

HUNTER COLLEGE READING/WRITING CENTER  
**WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM: The CPE Examination**  
Sample Reading 2 with Annotation

“Why Colleges Shower Their Students with A’s”

By Brent Staples

from *New York Times*, Op-Ed (March 8, 1998)

**bold**=main ideas

universal font =descriptive outline

*italics*=comments

introducing  
topic through  
analogy

The economist Milton Friedman taught that superior products flourished and shabby ones died out when consumers voted emphatically with their dollars. But the truth of the marketplace is that shabby products can do just fine if they sustain the veneer of quality while slipping downhill, as has much of higher education. Faced with demanding consumers and stiff competition, colleges have simply issued more and more A’s, stoking grade inflation and devaluing degrees.

**Poor products sell well if they provide what consumers want.**

thesis

deepening of  
main idea

Grade inflation is in full gallop at every level, from struggling community institutions to the elites of the Ivy League. In some cases, campus-wide averages have crept up from a C just ten years ago to a **B plus** today.

**Grades have been inflated in all types of universities.**

three  
subpoints–  
generalization

Some departments shower students with A’s to fill poorly attended courses that might otherwise be canceled. Individual professors inflate grades after consumer-conscious administrators hound them into it. Professors at every level inflate to escape negative evaluations by students, whose opinions now figure in tenure and promotion decisions.

**Grade inflation gets students to buy” classes.**

more limited  
example of  
subpoint 2&3

The most vulnerable teachers are the part-timers who have no job security and who now teach more than half of all college courses. Writing in a recent issue of the journal *Academe*, two part-timers suggest that students routinely corner adjuncts, threatening to complain if they do not turn C’s into A’s. An Ivy League professor said recently that if tenure disappeared, universities would be "free to sell diplomas outright."

**Students demand good grades from teachers.**

illustration

The consumer appetite for less rigorous education is nowhere more evident than in the University of Phoenix, a profit-making school that shuns traditional scholarship and offers a curriculum so superficial that critics compare it to a drive-through restaurant. Two hundred colleges have closed since a businessman dreamed up Phoenix 20 years ago. Meanwhile, the university has expanded to 60 sites spread around the country, and more than 40,000 students, making it the country's largest private university.

**traditional schools replaced with profit-making ones**

*Big guy puts little guys out of business–corporate schools!*

illustration,  
continued

Phoenix competes directly with the big state universities and lesser-known small colleges, all of which fear a student drain. But the elite schools fear each other and their customers, the students, who are becoming increasingly restive about the cost of a first-tier diploma, which now exceeds \$120,000. Faced with the prospect of crushing debt, students are treating grades as a matter of life and death—occasionally even suing to have grades revised upward.

**schools compete with each other**

**Students need grades because they're taking on so much debt.**

contrast

Twenty years ago students grumbled, then lived with the grades they were given. Today, colleges of every stature permit them to appeal low grades through deans or permanent boards of inquiry. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Prof. Paul Korshin of the University of Pennsylvania recently described his grievance panel as the "rhinoplasty committee," because it does "cosmetic surgery" on up to 500 transcripts a year.

**More grade appeals are permitted now.**

*Schools should be more strict.*

rebuttal of counter-argument

The argument that grades are rising because students are better prepared is simply not convincing. The evidence suggests that students and parents are demanding—and getting—what they think of as their money's worth.

**Students are not better educated, just getting better grades.**

recommen-  
dation

One way to stanch inflation is to change the way the grade point average is calculated. Under most formulas, all courses are given equal weight, so math, science, and less-challenging courses have equal impact on the averages. This arrangement rewards students who gravitate to courses where high marks are generously given and punishes those who seek out math and science courses, where far fewer students get the top grade.

**stop inflation by changing calculation of GPA**

states problem

**students shouldn't be punished for taking challenging courses**

contrasting views

Valen Johnson, a Duke University statistics professor, came under heavy fire from both students and faculty when he proposed recalculating the grade point average to give rigorously graded courses greater weight. The student government beat back the plan with the help of teachers in the humanities, who worried that students might abandon them for other courses that they currently avoided. Other universities have expressed interest in adopting the Johnson plan, but want their names kept secret to avoid a backlash.

**Some want change but fear public exposure.**

*Aren't teachers, not subjects, what make classes hard? If a rigorously graded course in the humanities were given less weight, that would not be fair.*

conclusion

Addicted to counterfeit excellence, colleges, parents and students are unlikely to give it up. As a consequence, diplomas will become weaker and more ornamental as the years go by.

**College degrees lose value as a result of inflation.**