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Student Evaluations, Grade Inflation, and Declining Student Effort

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By [Richard Vedder](#)

The Chronicle's Susannah Tully has brought my attention to a [great article](#) in the prestigious *Journal of Political Economy* by Scott Carrell and James West dealing with professorial approaches to teaching, student evaluations and student performance. It seems professors who do more than teach the basic bare-bones knowledge and are in some sense more rigorous tend to get poorer student evaluations (no surprise there). The less rigorous professors even get good performances out of their students in the courses taught but those students subsequently, in follow up courses, do poorer than the more rigorous professors who do more than teach to the standardized test. Sounds reasonable to me.

This got me thinking more about student evaluations and some other evidence. Specifically, I would note that student evaluations began to become popular during the 1960s and early 1970s as a common evaluation tool for faculty. I would also note that most of the great grade inflation in America has occurred since evaluations began, with national grade point averages probably rising from the 2.5 or 2.6 range in about 1960 to well over 3.0 today (admittedly, this is based on limited but I believe likely correct evidence). Professors to some extent can “buy” good evaluations by giving high grades, so the evaluation process is probably a major factor in grade inflation.

So what? What difference does it really make if the average grade is a B- or C+ instead of a B or B+? This is where another working paper of the National Bureau of Economic Research comes in. Philip Babcock and Mindy Marks present evidence in Working Paper 15954 that in 1961, the average student spent 40 hours a week engaged in their studies—attending class and studying. By 2003, this had declined by nearly one-third to 27 hours weekly.

One advantage of getting old is that you gain some historical perspective, and I have been in higher education for over a half of century and believe that Babcock and Marks are right. Students do less reading, less studying, even less attending class than two generations ago. Why? They don't have to do more. With relatively little work they can get relatively high grades—say a B or even better. And student evaluations are one factor in explaining the underlying grade inflation problem. Go to the [campusbuddy.com](#) Web site and see for yourself evidence on the grade-inflation phenomenon. The colleges of education, which in my judgment should be put out of business (topic for another blog), are the worst offenders, but the problem is pretty universal.

College is getting more expensive all the time—and students are consuming less of it per year as measured by time usage. The cost of college per hour spent in studying is rising a good deal faster than what tuition data alone suggest. Why should the public subsidize mostly middle-class kids working perhaps 900 hours a year (half the average of American workers) on their studies?

What to do? We could move to reduce the impact of student evaluations, or even eliminate them. One reason for their existence—to convey knowledge to students about professor—is usually met separately by other means, such as the [RateMyProfessors.com](#) Web site. Alternatively, colleges could by mandate or the use of financial incentives encourage faculty to become more rigorous in their grading. If state subsidies started to vary inversely in size with grade-point averages, state schools would quickly reduce grade inflation. In any case, we need more research into WHY students today are working less. But I would bet a few bucks that grade inflation and student evaluations are part of the answer.

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