



MEMORANDUM

January 9, 2003

TO: Mr. Dalton B. Floyd, Jr., Chair and Members
Commission on Higher Education

FROM: Ms. Susan Cole, Chair and Members
Access & Equity and Student Services Committee

Grade Inflation Study

Given the expansion of the Palmetto Fellows Scholarship, Legislative Incentives for Future Excellence (LIFE) Scholarship program and the implementation of the South Carolina HOPE Scholarship program during the past year, the possibility of grade inflation at the undergraduate level has been a topic of discussion in South Carolina. Title 59, Section 59-149-10 states that the Commission “must ensure accountability for the [LIFE] Scholarship by monitoring the distribution of grades at the institutions which receive these scholarship funds.” A statewide study may be initiated by the Commission in order to review the distribution of grades earned by state scholarship recipients at the participating institutions to determine whether grade inflation is indeed a systemic issue.

Grade inflation occurs when a student receives a grade for course work unwarranted by the level of work or achievement demonstrated (Stone, 1995). Studies to determine whether evidence of grade inflation is present at the independent and public colleges and universities in the state may incorporate a number of variables including: 1) preparedness for college as measured by the grades and grade point averages of high school seniors; 2) historical review of available grade point averages earned by first year college students prior to the expansion of state and lottery funded scholarships (1993 -1998); and 3) review of available grade point averages earned by first year college students after implementation of state scholarships (1999-2002). Additionally, several variables may include a review of grading, forgiveness and withdrawal policies adopted by the higher education institutions in the state.

Suggested strategies and approaches to conduct a grade inflation study should include the following:

1. Review USDE 1995 Grade Inflation Study by Clifford Adleman.
2. Review NCES 2002 Study of 1999-2002 Grades.
3. Review of existing field of literature addressing grade inflation.

4. Review variables proposed in the Georgia Grade Inflation Study as well as studies conducted by other states.
5. Review changes in grading policies, forgiveness, duplicate course and withdrawal policies adopted by the SC public and independent colleges.
6. Review studies of grade inflation conducted by Representatives of the General Assembly.
7. Survey institutional representatives regarding reporting of first year collegiate grades to high schools in the state.
8. Conduct a benchmark study (1993-98) of cumulative grade point averages by the end of the high school senior year.
9. Conduct a benchmark study (1999 – 2002) of cumulative grade point averages by the end of the high school senior year.
10. Conduct a benchmark study (1993-98) of collegiate grade point averages earned by the end of the freshman year (first-time freshmen).
11. Conduct a benchmark study (1999-2002) of collegiate grade point averages earned public colleges by the end of the freshman year (first-time freshmen).
12. Create a Student Transcript Data Base at the Commission on Higher Education (the Commission presently does not collect course by course grade information). Student transcript data would enable the Commission to track grades over time to determine if there was a significant increase in grades and a change in the distribution of A, B, C, D, and F grades (grade distribution patterns).

The strength of an in depth study which examines grade inflation lies in its breadth, given the possible statewide implications regarding the variations of academic rigor and standards. This study must examine several factors that provide empirical evidence of grade inflation. Careful and complete data analyses are necessary to avoid simplistic and possibly inaccurate conclusions about grade inflation based simply on the number of “A” and “B” grades awarded by South Carolina colleges and universities. Given the importance of conducting an accurate and comprehensive examination of grade inflation in South Carolina, funding to conduct a statewide grade inflation study should be given priority.

Recommendation:

The Access & Equity and Student Services Committee recommends that the Commission endorse the strategies set forth in this proposal. The Committee further recommends that the Commission seeks funding to conduct a comprehensive statewide study on grade inflation.