HOUSING AND GRADING PRACTICES

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As the pressures from college applications mount, it is becoming apparent that college faculties are prone to adjusting their grading standards to the kind of students whom they teach. Webb (1959) may have been the first to record this phenomenon in the literature. Aiken (1963) noticed the same thing at another institution. Hills (1965) found evidence that in one institution this change in grading standards was produced by the faculty's retention of a traditional distribution of grades rather than by the faculty's inability to teach effectively the more competent students which it was provided under selective admissions brought about by application pressure.

The argument is sometimes presented that there is nothing inherently wrong with a faculty's raising its grading standards as the quality of an institution's student body improves. In fact, it is argued that a stiffening of standards all around is in order in this post-sputnik era—educators have been too lax, and students have become too lazy. But, it is seldom argued that standards of excellence should be lowered, that weak students admitted to our colleges should be judged in their academic work with greater leniency than they were previously granted. This would be tantamount to promoting inferiority in American higher education.

Since enrollment pressures are producing more highly-selected student bodies each year, it might be argued that there is no need at present to be concerned that grading standards float with the level of ability of students. But this introduces a possibility of error. The assumption that the aptitude level of entering students is steadily increasing is false. Enrollment pressures also cause new student housing to be constructed. When it is opened, it must be filled so that student rentals can pay the mortgage. This can, and does, result in a sudden need for many more students and a lowering of admissions standards to obtain those students. When this happens, if grading standards float with the aptitude level of the student body, the standards go down. A segment of American education moves away from excellence and toward inferiority.

Faculties like to believe that this does not happen. They often do not realize that their grading standards float, and that they float down as well as up. An illustration of the changes which can take place without the faculty's cognizance appears in the data to be presented below from a liberal arts college which opened a new dormitory for male students in the fall of 1961. It felt obligated to fill this new dormitory. To that end, it admitted roughly 50% more males than in the previous year. By tracing the College Board SAT scores, the high-school averages (HSA) and the first-year average grades (FAG) between the years 1957 and 1962 for these male students, one can see the effect on grading standards of this sudden enlargement of the freshman class. It is even more clearly depicted through use of the statistical technique described by Gulliksen and Wilks (1950). The relevent data appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Means of FAG, SAT V, SAT M, HSA, and the
Regression Equation Constants

Year	N_1	N_2	FAG	SAT V	SAT M	HSA	Constant
1957	221	181	2.03	384	442	27.5	-.5165
1958	226	166	1.96	402	445	27.4	-.6107
1959	203	162	1.97	404	457	28.3	-.6664
1960	233	182	1.86	420	459	27.9	-.7857
1961	332	222	1.99	409	454	26.4	-.5610
1962	236	140	2.08	439	490	29.0	-.6866

The Gulliksen-Wilks technique asks whether the same regression system applies to several different sets of data. When this technique was applied to the data represented in Table 1, it was found that the standard errors of estimate were not significantly different, the regression slopes were not significantly different, but there were significant differences among the regression intercepts, i.e., the constant terms of the multiple regression equations. When one set of regression weights was obtained for the entire set of data,

the constant terms for the various groups are those presented in the right hand column of Table 1. There it can be seen that for each successive year from 1957 through 1960 the constant term became more negative. This means that for students of the same aptitude lower grades were obtained each year of this four-year period (i.e., grading standards floated up). However, in 1961, the year in which the new dormitory was opened, the constant term of the regression equation became less negative by a sizable amount. This implies that during 1961 higher grades were obtained for a given level of ability than in the previous three years (i.e., grading standards floated down). In 1962 the trend toward greater negative constant terms resumes. (The multiple correlation for this prediction equation is .60, and the standard error of estimate is .50 letter grades. The regression equation is:

$$PFAG = +.0016 \text{ SAT V} + .0015 \text{ SAT M} + .0482 \text{ HSA} + \text{the Constant Term.})$$

Discussion

The data in Table 1 represent the first-year performance of these entering male students. In the column labeled N_1 are the numbers of students who were admitted at the beginning of the fall quarter. In the column labeled N_2 are the numbers of students who were still enrolled at the end of the first year having completed the entire year without interruption. (The means in Table 1 are based on the students included in N_2.) In those columns can be seen evidence of the attempt in 1961 to fill new dormitory space by admitting half again as many students as were admitted in previous years. In the following year, of course, that dormitory space was filled to some extent from the large previous year's class, so the number of freshmen who entered was reduced. Notice that in column 2 the increase in the 1961 class size is greatly reduced by the end of the year. Even with the reduction in grading standards, apparently there was heavy academic loss among these students who were admitted to fill space. The lower admission standards of 1961 can be seen in each of the columns for SAT V, SAT M, and HSA.

While the evidence is not conclusive that it was solely the opening of the new dormitory and the lowering of admission standards that caused the lowering of grading standards, these are concomitants in this situation. If one

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assumes that grading standards float with the level of the student body rather than being fixed by the academic integrity of the faculty, the relationship between sudden enlargement of enrollment with lowered admission standards and the lowering of grading standards is not surprising. In fact, these data suggest that one way to determine whether a faculty has fixed grading standards would be to observe what takes place in its grading performance when new facilities are opened or when for any reason admission standards are raised or lowered. These data also strongly suggest that floating standards cannot be justified on the grounds that they always (or currently) float upward. These data indicate that they may also float downward, if they are allowed to float at all.

Summary

Data are presented which illustrate a lowering of college freshmen grading standards concomitant with a lowering of admissions standards for the purpose of filling newly-created dormitory space. This is additional evidence that grading standards float with the ability level of the students, and it is an instance in which standards floated down, currently a direction considered much less acceptable than up.

References

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