but also give them a description of why they are getting that grade, give them consistent feedback on the work that they are turning in so they understand how they ended up with the ultimate result of a certain grade, which a lot of my classes do. When they don't I kind of get mad and ask somebody… It's about having that feedback.

> I appreciate when teachers are really thoughtful about their feedback, to let me know this is where you are, this is why I think that—that's the most important part, the feedback with the grades—which requires more time on their part, which is something that not everyone can do.

These statements highlight that grades are often opaque. Students desire and highly value feedback that helps them interpret their performance. Other participants' preference for feedback suggests that grades have a sense of finality and judgment, whereas written comments cultivate a growth mindset; to receive feedback is to be viewed as amidst a growth process. As Karen explained, giving feedback can help minimize any potential grade fixation: "I would love written feedback instead of grades. I love written feedback. I think it would give us more freedom to engage as opposed to like trying to grub for a grade." Read together these comments suggest that students who feel informed about the limitations of their performance are primed to work harder and incentivized to value learning over high grades. These statements all underline the singular value of critical, individual feedback to the learning process.

Beyond simply arguing in favor of fairness and feedback, our participants also valued transformative educational experiences that allowed them to think and work in new ways. Many of our participants found their most challenging classes to be the most rewarding because these difficult courses inspired new ways of seeing the world. Adithi explained that her most challenging class had "forced" her "to take a lot of notes as [it moved] incredibly rapidly." Despite the fast pace, she was pleased that the challenge had "helped" her "develop study skills" and had "changed" her way of thinking. She credits this growth to the course's emphasis on thinking over and above test taking: "[the professor] gave me tools to use rather than teaching to a test, and challenged me to use that new set of tools and way of thinking to the best of my ability." In similar terms, Annika noted that her favorite class had "pushed" her "a lot," but the challenge helped her reach "this other level of understanding" that she was ultimately grateful for.

Another participant, Nina, who also felt that her most challenging class had been her most successful learning experience, noted that rigorous grading needs to be supported by equally rigorous classroom management and thoughtful course and assignment design. "The bar was set high for in-class participation," she began:

> People were really careful about what they said in class, close reading was valued in discussions, comments were thoughtful. Every piece of reading felt

important, well chosen. A handout was circulated at the beginning of the quarter
that established a high bar for philosophical writing, how to adhere to the
discipline's standards. Every assignment, even small ones, were held to this
high standard. The professor pointed out when a comment was off track.

As Nina's comment suggests, students are aware of many aspects of how a course is designed
and administered. The rigorous grading practices that characterized her favorite course helped
her arrive at a better understanding of disciplinary excellence in the subject being studied. She
felt respected as a developing philosopher.

Several other participants similarly celebrated courses that challenged them to develop
their own perspectives, while also adhering to a high standard of disciplinary excellence.
Adam's remarks are representative:

[Fellow's note to PI: "Participant got way more enthusiastic when talking about
this class then when they were talking about previous topics."] This was my
favorite class! The class gave a very unbiased perspective and allowed us to
make our own judgments… I got a more holistic and fair view. Also, very
informative… Everyone researched their information, and I think that it really
helped, because we really had to look at the facts. I never knew my professor's
opinions. It was nice because he left it up to us to decipher and come up with
our own conclusions. He's a very knowledgeable person, but he never told us
what to think.

Like Adam, Meave explained that she "really loves" assignments that "force" her to investigate
the material. She values assignments that balance guidance with exploration because these
kinds of prompts, "give me a chance to learn in a way that's conducive to my own growth as a
person." In her favorite class she was "given the freedom" to choose her own situation and
develop an original syllabus for a hypothetical ten-week class she might then teach; "It [was]
a great example of a prompt that has guidance and direction, but is also open-ended."

As these statements reveal, there is a wide range of pedagogies that can inspire learning
and growth, but trends do emerge. Despite favoring certain subjects over others, our
participants consistently expressed a preference for courses that "force" an adherence to
disciplinary standards of excellence. This adherence empowers students to generate their own
understandings of course material and facilitates the development of new skills and novel ways
of looking at the world.

Striking among these responses is the desire to be invited into the real work of
knowledge production within a discipline, as opposed to receiving and regurgitating
information. As Duygu explained: "My ideal learning would be less evaluation focused. You
would be evaluated for comprehension." Similarly, Kathleen argued that in order for learning
to be truly transformative, it has to be "more creative. We have to come up with our own
understanding of the material." In subjects as different as chemistry and dance, the students we
interviewed valued opportunities to participate in the process of educating themselves.

When asked about grading practices that compliment optimal learning, the students we
interviewed spoke in animated language about the "art" of good argumentation, the "beauty"
of a well-crafted lecture series, the importance of becoming informed about "ethical life," and
the satisfaction of acquiring "new knowledge" and working to "master" new techniques,
material, and concepts. They appreciated courses that offered transferable skills: "I take the
skills of the roundtable discussion into daily life. That's really fun and productive." They
marveled at educational experiences that transformed their worldview:

> [The introduction to bioengineering has] given me a completely new perspective on how to think. It makes me look at biology as a tool rather than a study of mechanisms. It's helped me view the world and its problems in a completely new way.

In describing these growth experiences, students repeatedly told us that they appreciate being challenged. As Nina explained, she treasures critical feedback, which she described as "an opportunity to see myself as having room to improve." These reflections demonstrate that students are not only aware of learning when it happens, but also desire opportunities to grow.

Grading Practices that Undermine Learning

We encountered a great deal of positive sentiment with regard to learning on campus. Our results, however, also reveal that the same students who value challenging classes that "force" growth can become fixated on grades in both overly harsh and overly lax grading environments: Both of which, they argue, obstruct learning. Certain extreme grading practices—described by students as "weeding" or "filtering" and "easy A's"—are felt by many to interfere with learning. Students struggle to understand why certain courses seem eager to thin the ranks while others don't recognize exceptional work.

By reporting on conversations held between students, our findings shed light on an otherwise hidden emotional dimension of these extreme grading environments. In classes that grade harshly, students can feel that the opportunity to learn is being withheld from them. In lax grading environments, students can feel denied the opportunity to take pride in their work (Lewis, 2017).

The following statements are representative of our participants' critiques of what they term "weeding" or "filtering" classes:

> A lot of people don't have the opportunity to demonstrate their ability.

> I actually really liked the material but hated the class because I didn't have extensive background and felt like no matter what I did I wasn't going to do well.

> There's a certain level of difficulty where you just give up, because you're like, "I really don't see how I could make progress on this, or how I could achieve this outcome even if I sunk six hours into this right now." After a certain level of difficulty, you're like, "Maybe I should just give up or choose my battles." The kind of difficulty in "how difficult?" determines motivation.

As these statements reveal, "weeding" or "filtering" grading practices can thwart learning.

At their worst, these kinds of extreme grading regimes can force eager students out of particular career paths thus inadvertently reproducing inequality and ensuring the continuation of unequal assess to STEM professions. One first-generation student explained that she felt "weeded out" of physics:

> The environment I come from, no one has ever come this far, gone to school this far away. From Chicago to [here], that's a distance. I'm being held to this high standard. I think I am very hard on myself because I know I can do it, maybe it will take more effort, but I know I can do it… I took a physics class fall quarter and had to withdraw. I felt it was intense. I felt as though it was a

weed-out process. If you didn't come in with some knowledge, then that's it for you. You can't pursue this, it's just too bad. I just felt like I was wasting my time. It was just frustrating. I realized, like okay, this is a weeder course, but I came here to learn, and I am not given the opportunity to learn. You have people that haven't had the opportunity to learn, and it's just frustrating.

This statement shows how courses and majors that "weed out" certain undergraduates fail the university's own mission of providing equal access to the full curriculum. Weeding and filtering grading systems should be viewed as a betrayal of the institution's core values and ideals; so too, should overly lax grading systems.

At the other extreme end of the grading spectrum, many of the students we interviewed noted that a lack of rigor prompts disengagement: "If you think you're going to get an A, you won't work as hard"; "I wouldn't go above and beyond for a class where I thought I was going to get an A"; "People who come to easy-A classes for the A, and just for the A, will not learn." Other students noted that easy-A classes work against positive feelings of pride, satisfaction, and fulfillment: "It's hard to distinguish yourself as a great student in one of these kinds of classes," complained Nina. When the URF asked, "Did the lack of rigor in the class affect your ability to learn in any way?" Jen responded, "Honestly, we didn't really learn anything. I didn't like it that much." As these examples suggest, many of our participants were critical of lax grading.

Those who valued easy A's did so for pragmatic reasons unrelated to a desire to learn. For example, when the URF asked, "How did the low workload affect, if at all, your engagement with the class?" Jamie responded, "Oh! It can make the material less fulfilling. But, at the same time, I value having time to do other things." Lax grading benefited the student from the perspective of extracurricular engagement, but not from an academic standpoint.

Discussion

Our results show that consumerism and the entitlement associated with it is not a fixed generational attitude so much as a conditional sentiment that grading practices can either disarm or inflame. It seems that despite being characterized as demanding consumers, some students want exactly what every other generation of college student has wanted: the challenge of enacting transformative intellectual, personal, and professional growth. As one student explained: "Learning and doing a good job for a grade aren't mutually exclusive."

The wide range of viewpoints expressed by our participants demonstrates that any broad generalizations about millennial learners should be greeted with skepticism, especially negative characterizations that have the potential to validate anti-learning practices on the part of professors and institutions. Perhaps the real commodity in students' eyes is simply educators' adherence to, and further development of, best teaching practices.

In an op-ed for the *New York Times* titled "Demanding More from College," Bruni (2014) argued that college needs to be "an expansive adventure" (para, 20). He called on students to insist that all facets of their college experience yank them "towards unfamiliar horizons and untested identities rather than indulging or flattering who and where they already are" (para, 20). Our results both complicate and confirm Bruni's argument. The students to whom we spoke overwhelmingly told us that they "cherish" immersing themselves in new material and novel ideas—that they find fulfillment in educational experiences that challenge them to master unfamiliar competencies and creatively participate in the production of new knowledge. In sum, they expressed a strong hunger for college to be, as Bruni states, an "expansive adventure" that affirms their ability to shape their own intellectual trajectory.

We wonder, however, how much control students exert over these transformative educational adventures. Our results suggest that students snap up opportunities for optimal learning when they are offered, but also work their way, sometimes begrudgingly, through less ideal learning experiences as the need arises. Even highly motivated students at an elite institution felt entitled, at times, to high grades in courses they perceived as easy. These same students felt discouraged from trying to learn in courses they felt were designed to weed out those who were not already familiar with the material. Knowing that even the nation's top students can be thwarted from the growth they desire by both excessively harsh and lax grading practices should spark conversations about how to replace these broken grading regimes with ones that reward an academic ethic.

Further, students explained how each ideal learning experience was contingent on excellent teaching performed by an instructor with enough time and sufficient training to design clear, compelling assignments; to offer growth-oriented, critical feedback; and to carefully manage the classroom environment in ways consistent with clearly stated learning objectives that meaningfully reflect the nature of the subject being studied as it operates in the world beyond the campus. These are all labor-intensive, learned professional skills that most graduate students are not taught on the way to becoming professors, that are poorly assessed on most conventional teaching evaluations (Eiszler, 2002), and that necessitate institutional support. Yet, these are the very skills that characterize what it means to teach and that reward students' investment in learning. As Pat C. Hoy (2009) writes, it is "we teachers" who "design the pathways for success, insist on the students' playfulness as they meander along them, and encourage them to take the risks of conception necessary for their success and ours" (p. 324).

In many ways our findings support the conclusion by the 2014 National Survey of Student Engagement that institutional culture is critical to student success: Top-performing institutions share a commitment to and embrace a responsibility for student success that "engages the entire campus community" (p. 2). We add to this existing thesis by demonstrating that student-centered communities of inquiry can offer a critical contribution to this process of engagement. When invited into the production of scholarship, students can help generate the kind of grounded sociology of education that has the potential to drive pedagogical innovation and generate new lines of inquiry in higher education research.

Future research could extend our results by further investigating the relationship between grading and self-reported learning at a range of different kinds of institutions that serve more heterogeneous student populations. Researchers interested in conducting similar inquires at other institutions should take several factors that distinguish this study's participant population into account. Students on elite campuses are less likely to express a consumerist orientation towards college and are more likely to explain their motivation to pursue a baccalaureate (BA) in altruistic terms (The National Survey of Student Engagement, 2014). Within this highly motivated student group, our specific participant population reported spending significantly more time outside of class on their studies than the national average, which is ten hours a week or fewer. In sharp contrast, only five of our participants reported spending ten hours a week or fewer on homework, while the rest of our participants reported spending an impressive twenty to sixty hours a week outside of class on their studies. Future research could investigate the extent to which students' own time commitment to their studies has an impact on their perceptions of the relationship between grading and learning.

The student-centered research methods developed here could be used to inform institutional policy and enrich teaching. Empowering students to address their own questions within the sociology of higher education could help administrators develop policies that truly reflect students' diverse lived experiences. Teachers interested in finding new ways to teach qualitative research methods to advanced undergraduates might consider ways of generating collaborative-inquiry seminars with research proposal writing, conference presentation, or

publication as the ultimate aim. Many real-world genres of research-based writing, such as op-eds, white papers, podcasts, and blog posts, could also be included in this kind of student-centered curriculum. These kinds of inquiries reject the notion that students are consumers and instead create occasions for them to showcase their potential as researchers.

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