***Making the Grade* Revisited**

Making the Grade was not widely read when it was originally published in 1968. It had hardly appeared when the anti-war movement hit American college campuses. The resulting politicization of academia provided the occasion for reforms of campus and academic customs which, having long since outgrown whatever justification they might once have had, were now seen by many students and faculty as oppressive and anti-educational. Commentators on higher education were at that time totally engrossed in explaining and arguing the merits of this politicization and change, and our book, focused as it was on how students emphasized grades as a standard of judgment and conduct in their daily life, had nothing to say about that. Indeed, most authorities on higher education would probably have said that college life had changed so much that the grade point average perspective we described was gone forever, like the raccoon coat and hip flask of the stereotypical Jazz Age college student.

But, as Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz (1987) says in her history of college student cultures from the late 18th century to the 1980s, the great protests of 1968-1970 were no sooner over than grades and grade point averages returned to dominate student life even more thoroughly than before. Though historically contingent, taking somewhat different forms from time to time, the emphasis on grades has persisted. Which suggests that the social organization that gives rise to it has not changed as much as some might have thought.

We accounted for what we called the grade point average perspective in a simple and straightforwardly sociological way, arrived at through a comparison of several arenas of student life. Students negotiated the conditions of campus *political and organizational life* with authorities from positions of some power—positions in the student government, the large number of independent student organizations, and on the student newspaper—and could preserve substantial areas of autonomous action for themselves. The same authorities left them to run such aspects of their *private lives* as frienships and dating (within broad limits, broader today than they were then) as they wanted. No one had to date or have friends and, if they did, they chose, for the most part, who they would associate with.

But when it came to academic matters, students stood in a relation of *subjection* to college faculties and administrators. Those authorities decided what courses would be taught, what courses students had to take and what work they had to do in them, how their work in those courses would be assessed, and what the consequences of those assessments would be. Students had no voice in any of that. In such conditions, they acted like other subject populations, making use of what have been called the “weapons of the weak” (Scott, 1985). Where they were free to communicate with one another, as they were at the University of Kansas, they identified common problems, defined the possibilities of action, and created shared vocabularies of motives and common practices. In short, they created an oppositional culture which protected them from what they saw as the arbitrary actions of college officials and faculty.

We shouldn’t think that this is a necessary feature of all educational situations. Music students, for instance, take lessons when and from whom they want, and participate in setting the goals of the instruction; people who want to learn another language can go to a commercial language school where there are no tests other than the one they will take when they get to the country where that language is spoken and see if they can manage in it; apprentices learn their trades without being subjected to routinized assignments or many

formal tests (Becker, 1986).

Nor is the phenomenon of an oppositional culture peculiar to college students. William Graham Sumner stated the basic idea—that people with common problems who can communicate with each other about them will create shared understandings and practices, a culture—in his *Fo;lkways* (1906). We specified it, for the case of medical students (Becker, et.al., 1961), by arguing that students created specific cultural practices as a way of dealing with the problems created for them by their subjection to the faculty. But similar conclusions had and have been reached about other subject populations in, for instance, the study of prison cultures (Sykes, 1958; Irwin and Cressey, 1962; and Ward and Kassebaum, 1965), and colonial peoples (Scott, 1985).

Given that formulation—that the problems created by subjection lead to the development of culture, of ideas and practices which serve to cushion or oppose the effects of subjection —research can uncover the way variations in the conditions of subjection lead to variations in the kind of culture developed. If students find themselves confronted by different kinds of problems, their cultures should vary accordingly.

Some readers may feel that, because the conditions of student life have changed so drastically since we did our research. our analysis will be dated asnd irrelevant to contemporary situations of higher education. They may agree with the college administrators—deans and presidents—who, throughout the 1980s, worried about what has been and is still being called “grade inflation,” the tendency of faculties to give increasingly higher grades to students: higher average grades for entire classes, higher percentages of A’s, fewer failing grades, greater use of Pass/Fail options, and so on. Administratorshave interpreted this as a sign of lowered standards, and have often thought it resulted from cowardly faculty trying to avoid the anger of the students who had shown themselves capable of striking back at people who displeased them. It might also seem to relegate the findings of our research to history, interesting phenomena that once occupied students in a way they no longer do.

But that is not the case. Alternative and complementary interpretations, in part supported by the findings of our research, would be that professors were, by de-emphasizing grades, trying to put the education back into what had become a highly ritualized exchange of canned knowledge for the grades which constituted the currency of campus life; that grades had become an administrative device which actively diverted students from really learning anything (this point is argued at length in Becker, 1986); that Veblen (1918) was right when he said that the chief function of grading systems was not educational, but rather to help the Tycoons of Erudition who ran the universities provide the kind of quantified production controls the Captains of Solvency who sat on their governing boards were accustomed to.

The standard interpretation of grade inflation suggests that faculty have unwisely done away with the whip that drove students to academic effort: “If you give them a high grade no matter what they do, they won’t work.” This seems not to have happened. Instead, the worries about whether I’m going to get an A, B, or C, a 2, 3 or 4, have turned into worries about whether I’m going to get a 3.5 or 3.6. The range has been compressed, but the emphasis persists. Here’s an illustrative story: a new professor, wanting not to bother with grades, but also not wishing to attract administrative attention by giving everyone 4 (in letter terms, A), asked an old hand what he could get away with. “3.5.,” the old hand said. But when the newcomer gave all the seminar students 3.5, thinking to have solved the problem, two students from outside the department appeared, quite distraught, because in *their* department 3.5 was practically failing; only 3.7 would do.

The phenomenon of grade inflation has been grossly exaggerated. A few faculties —Stanford’s became the object of a lot of journalistic attention in the early 1990s for this reason—went quite far down the road to giving most students As. But, although the average grade has gone up all around the country, enough students still (for all sorts of personal and institutional reasons) get grades lower than they would prefer that the effort to keep one’s grades in line still plays an important role in student calculations of where and how to allocate their effort. Enough students worry that they will flunk, that their grades will be too low for the professional school they want to be admitted to, that prospective employers will

ignore them in favor of graduates with better grade point averages—enough students have those worries that the phenomena we described are still experienced by the ordinary college teacher.

Helen Horowitz's research on student cultures from the 18th century to the present uncovered a variety of student cultures that our ahistorical approach in the Kansas study ignored. Her fascinating story of how colleges got to where they are today adds dimension to our work by indicating the changes in what students wanted, in what faculty and administrators insisted on controlling, and the resulting variations in the content of student cultures.

Horowitz (1987, p. 118) describes students as "a subject people," who have "entered a society in which they did not make or enforce the rules—at least not the important ones. In this way they had much in common with workers, slaves, and prisoners." She then distinguishes three basic student orientations toward higher education, which have persistedin various forms and mixtures for almost two hundred years. Some students "sought a collective form of protest and escape. College life [by which she means the culture of high living, hard drinking, and denigration of scholarly effort usually attributed to fraternities and sororities] . . . provided a channeled means of expressing hostility to college authority and became a partially accepted form of adolescent rebellion."

Many more students, the outsiders to college life, "submitted fully," accepting college as it presented itself, as the place where the faculty had the knowledge and the administration the legitmate authority, and worked hard, remaining outside the more well-known manifestations of college life. Different groups played this role in different historical periods: in the 19th century, poor farm boys for whom a college degree was the way to become a preacher; in the early part of the 20th century, poor big city Jews for whom education and professional expertise were the way out of poverty and the means to overcome discrimination; after World War II, veterans who might never have been able to attend college without the G.I. Bill and who were unwilling to accept what they saw as the adolescent foolishness of college life.

A third group "rebelled openly." Campus radicals, aesthetes, and political activists held the college faculty up to its own standards and found their teachers wanting, but usually found a few inspiring exceptions to their scorn. Campus rebels, unlike the other two groups, made contact with the world beyond the campus, with arenas of grown-up artistic, scholarly, and political activity.

Horowitz argues (1987, pp. 174-92 and 245-262) that outsiders ultimately took over college campuses, as the world of real adult work increasingly made professional and technical expertise, and the college grades that demonstrated that you posssessed them, the necessary condition for success. Even fraternities and sororities, former strongholds of the resistance to the academic demands of faculty, adopted the grade point average perspective we described.

I would qualify Horowitz's argument in only one respect. She emphasizes the failure of students to respond to the life of the mind, as that is presented to them in classes and contact with faculty. In so doing, she neglects a crucial part of our argument: that students act as they do because faculty do not ordinarily reward students who act as though the life of the mind were central. The tests, papers, and other assignments faculty hand out typically punish students who pursue their own lines of interest, who do respond to intellectual interests to the detriment of fulfilling the mind-numbing makework faculty impose in an effort to deal with the conditions of mass education. To understand why students are up against what they are up against would require another study, a hard look at the condtions of faculty life and the people and organizations to whom they are subject.

We might have had more to say about such matters as administrative concern with grade inflation, and the conditions which lead faculty to push students toward anti-intellectualism, but our study focused entirely on student life, taking account of the faculty and administration only as they impinged on students, never looking at or trying to understand why university staff acted as they did. We did not study the faculty or

administrators, nor did other students of higher education working in the 1960s study those groups in depth. We should have.

I will focus here not on faculty but on the higher administration of universities, the men and women who came to run the increasingly large and complex businesses universities had become, and to deal with their multiple constitutencies: state legislatures, large donors, the business community, the political apparatus, the ever growing body of administrative law which governed the universities' relations to the federal government from which so large a part of the school budget now came. As is often the case, it has taken some untoward events to point us sociologists to things we ought to be studying.

There was never the slightest hint of administrative scandal while we were at KU; none of the events sociologists thrive on pointed us toward this phenomenon which now seems so worthy of attention. But that was then, and now a number of troublesome incidents —specifically, some well-publicized scandals in which highly placed college and university administrators, often presidents or chancellors, have treated the organization's money or property as their own—have alerted us to something worth studying. A few offenders have been prosecuted for misappropriation of funds, convicted, and served prison sentences. Others have simply resigned in disgrace, leaving the institution to deal with such consequences of their acts as, for instance, reductions in overhead rates on federal contracts which have seriously affected institutional finances.

It is a sociological truism that when a lot of people in similar organizational positions commit similarly deviant acts the explanation is not to be found in their psychological quirks or imperfect socialization to the job, or any other feature of those people as individual actors. The explanation of police corruption thus is not that we can expect a few bad apples in every barrel, but rather that something about the barrel is making the apples rotten. The college administrators who have been dipping into the till are not dishonest men and women, whom more careful screening would have kept out of such positions of trust. Rather, the sociological argument runs, the world they live and work in has created a situation in which it seems normal and reasonable to them to treat what is the institution's as their own.

Since we did not do the research on administrators we ought to have done, and no one else has either, what follows is no more than speculation, informed by years of participation in academic institutions, by a careful rereading of Thorstein Veblen's *The Higher Learning in America* (1918), and by consideration of major changes in the organization of academia. I am just guessing at what careful study might disclose, and my guesses may well be wild.

Theft is not the issue. It is a pointer to substantial changes in the day-to-day life of colleges and universities, and especially of the larger institutions and those known as "research universities." Such institutions are also the ones that get the most research funding from the federal government. The money brings with it massive requirements for reporting and accountability, periodic visits from federal auditors, and the necessity to institute organizational controls over what people do and how money is spent. There is, as conservatives like to complain, a lot of paperwork when you are on the take from the feds. And someone has to do that work, supervise its doing, and make policies for its doing.

Universities have thus become the homes of large bureaucracies, seen most easily in the growth of the buildings that house them. When I went to Northwestern University in 1965, the university bureaucracy—the president, the vice-president for academic affairs, some of the deans, the financial people, all that—were housed in a small one-story building. When I left in 1991, twenty-six years later, the administration (and not all of it, because the largest subgroup, which ran the College of Arts and Sciences, was in two large former residences elsewhere on the campus) occupied a grand multi-story building. In every university I know about, deans who made do with a staff of two or three now command well-appointed offices filled with assistant deans, associate deans, and a host of specialists.

As a result, administrators have become divorced from the daily life of the institution. Deans speak only to department chairs (unless they delegate that job to sub-deans, and then they speak only to the sub-deans). Provosts speak only to deans. Presidents speak only

to the provost, legislators, and prospective donors. None of them have any direct contact with students. None of them have any direct contact with faculty or with the departments to which they nominally belong. Their knowledge of the institution comes to them on paper: in reports compiled from data bases, in reports of committees, in talk that goes on at their meetings with other administrators. They thus cannot know first hand what students or faculty—the real heart of any academic institution—are doing or what the circumstances of their lives are.

It is in that setting, where administrators talk only to one another, that the cases of flagrant abuse I referred to earlier arise. Men and women who have lost touch with the lower reaches of the organization come to think of it as "theirs." They think of their own private affairs as so intertwined with the university that any expense they incur—for a family wedding, say, for the decoration of their home, for the upkeep on a boat—is seen as "helping the university" and therefore chargeable to the university. Their special reserved parking places seem necessary to them, because their time, so they think, is more valuable than that of the faculty, who can drive around until they find a place. They act and feel, in short, like the CEOs of large corporations, and often see themselves as close kin of such managerial royalty.

The divorce from the lives of the main participants in the university and the feeling of owning the university's resources are illustrated in two incidents which occurred in 1994. In the first, Jack Peltason, president of the nine-campus University of California system, suffered the embarassment of having the taped and transcribed record of his supposedly secret monthly meeting with the chancellors of those campuses splashed all over the front pages of the San Francisco Examiner (Williams, 1994) and other California papers. He spoke to his chancellors of the necessity of punishing Democratic state senators who had dared to reject his hand-picked nominee for the University's Board of Regents, saying "I don't want to see them get away with it without some kind of pain or penalty," and committed many other indiscretions. Perhaps the most telling remark could well pass by unnoticed. In a discussion of how to get what he regarded as sufficient severance pay for retiring administrators (very lucrative settlements in recent cases, including the million dollars awarded outgoing president David Gardner, had provoked considerable public complaint), and speaking of Barbara Uehling, the retiring chancellor of the Santa Barbara campus, Peltason said, "*I* want to do something for Barbara." That is, he felt that it was his personal prerogative to give her a present for her several years of service, most of it under fire from angry faculty. And he did do something for her: a year off at full pay, and a well-paid position on the UCLA faculty, all this at a time when the university was in one of the worst financial situations in its history. Only a man out of touch with faculty and students could have made that move or talked that way; it took no daring, because Peltason did not live among the people to whom what he "did for Barbara" would be offensive.

In the second incident, William Gerberding, retiring as president of the University of Washington after eighteen years in office, undertook in the year before his departure to do away with a prized faculty perk: the so-called "research" quarter. The university operates on the quarter system, and many faculty teach four courses a year. It is, comparatively, a very light teaching load, and reflects the university's commitment to research and publication as major institutional goals and major parts of a faculty member's obligation. To further the productiveness of that light load, many faculty members undertook to teach their four courses in two quarters, leaving the third quarter free for their scholarly work. This perk was so well institutionalized that many faculty found it in the boilerplate of the letters offering them their positions. In the spring of 1994 Gerberding, quite suddenly and without, so far as is known, consulting any of his subordinates, announced that, effective immediately, this practice would cease and that any faculty member being paid by state money must do some classroom teaching every quarter.

What is of interest here is that Gerberding, in his explanation of why he decided to do this after eighteen years in office, said that the practice had *only just come to his attention*. Many people unacquainted with universities might think it inconceivable that a practice so well-known and so customary could have escaped the attention of the university's president. Had he never heard faculty members explain that they would be away from the university

for a few weeks to gather data or visit a library elsewhere?

To old hands, however, it was no surprise that the president did not know of this venerable practice. How could he possibly have found out? His official schedule never brought him into close enough contact with faculty to discover such things. The rumored explanation of how he did find out is that he sent for something from a six member department and, when no one answered, discovered that no one in the department was teaching that quarter. But for that accident, he might have remained unaware for the remaining year of his term.

What these two incidents indicate is what a serious sociological study might be able to document: that the administrators of large universities live in a world in which faculty and students appear only as numbers on pieces of paper, and that they regard the small world of meetings and so on which engrosses them as all that really matters in the university. That is, admittedly, a large leap from scant data. But I am reminded of some remarks the president of a major university made to a student reporter, which I chanced to run across in a student newspaper (but neglected to keep, not realizing I would want a full citation some day). This president explained, patiently, to the naive student, that many people thought you needed students to have a university, and did not understand that students were quite expendable. Similarly, he went on, faculty are not crucial to the operation of a modern university. The one group, he said, which no modern university could do without is—who else?—the administration.

As I've now said repeatedly, none of this proves anything. But it sets an agenda for research. No doubt this research will not be easy to do, since wily university administrators will not easily give sociological researchers access to their daily work lives and deliberations. Still, a lot gets out, as a result of whistle blowing by disgruntled employees of various organizations, and through the enterprise of journalists who do not hobble themselves with ethical considerations when it comes to exposing skullduggery in public institutions. And we could use that material as students of crime have used the hearings of congressional committees and the contents of wire taps, as data of high quality for the investigation of what are sometimes called complex organizations.

Attentive readers will notice repeated references in *Making the Grade* to a second volume which would analyze in detail the complexities of student organizational life. That volume never got written, for a variety of personal and professional reasons. The research team broke up, following individual career paths that did not leave time for preparation of that volume. And then, as people say (without much justification), the data got "old." Which only means, I think, that our first-hand acquaintance with all the circumstances of the research receded, it seemed less interesting, and we were individually and collectively unwilling to reacquaint ourselve with the mass of information we had collected.

In any event, many of the major ideas that book would have discussed are in fact discussed in this volume. What is missing is the detailed analysis of the specifics of how people got elected to office, how organizations functioned in the overall political life of the student body and the university, and most importantly the detailed presentation of proof for all these assertions. Many of the assertions are in this book, but now must be taken on faith.

Some of the findings of that part of the study would be of considerable interest today. As a sample, consider what we learned about the differences between men's and women's organizational careers. We interviewed about twenty each of men and women who were campus leaders of various kinds: presidents and other major officers of campus organizations, editors, and so on. We soon saw a striking difference in the kinds of careers men and women had. When Blanche Geer asked men how they had achieved their present positions—"How did you get to be President of the Inter-Fraternity Council?", for example—they told her long stories of planning far in advance, of going after smaller positions conceived of as stepping stones to the more important ones, of striking deals with politically powerful members of other organizations, and so on. When I asked women similar questions—"How did you get to be President of Pan-Hellenic?"—the answers were very different: "I don't know how I got to be President of Pan-Hell. The Dean of Women called me up and said 'Congratulations! You're the new president.' I guess it was my sorority's turn or something." We probably would not find the same differences today.

In any event, the material was never fully analyzed, the book was not written, and the data were finally deposited in the Special Collections of the Northwestern University Library, to be available to scholars after a sufficient interval has passed.

Finally, I'd like to add a personal note. This republication of *Making the Grade* can perhaps serve as a small memorial to Blanche Geer and Everett Hughe,s neither of whom lived to see it happen. Our work on this research was a wonderful experience for all of us, a model of what collaborative research at its best can be.

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