



# Creative Grade Inflation Reduction Strategies: A Case-Based Study from the School of Business

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This case study investigates various strategies for the reduction and elimination of grade inflation in the School of Business.

**Theoretical Reference:** This case study is based on existing research regarding grade inflation and the shifts in average grades within educational settings. It also considers the broader context of academic rigor, learning outcomes, career opportunities, and the income of graduates.

**Method:** A qualitative mono-method is adopted with an inductive approach, data collected from previous research, and a rigor index is developed.

**Results and Conclusion:** The findings suggest that evidence-based interventions combining pedagogy, transparency, and cultural awareness can effectively reduce grade inflation while upholding the integrity of business education, strengthening stakeholder trust, and institutional reputation.

**Research Implications:** This case study provides valuable action plans for schools of business that want to move from the current inflated grade situation to the normal grade distribution, which will help in upholding the academic rigor, reputation of the institution, satisfaction of the students and diverse stakeholders, as well as promoting a better future for the graduates. Rigor Index (RI) has been developed in addition to the promotion of multidimensional assessments and culturally adapted policies.

**Originality/Value:** This case study is the first to examine grade inflation in the School of Business at GCC. It provides an original base of action for higher education institutions to progress and compete globally while remaining sustainable.

**Keywords:** Grade inflation, academic rigor, Rigor Index, business education, assessment strategies.

## INTRODUCTION

### Understanding Grade Inflation in Contemporary Higher Education

#### The Grade Inflation Phenomenon

Franz (2007) studied learners' influence on their professors in the context of grade inflation. The author employed both empirical and theoretical data to explore this influence and categorized the reasons into four main types: professors' leniency, the high cost of education, the significant benefits of pressuring professors, and the low cost of pressuring professors.

This case study indicates that pressure among learners on professors tends to increase when they place a higher value on their grades, leading to an escalation in the cost of studying. This presents a significant challenge to organizations. A significant concern is the impact of grade inflation on recruitment processes; when transcripts contain inflated grades, they can diminish candidates' chances of being hired. According to Claybaugh (2025), the increasing number of summa cum laude honors may be related to grade-inflation. Another concern is that



the number of first-year students achieving a GPA at Harvard College decreased from 286 in the previous year to 251 in 2025. This raises concerns regarding grading practices. Despite these concerns, the primary role of the institution should be to educate students rather than merely grade them, unless grading affects the college's mission. Upholding the integrity of colleges and addressing grading issues is a shared responsibility among individuals, groups, and institutions.

In previous discussions, many faculty members expressed concerns regarding discrepancies between the grades awarded and the quality of students' work. There have been a few major complaints from students regarding grading practices. However, concerns have been raised about inconsistencies in grading across different majors, concentrations, schools, and even among different sections of the same course, which warrants further investigation.

Grade inflation refers to professors' tendency to give higher grades than learners deserve, often due to leniency and lowered standards (Franz 2007). Another significant factor contributing to grade inflation is the lack of clarity and transparency in grading practices. For instance, if the re-evaluation of an exam yields significantly different grades, it indicates a serious problem. This variability suggests that when there is pressure on the exam structure, the potential for grading inconsistency increases, leading to inflated scores.

Additionally, students often flood instructors with emails requesting grade re-evaluations, which can contribute to grade inflation if instructors are lenient or if grading issues arise. One possible solution to mitigate this problem is for professors to decline checking emails related to grading and encourage learners to visit them during their office hours. This approach can help reduce the likelihood of grade changes resulting from external pressure and discourage grade inflation from becoming the norm among instructors.

There are several reasons for this grade inflation. One reason is that professors may seek high evaluations from learners, which can increase their chances of promotion in academic institutions, as noted by Franz (2007). For example, when a professor offers an easy A to learners, it may be driven by a desire to receive better feedback and higher evaluation scores from learners.

Claybaugh (2025) noted that faculty members often feel pressure from their peers because they want to avoid being viewed as being outliers. However, there are concerns that some faculty members may perceive a competitive atmosphere among themselves regarding their students' performance. One faculty member remarked, 'Grading at Harvard is a race to the bottom,' highlighting a classic game theory dilemma. This competition is particularly pronounced when the number of available students is limited.

Denning et al. (2025) discussed grade inflation in the United States. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding its effects on students and the underlying reasons for it. A key concern is whether the grading standards have deteriorated. This question is important for policymakers, researchers, educators, and administrators. Teachers' grading practices, biases, and expectations can significantly affect students' performance.

This debate also examines how grade inflation affects students' motivation, academic performance, and preparedness for the workforce. Students enrolled in grade-inflated courses may struggle to perform well in assessments, tests, quizzes, and other academic activities. If students exert less effort in their studies, they are more likely to learn less.

Research indicates that grade inflation differs from the actual value-added to education. This differentiation affects students' academic outcomes and prospects, including their graduation timelines, employment prospects, and overall earnings. Eased grading standards due to grade inflation can lead to a decrease in the educational outcomes of institutions.

Claybaugh (2025) emphasized that we owe our students a functional grading system. These grading systems should provide clear signals to help students understand their strengths and weaknesses in their learning. In addition, these signals assist employers in evaluating the candidates. Furthermore, beyond a reliable grading system, we owe students an effective education that is truly valuable to them.



## The Multi-Stakeholder Impact

Claybaugh (2025) emphasizes the importance of grading integrity among faculty members. To achieve this, the faculty should perform the following:

- The distribution of grades in their courses over time was reviewed.
- Evaluate their assignments and the relative weights assigned to each of them.
- Clearly articulate the grading standards.
- Coordinates and calibrates grading across different sections of the course.

Schools collaborate within each department to address grade inflation, which aims to lead to more effective solutions to this problem.

The consequences of grade inflation extend across the educational ecosystem, creating cascading negative effects for various stakeholders.

**Faculty Challenges:** Faculty members may experience considerable pressure to inflate grades, largely stemming from various sources, including the fear of negative job performance evaluations based on their students' outcomes, avoiding bad relations with the students, lack of experience, and lack of clearly stated objectives (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). The study suggests that universities should implement new student evaluation processes and policies. Specifically, this entails accurately identifying the underlying issues related to grading and its practices.

**Institutional and employer impact:** According to Butcher et al. (2014), inflation impacts educational institutions by leading to decreased enrollment numbers and a decline in the number of students pursuing certain majors. Additionally, inconsistencies in grading across departments can pose challenges for these institutions. Caruth and Caruth (2013) argue that grade inflation can occur without a corresponding increase in the knowledge provided by the institution, which may harm the university's credibility. Chowdhury (2018) also noted that as universities compete for students, grade inflation can influence this competition, affecting both enrollment and the institution's financial health. Ultimately, this situation can damage the institution's reputation and the public's perception. From the employers' perspective, distinguishing among candidates is difficult, potentially leading to increased social disparities and inequalities.

**Student Experience:** Chowdhury (2018) highlighted that grade inflation can negatively impact students' perceptions of their academic abilities, as they receive misleading feedback. This situation represents a clear decline in the work ethic. As a result, students may not understand their true academic performance or capabilities. They might believe that they are well-prepared for tasks despite lacking the necessary knowledge and skills.

Additionally, there are fairness concerns for high-achieving students when grade compression occurs, a phenomenon in which a large majority of grades cluster at the top of the scale (primarily A's and A-minuses), making it difficult to distinguish between high achievers and average students. To protect their GPAs, students may choose "easy-A" classes instead of challenging themselves academically. Consequently, students might prefer instructors known for giving inflated grades, leading them to delay taking certain courses in favor of those taught by "grade-inflating" instructors. This trend poses a significant challenge to maintaining high GPA standards in prestigious academic institutions.

## Defining Academic Rigor and the Rigor Index Development

### Conceptualizing Academic Rigor

Campbell, Dortch, and Burt (2018) studied the limitations of traditional definitions of academic rigor in higher education, emphasizing the need to focus on student success and equity. This research called for a reframing of



academic rigor. Traditionally, rigor has been associated with the difficulty level of the institution, the number of hours students spend studying, and the quantity of assignments assigned.

However, the real challenge lies in shifting from memorization to analysis and evaluation, where learners become creators of knowledge rather than mere absorbers. This shift transforms the concept of rigor into an academic challenge that supports student learning and growth.

Dennis (2025) noted that academic rigor is difficult to define, as researchers often rely on operational definitions. The consequences of its absence are evident, leading to issues such as grade inflation and misaligned evaluations. Students who lack a proper understanding of their capabilities and skills may suffer from ignorance, contributing to broader societal problems. Schorr (2025) highlighted that four-year college grade point averages (GPAs) have risen by more than 16% at public and non-profit universities, indicating grade inflation. When academic rigor decreases, grades may reflect attendance rather than mastery, exacerbating this critical issue.

Rigorous education prepares students to memorize concepts and apply them to complex and ambiguous business contexts that require judgment and creativity.

### The Rigor Index: A Novel Metric for Grade Inflation Prevention

The Rigor Index (RI) represents a significant methodological development in the fight against grade inflation. This numerical measure indicates the extent to which a course's total assessment weight is devoted to assessing higher-order cognitive skills, specifically analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation, rather than simple recall or comprehension.

**Theoretical Foundation:** The Rigor Index is derived from Bloom's taxonomy, which classifies learning objectives into six hierarchical levels (Bloom, 1956).

Level	Cognitive Process	Example Task Type	Classification	Rigor Contribution	Index
1	Remember	Define terms, list facts	Lower-Order	No	
2	Understand	Summarize, explain concepts.	Lower-Order	No	
3	Apply	Solve problems using a method.	Mid-Order	Partial (50%)	
4	Analyze	Break down a case, compare models.	Higher-Order	Yes	
5	Evaluate	Critique, justify decisions.	Higher-Order	Yes	
6	Create	Develop a plan, design a solution.	Higher-Order	Yes	



**The Rigor Index Formula is introduced as follows:**

$$RI = (\text{Total Weight of Higher-Order Assessments}) / (\text{Total Assessment Weight})$$

Where Total Assessment Weight = 1.0 (100%)

**Target Standard:**  $RI \geq 0.60$

This target means that at least 60% of the grading weight must come from assignments, projects, or exams that evaluate higher-order skills (levels 4–6 in Bloom's Taxonomy).

**Practical Application: Rigor Index Calculation**

**Example of Course Assessment Structure:**

Assessment Component	Weight	Bloom	Classification	Counts Toward Rigor?
Quiz (definitions)	10%	Remember	Low	NO
Midterm (problem solving)	20%	Apply	Mid	YES (partially)
Case Study Analysis	25%	Analyze	High	YES
Strategic Project	30%	Create	High	YES
Participation & Reflection	15%	Evaluate	High	YES

**Calculation:**

Higher-order assessments = 20% (apply) + 25% (analyze) + 30% (create) + 15% (evaluate) = 90%.

Rigor Index = 0.90 → Excellent (Well above the 0.60 minimum)



**Key Insight:** The Rigor Index ensures that courses remain intellectually challenging by emphasizing higher-order thinking and application, supporting accreditation requirements for evidence of critical assessment, helping prevent grade inflation caused by overly simple evaluations, and enabling departments to benchmark and maintain consistent academic standards across all courses.

### **Strategic Framework: Creative Approaches to Grade Inflation Reduction**

This framework aims to promote effective strategies for reducing significant grade inflation. It is organized into the following key areas:

- Fostering academic rigor through various approaches.
- Ensuring consistency and objectivity.
- Detecting grade inflation and monitoring the implementation of this framework.
- Highlighting best practices in course design and assessment, as well as managing appeals and cultural pressures.

First, by studying the assessments and the learning outcomes, Assessments will be improved through the creation of mixed formats to reduce overreliance on any single assessment type. This includes essays, presentations, projects, and comprehensive exams, each of which targets different cognitive skills and learning modalities. Assessment diversity prevents students from gaming the system and provides multiple opportunities to demonstrate their competencies.

These assessments aim to test the learning of students, based on the learning objectives of the courses that must map to Bloom's higher levels of analysis (Level 4), evaluation (Level 5), and creation (Level 6). By explicitly aligning learning outcomes with higher-order cognitive processes, faculty members can establish clear expectations that transcend content recall.

High-quality, specific, and actionable improvement guidance is the cornerstone of this framework. Rather than providing perfunctory comments, faculty members provide detailed feedback that identifies strengths, identifies specific areas for improvement, and offers concrete strategies for enhancement. This transforms assessment from a summative judgment into a formative learning opportunity.

Regular reviews of content and assessment alignment ensure that courses evolve to maintain their rigor. This systematic approach prevents the gradual erosion of standards and incorporates emerging best practices into business education pedagogy.

Next, the bias that can arise from grading multiple sections of the same course will be examined, along with strategies to reduce this bias. This includes the development of comprehensive grading rubric and a constructive feedback protocol.

For courses taught across multiple sections, the framework implemented shared learning outcomes, common weightings, and unified rubrics. This approach reduces intersectional variability and ensures equitable student experiences, regardless of instructor assignments.

The framework incorporates several techniques to enhance its objectivity.

- **Blind Grading:** Where feasible, removing identifying information reduces unconscious bias.
- **Rubric Anchors:** Detailed exemplars clarify performance expectations at each level.



- Double marking: For high-stakes projects, independent second evaluations ensure consistency and fairness during the assessment process.

The policy mandates the distribution of rubrics from week one for all tasks, enabling students to understand their expectations from the beginning of the semester. This transparency empowers students to self-assess and target their efforts effectively, while reducing ambiguity, which can lead to grade appeal.

The framework requires feedback that provides clear guidance for specific improvements rather than generic praise or criticism. This shift in the assessment culture from judgment to developmental support is evident.

Next, we focus on detecting and monitoring grade inflation. This will be achieved through an evidence-based detection approach, along with the integration of a rigor index and the inclusion and development of performance indicators and reporting processes.

This framework employs sophisticated analytical methods that combine course- and program-level perspectives. By pairing grade distribution patterns with rigor indicators using the Rigor Index, the system flags courses where high grades coexist with low rigor scores, which is a sign of potential grade inflation.

The RI threshold ( $\geq 0.60$ ) served as an objective standard, with at least 60% of the assessment weight dedicated to evaluating higher-order skills. This metric transforms subjective concerns into quantifiable, trackable data.

The system tracks multiple metrics.

- Percentage of courses meeting RI  $\geq 0.60$  threshold.
- High-grade rates by course level within agreed bands.
- Inter-section GPA variance (target:  $\leq 0.40$ ).
- Grade appeal rates with upheld ratios.

These indicators enable the early detection of problematic trends before they become entrenched.

The next step will focus on designing the course and developing best practices for assessment. This will include establishing clear requirements for assessment diversity, ensuring alignment with learning outcomes, incorporating higher-order task design, and creating transparent rubric standards. Additionally, it will involve outlining requirements for providing constructive feedback.

The framework mandates the creation of mixed formats to reduce overreliance on single assessment types and ensure a comprehensive evaluation of student capabilities across different dimensions of business competency.

The systematic alignment of learning outcomes, assessments, and rubrics ensures coherence in the course design. This constructive alignment approach guarantees that assessments genuinely measure intended learning outcomes.

The framework requires designing challenging yet attainable learning activities that push students beyond memorization into analysis, synthesis, and creative problem solving, which are the hallmarks of business leadership competency.

Detailed rubrics distributed from week one provide clarity on performance expectations, reduce ambiguity, and empower students to self-regulate their learning efforts in the course.

The framework mandates feedback that provides clear guidance for specific improvements, transforming the assessment from a terminal grade into an ongoing developmental dialogue that is more effective.



Lastly, it is important to manage appeals and cultural pressures by formalizing claiming procedures and processes. This involves establishing official institutional protocols that require the use of rubrics, providing feedback, and maintaining records, all of which should be verified by a committee to ensure adherence to established criteria. This formalization safeguards both the academic judgment of faculty and the students' rights to fair treatment.

Recognizing the region's unique cultural dimensions, the framework incorporates the following specific strategies:

**Week One Grading Philosophy Communication:** Faculty explicitly communicates the grading philosophy from the course outset, anchoring grades to learning outcome mastery rather than effort alone. Proactive transparency manages expectations before conflicts arise.

**Learning Outcome Mastery Focus:** This framework emphasizes that grades reflect demonstrated competency against defined standards, not relative performance or subjective judgment. This objectivity reduces the space for cultural pressures to influence grading decisions.

**Comprehensive Documentation:** All feedback must be documented systematically, creating an evidence trail that supports grading decisions and protects faculty from unwarranted pressure.

**Departmental Policy Escalation:** Persistent pressure from students or families is directed to department chairs per established policy, removing individual faculty members from untenable positions while maintaining academic standards.

### **Implementation Insights and Lessons Learned**

This phase of implementation is a critical step in addressing grade inflation at the School of Business. It is essential to continue learning from these experiences to enhance the effectiveness of our strategies further. Therefore, the following activities and steps are vital for improving the effectiveness of these strategies:

- Administrative support is vital for overcoming resistance and fostering momentum in rigorous assessment.
- Training on Rigor Index and bias mitigation ensures consistency.
- Balancing local culture with international standards is key.
- Clear communication with all stakeholders builds support.
- Regular performance analysis enables timely interventions.

The implementation of these strategies will encounter several challenges at different levels, including resistance to change, resource intensity, the need for student adjustments, and managing cultural pressures. To ensure the effectiveness and efficiency of these efforts and to achieve the goal of reducing inflated grades, it is essential to proactively implement proper mitigation strategies.

Faculty may resist standardization in grading due to established discretionary practices, but it's important to show how the framework balances academic freedom with accountability.

Rigorous assessment demands significant faculty time for design and feedback, which should be acknowledged in evaluations and resource allocation.

Students may initially be resistant to strict standards but can come to appreciate their value with quality feedback and support.



In environments influenced by family and social pressures, formal processes are crucial to maintain fairness in grading.

## CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### Key Findings and Contributions

This case study demonstrates that creative and systematic approaches to grade inflation can succeed in culturally diverse contexts, based on the following principles:

The Rigor Index provides an objective and transparent metric for assessing and maintaining academic rigor. Subjective concerns were converted into actionable data by quantifying the proportion of higher-order assessments.

Effective grade inflation mitigation requires integrated strategies spanning course design, faculty development, policy enforcement, and cultural adaptation. Piecemeal interventions are insufficient to achieve this goal.

Universal principles of academic rigor can be implemented through culturally appropriate mechanisms that respect local contexts while maintaining international standards.

Success requires the active involvement of all stakeholders: administrators, faculty, students, employers, and accreditors, each of whom must understand their role in maintaining academic integrity.

### Practical Implications for Business Schools

Business schools globally can draw several actionable lessons from this case study, including:

**Adopting Quantifiable Rigor Metrics:** Implementing Rigor Index or similar measures enables objective monitoring and inter-course comparison of academic standards.

**Invest in Faculty Development:** Sustainable change requires building faculty capacity for rigorous assessment design, rubric development, and constructive feedback.

**Formalizing Appeals Processes:** Protecting faculty from undue pressure while ensuring student fairness requires institutionalized procedures that depersonalize grade disputes.

**Aligning Incentives:** Personnel evaluation systems must reward rigorous teaching rather than incentivizing grade inflation through an excessive emphasis on student satisfaction scores.

**Embrace Transparency:** Proactive communication of grading philosophies, standards, and rationales builds understanding and manages expectations across stakeholder groups.

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

This case study presents several limitations that suggest future research directions.

Long-term tracking of graduate outcomes, such as employment success, graduate school admission, and employer satisfaction, could validate whether maintaining rigor enhances students' career prospects.

Controlled studies comparing institutions with and without Rigor Index frameworks could isolate the specific impact of this metric versus other interventions.

Although this case demonstrates cultural adaptation possibilities, research across diverse cultural contexts (East Asia, Latin America, and Europe) would strengthen the understanding of universal versus context-specific success factors.



Direct assessment of whether maintained rigor correlates with deeper learning, critical thinking ability, and professional competency development remains an important empirical question.

Qualitative research exploring faculty experiences in implementing the framework could reveal implementation challenges and facilitators that are not captured in quantitative metrics.

## Final Reflections

Grade inflation represents a collective action problem: individual faculty members face pressure to inflate grades while knowing that systemic inflation harms all grades. The School of Business demonstrates that collaboration among educators across departments, colleges, and universities establishes and maintains standards and is achievable when supported by the following conditions.

- Clear and objective metrics that remove ambiguity.
- Comprehensive frameworks that address multiple pressure points are required.
- Cultural sensitivity that respects local contexts while maintaining standards.
- Leadership commitment protects faculty who implement rigorous standards.
- Transparency mechanisms that build stakeholder understanding and support are crucial.

As higher education faces increasing scrutiny regarding quality assurance, grade inflation mitigation must evolve from a periodic concern to a systematic practice. The creative strategies presented in this case study, particularly Rigor Index development, offer practical tools for institutions committed to maintaining academic integrity while supporting genuine student success.

The forward path requires courage: the courage to demand rigor even when pressured toward leniency, the courage to experiment with innovative metrics and practices, and the courage to prioritize long-term educational integrity over short-term competitive advantage. Business schools that embrace this challenge will not only combat grade inflation but also produce graduates who are better prepared for the complex, ambiguous, and ethically fraught business environments they will navigate throughout their careers.

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## APPENDIX: RIGOR INDEX QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

**Purpose:** To ensure that at least 60% of course assessment weights evaluate higher-order cognitive skills.

**Formula:**  $RI = (\text{Total Weight of Higher-Order Assessments}) / (\text{Total Assessment Weight})$ ,

**Target:**  $RI \geq 0.60$

### Bloom's Taxonomy Quick Classification (Bloom, 1956):

- Lower-Order (Don't Count): Remember, Understand
- Mid-Order (Count Partially): Apply (50% weight)
- Higher-Order (Count Fully): Analyze, Evaluate, Create

### Sample Assessment Mapping:

Assessment Type	Typical Bloom's Level	Counts Toward RI?
Multiple-choice quiz (recall)	Remember	No
Essay exam (explain concepts)	Understand	No
Problem set (apply formulas)	Apply	Partial (50%)
Case analysis paper	Analyze	Yes (100%)
Business plan project	Create	Yes (100%)
Peer evaluation critique	Evaluate	Yes (100%)

### Action Steps for Faculty

- List all assessments with weights



- Classify each by Bloom's level
- Calculate total higher-order weight
- Divide by total assessment weight (1.0)
- If  $RI < 0.60$ , redesign assessments to emphasize higher-order skills

**Example Redesign:**

Before: 40% quizzes (remember) + 60% midterm/final (understand) =  $RI = 0.0$

After: 20% quizzes + 30% case analyses (analyze) + 30% strategic projects (create) + 20% exams (apply/analyze) =  $RI = 0.75$ .