On the rise: Are grades where they should be?

By Joyce K. Shearer and Mary Delvin

Grade inflation is an evaluation problem that has received a good deal of attention during the past 20 to 30 years. During the post-Sputnik era of the 1970s, it was thought to be a response to public demand for more rigorous academic standards. There is also speculation that during that time, inflated grades were assigned by sympathetic professors as a strategy to delay the drafting of students for military service in Vietnam. In recent years, grade inflation has been perceived as a response to public concerns regarding academic accountability accompanied by demands for improving the quality of education in post-secondary schools.

Although studies of grade inflation have not been reported in nursing, the phenomenon appears to exist in almost every educational setting and should, therefore, be of concern to nurse educators. Numerous studies of college and university transcripts during the 1980s and 1990s have revealed a substantial increase in the number of As assigned to students in addition to a reduction in the number of recorded C's.

New Harris poll is sobering wake-up call for profession

By Nancy Dickinson-Hazard

A just-released national poll by Harris Interactive presents a sobering wake-up call for nurses everywhere. Despite our profession's far-ranging health care knowledge, the poll shows that most consumers look to nurses for advice on such important issues as elder care, women's health or childhood diseases. Instead, most of those polled rely on nurses for basic health care advice that's consistent with traditional nursing roles.

The national poll, sponsored by Nursing Spectrum and the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International, was based on telephone interviews with more than 1,000 adults aged 18 or over.

While the poll results show that nurses have carved out a respectable niche in providing health care advice to the public – principally through the traditional venues of office, school and hospital nursing – we clearly need to do a better job of reaching out to consumers and helping them with a wider range of health care problems and concerns.

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Tapping into technology: The future of electronic theses and dissertations

By Bernie Holday

The advancement of nursing science has been paralleled by advancements in the means of expression and sharing of knowledge. Since the expansion of the Internet there have been dramatic changes in the enterprise of nursing research and education. These changes are now helping to drive further change that will affect the key documents of graduate education: theses and dissertations.

The history of ETDs is quite short. The idea was first discussed publicly in a workshop hosted by University Microfilms International (UMI) in 1987. Practical solutions became feasible in the early 1990s with the arrival of Adobe's Acrobat software, which supported creation of the Portable Document Format (PDF). UMI, the Council of Graduate Schools, the Coalition for Networked Information and Virginia Tech worked together and sponsored a series of meetings beginning in the early 1990s in the United States and Canada.

The traditional nurse role highlighted

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Sigma Theta Tau International Honor Society of Nursing

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The advancement of nursing science has been paralleled by advancements in the means of expression and sharing of knowledge. Since the expansion of the Internet there have been dramatic changes in the enterprise of nursing research and education. These changes are now helping to drive further change that will affect the key documents of graduate education: theses and dissertations. These documents were handled by libraries and perhaps Bell and Howell Information and Learning (formerly University Microfilms) or a university press. In the not-too-distant future, most theses and dissertations will be prepared and submitted electronically by their authors to their universities via networks.

This change is occurring concurrently with the emergence of digital libraries. Digital libraries ensure access to these electronic theses and dissertations using powerful tools for searching and browsing, while enforcing any restrictions required by the university, author or publisher. Digital libraries are high-end or "super" information systems that integrate a wide variety of specialized technologies. Advanced information systems involve multimedia information and distributed processing and the ability to handle various approaches to information organization whether in collections, databases or graphs (as in hypertexts). Scientific visualization, virtual reality simulations, vector space or probabilistic or conceptual searching, and 2D or 3D graphics interfaces are all a part of a comprehensive digital library. Thus, while the rest of this article focuses on the implications of Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETDs) for nursing education and research, one must also consider the changes occurring in university libraries.

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Grades on the Rise

Grades are frequently used in student evaluations. Student course evaluations can affect the enrollment in a course or a section of a course, an additional factor that may contribute to grade inflation. Faculty may also assign passing grades for educational purposes, with the understanding that the student has achieved the minimum prerequisite level of knowledge. Faculty may also assign passing grades for educational purposes, with the understanding that the student has achieved the minimum prerequisite level of knowledge.

The Importance of Grade Accuracy

In general, grades serve two purposes. They inform students about their achievement in a course and their relationship to their peers. Grades also inform employers, regulatory bodies and educational institutions of student achievement. Both of these purposes are limited by grade inflation. With the maldistribution of grades, many schools have assigned grades that are not reflective of student performance.

Addressing Grade Inflation

There are a number of interventions that may be considered. However, the first step is to recognize that maldistribution of grades exists. Usually, the administrator of the program will recognize it when grade sheets are turned in with an excessive number of A's and B's. It or may become apparent when there is an exceptionally large number of students with high grade point averages. Clinical sections in which students consistently achieve excellent ratings should be examined to be sure grade inflation is not a factor. Once maldistribution of grades has been identified, faculty should have an opportunity to discuss the meaning of grades with each other. Everyone defining and implementing the grading scale in the same way? If not, faculty must be encouraged to come to a consensus on these issues.

Occasionally, students achieve uniformly high grades in courses in which there is an excess of previously learned material. In those instances, course objectives and content need to be reviewed. This should be followed by an examination of evaluation criteria to determine whether methods of evaluation assess the achievement of course objectives. Another area to be examined is the practice by some instructors of providing opportunities to students to earn additional credits, particularly when they do not contribute to appropriate assessment of student knowledge. For example, some faculty will allow a failing student to complete an additional project to earn credits, which will bring the final grade to a passing level. Unfortunately, the student may still not have mastered the required course content.

Efforts should be made to change faculty attitudes when maldistribution of grades is noted. Faculty should become aware of the implications of later-date evaluation of students. They have a right to administrative support when a student fails, and they should receive such support when it is necessary to assign minimal or failing grades to students. Faculty should establish appropriate standards of performance in all aspects of the curriculum and take pride in maintaining those standards. Faculty with inadequate knowledge of evaluation measures should be required to take an appropriate course at the time of their appointment. Finally, periodic faculty development programs on principles of evaluation, test construction, clinical evaluation and other measures of student performance should be offered so that faculty can maintain their competence in this critical area.

Tell us what you think by completing the survey on page 4.

Joyce K. Schoemaker, RN, EdD, is professor and dean emerita at the Medical College of Ohio School of Nursing.

Mary DeVos, RN, MS, is assistant professor at the Medical College of Ohio School of Nursing.

HARRIS POLL

Continued from page 1

and what types of side effects to expect, and how to interpret information provided by a physician.

For example, more than half (53 percent) of the respondents had asked a nurse about post-operative care. Also, more than half (53 percent) of the respondents had asked a nurse for advice about over-the-counter health care products that provide relief for pain, fever or allergies.

Respondents were also questioned about how often a nurse has helped them understand something a medical doctor has told them, including information about treatment options or a diagnosis. The majority of respondents (52 percent) responded "very often" and "sometimes." A similar percentage of respondents said they had asked a nurse about how to take a particular drug (50 percent) and side effects of prescribed drugs (50 percent).

Troublesome Findings

Although nurses are capable of providing a wealth of health care information, most of those surveyed said they did not seek expert nurse advice on care for the elderly, children's health issues, women's health issues, alternative therapies and certain aspects of medications.

The public also does not turn to nurses for advice on other important health-related issues including sexually transmitted diseases, sex education, abortion, and drug and alcohol use.

For instance, 59 percent of the women surveyed had not asked a nurse about birth control, 77 percent of women had not sought a nurse's advice about menopause and 81 percent of women had not consulted a nurse about osteoporosis.

Implications:

This poll clearly shows that nursing must find a way to make the public aware of the extensive health care knowledge nurses possess.

This is one of the issues being addressed by the Hononta Society of Nursing and other professional organizations through aggressive media relations designed to get news and entertainment programs to more accurately portray nurses.

It's also a focus of Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow, a coalition of 19 leading nursing and health care organizations that is launching a national advertising campaign to raise awareness of—and change the image of—the nursing profession in order to recruit and retain more nurses. (For more information on Nurses for a Healthier Tomorrow, visit www.healthertomorrow.org)

These findings should be a major concern for nurses everywhere who've worked hard to expand the role of our profession, increase our versatility and enhance our value in an increasingly complex health care system. It's time for nurses to have their voices heard and be counted among health care advisors consulted by the public.

Nancy Dickenson-Hazard, RN, MSN, FAAN, is the executive director of the Honor Society of Nursing, Sigma Theta Tau International.

How are we doing?

Excellence was launched in January of this year as an opportunity to provide nurses with an opportunity to choose the nursing information they want to receive in their clinical practice or administration. We would love to know what you think about Excellence. So that we may continue to provide you with new and information, we are always looking for authors and good story ideas. Please e-mail your thoughts to amy@stti.iupui.edu.
Three favorite aspects of job:
- Influencing future nursing care through teaching and research
- Relations with students
- Writing with an awareness that others will read my work and ideas

Three challenging aspects of job:
- The work is always there!
- The volume of knowledge required to keep abreast of is overwhelming
- Wishing you were even smarter!

Job description:
Conducts research investigating spiritual responses to illness and how nurses can care for the spiritual needs of patients; teaches undergraduate and graduate nursing students; and is currently writing a textbook on spiritual care giving titled "Spiritual Care: Nursing Theory, Research, and Practice."

Electronic theses and dissertations will provide a foundation for worldwide collaboration among schools of nursing that will allow them to address important research problems as well as enhance the dissemination of nursing knowledge. Most nursing faculty and practitioners now have access to theses for months or years for findings to appear in journals or books before they can refer to them in class or use them in practice. Nurses engaged in distance education have an especially difficult time finding out about graduate research results since most lack easy access to university libraries. Graduate students, faculty, and practitioners can easily search for studies related to their personal research. The NDLTD allows university users to search theses using NDLTD (http://www.theses.org). The information in these studies may guide a graduate student to a topic, provide important references and information about methodological issues, or lead directly to other relevant research.

Databases can keep track of citations to the theses reviewed, as well as record the large number of references to other scholarly literature. Faculty and students can also carefully review the details of the studies, methodology, data and analysis within weeks of the study’s submission. Some data sets, visualizations, videos and other accompanying materials can be downloaded for further review. The study of full data sets, both qualitative and quantitative, will be extremely useful to students and faculty.

Students will also benefit from learning by doing as they prepare their ETDs for submission. Students may learn more about multimedia technologies if they wish to include pictures, audio or video components to their theses. The students will also learn more about preservation after they create XML versions of their ETDs instead of Word or WordPerfect versions that may be unusable in a few years. Faculty will be able to guide their students to figures, tables, bibliographies, literature reviews, and other parts of the theses. All universities can participate in the NDLTD. It is expected that university, government, and other agency access to the NDLTD, including searching for and retrieving ETDs, will continue to be free. A review of the Virginia Tech ETDs Website (http://etd.lib.vt.edu/) will provide you with more information about ETDs. The next international NDLTD meeting is March 22-24, 2001, in Pasadena, Calif. (http://www.ndltd.org/).

Bonnie Holoday, RN, DNS, FAAN, is dean of the graduate school and associate vice president for research at Clemson University, Clemson, S.C.

Leadership Today-Changing Roles, Rules and Responsibilities

Sigma Theta Tau International presents the new 2001 Professional Development Conference and Chapter Leader Academy (formerly known as Regional Conferences)

These two-day seminars offer you five educational tracks from which to choose:
- Surviving and Thriving as a Clinical Practice Leader
- Achieving Your Lifelong Career
- Volunteer Association Leadership: Rewarding Roles in Service to Communities
- Becoming a Funded Researcher
- Chapter Leader Academy (a 3-day track)

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Recognizing the best: Regional awards to be presented

Creative and scholarly contributions to nursing benefit nurses and the patients they serve worldwide. To recognize outstanding accomplishments, the society presents the biennial regional awards. The following awards will be presented to recipients from seven geographical regions.

- Media Awards (print, electronic, photography and art)
- Technology Awards (information technology and education technology)
- Research Dissertation Award
- Research Utilization Award
- Research Dissemintaion Award
- Chapter Research Advancement Award
- Chapter Heritage Award
- Innovative Chapter Award
- Mentor Award

Recipients will be recognized during the 2001 Professional Development Conference and Chapter Leader Academy. Award winners may accept their awards at any one of these Professional Development Conference and Chapter Leader Academy sites: Orlando on January 26-27; San Francisco on February 23-24; Philadelphia on March 23-24; or Chicago on April 27-28.

To be considered for a 2000-2001 award, submissions must be received by October 15, 2000. For information about eligibility, specific criteria and submission requirements, visit www.nursingsociety.org or call Frank Maes at 1.888.634.7575.

Grade inflation: Tell us what you think

1. How many years have you been a nurse educator?
   a. 1 to 5 years
   b. 6 to 10 years
   c. 11 to 15 years
   d. more than 15 years

2. What is the highest degree in nursing you have earned?
   a. associate degree in nursing
   b. bachelor's degree in nursing
   c. master's degree in nursing
   d. doctoral degree in nursing

3. Have you earned a doctoral degree in a discipline other than nursing?
   a. yes (please specify)
   b. no

4. In your educational preparation, did you complete courses in (Circle all that apply)
   a. curriculum development?
   b. instructional methods?
   c. tests and measurements?
   d. evaluation of students?
   e. none of the above?

5. In what type of program are you currently teaching? (Circle all that apply)
   a. associate degree
   b. bachelor's degree
   c. bachelor's degree completion program for nurses
   d. master's degree
   e. doctoral degree

6. How many students are there in your school of nursing?
   a. less than 100
   b. 101 to 250
   c. 251 to 500
   d. more than 500

7. How many faculty members are there in your school of nursing?
   a. less than 20
   b. 21 to 40
   c. 41 to 60
   d. more than 60

8. What is your academic rank?
   a. instructor
   b. assistant professor
   c. associate professor
   d. professor

9. In addition to teaching, do you hold an administrative position?
   a. yes (please specify)
   b. no

10. During the past three years, what courses have you taught? (Circle all that apply)
    a. adult health
    b. community health
    c. ethics
    d. gerontological nursing
    e. health assessment
    f. health care of children
    g. health care of women
    h. nursing administration
    i. nursing education
    j. nurse practitioner
    k. pathophysiology
    l. pharmacology
    m. psychiatric nursing
    n. research
    o. role preparation
    p. other (please specify)

11. Do you believe grade inflation is present in your school of nursing?
    a. yes
    b. no

If you responded no to question 11, do not continue the remainder of this survey but do return it. Your contribution is important!

12. What leads you to the belief that grade inflation is present in your school?

13. If there is more than one program in your school, is grade inflation more prevalent in one of them?
   a. yes (state which one)
   b. no

14. What factors do you believe contribute to grade inflation?

15. What measures, if any, have been taken to decrease grade inflation in your school?

You are invited to participate. Please return this survey to Dr. Joyce Shoemaker, 1614 River Road, Maumee, OH 43537 no later than November 15, 2000. Results of the grade inflation survey will be published in a future issue of Excellence in Nursing Education.

Thank you for your participation. Please return this survey to Dr. Joyce Shoemaker, 1614 River Road, Maumee, OH 43537 no later than November 15, 2000. Results of the grade inflation survey will be published in a future issue of Excellence in Nursing Education.

Excellence in Nursing Administration

- Achieving positive results during change
- Delivering culturally competent care
- Managed care: How it's affecting health care
- Forensic nursing

Excellence in Clinical Practice

- Rehabilitation nursing: Another increasing shortage
- Nurses and 'the net: The Internet resource for clinicians
- Nursing: An international student's perspective
- Forensic nursing
- Nursing coalition expands membership

Excellence in Nursing Education

- On the rise: Are grades where they should be?
- Tapping into technology: The future of electronic theses and dissertations
- Nursing research congress to be held in Denmark
- Nursing coalition expands membership

If you did not select one of these three versions, you automatically received Excellence in Clinical Practice. You may still select a customized version of the January issue by calling our Member Service Center at 1.888.634.7575 or e-mailing: marketing@stti.iupui.edu. Select only one version to receive in the mail and please include your member number in your response.

**Excellence in Nursing Education**

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