

In Garrison Keillor’s radio narratives, Lake Wobegone is the fictitious place where “all children are above average.” In education, we now speak of the “Lake Wobegone Effect”—a combination of grade inflation and less content—and it's driving down the value of high school diplomas and college degrees.

Both the U.S. and Kansas departments of education recently announced that high school graduation rates increased to over 80 percent. True...but I would take that with a grain of salt.

K-12 teachers regularly feed me information about their own classroom situations. And the news from some is alarming.

Here is how one, solid, science teacher described her situation. She assigns homework and expects students to come prepared for classwork and labs. But one student never did his homework. Daily grades are now online and when school administrators saw that this student was failing, that student was pulled from class the last week of the semester and put on a programmed learning computer. That is where the student reads a paragraph and then selects answers on the computer—over and over again—until he gets the question right. Thus, an F-student who was unlikely to graduate high school became a “good” student ready for college!

How widespread is this? It's hard to know for certain. But similar "end runs" have been happening in a variety of ways across Kansas. Not at all schools. Not even at a majority of schools. But the practice of overriding or coercing teachers’ grades appears to be growing.

Now, switch to our higher education institutions. Unfortunately, public universities now operate under the same pressures faced by teachers in public schools:

Increase enrollment. Keep them in school. Graduate everyone.

At college campuses, more faculty feel the pressure to reduce the number of failing students while at the same time being told “don’t let standards drop.” For our growing number of adjunct faculty, our part time hires, there's no need to mention this. They already know that if they give too many Ds and Fs...they won't be hired back.

But many universities are now reducing the credit hours required to graduate.

Downsizing the general education programs.

Reducing requirements to take those hard math and science course.

Advising students to take the easiest courses first.

In 1969, **one-fourth** of college students had grades of C or less. It's now just 7%.

In 1969, **five percent** had grades of A- or higher. Today, it is **41 percent**.

And the directive to increase retention and graduation rates comes straight from our President, our governors, and the higher education governing bodies in state capitols across America.

Today, a university president’s job depends on growth at all costs.

ACT scores show that less than one-third of high school seniors are ready for college. And yet, our colleges are being asked to turn out **twice** this many graduates. That kind of math doesn't add up.

Public school teachers and college faculty have a responsibility to our good students to resist the pressure to water down the curriculum and drop our grading scales. Good students want a degree that means something. The student who walks across the stage at graduation to receive that diploma or degree they truly earned, should not be followed by students who did not and cannot do the work.

In Garrison Keillor's radio narratives, Lake Wobegone is the fictitious place where "all children are above average." In educators, we now speak of the "Lake Wobegone Effect"—a combination of grade inflation and less content deflation—and it's driving down the value of high school diplomas and college degrees.

And this academic erosion is picking up speed.

K-12 teachers regularly feed me information about their own classroom situations. Many are former students -- and they rely on my discretion to not divulge their identities. Some are still allowed to practice as professionals, but the news from other teachers is alarming.

Here's how one, solid, science teacher described her situation. She assigns homework and expects students to come prepared for classwork and labs. But one student never did his homework.

When it became evident to administrators that this student was failing, the student was pulled from class the last week of the semester and put on a programmed learning computer. The student progressed through sets of questions on the computer -- over and over again -- until he finally received a high enough score to pass. Thus, an F-student who might not graduate high school became a "good" student ready for college!

How widespread is this? It's hard to know for certain.

But similar "end runs" have been happening in a variety of ways across Kansas. Not at all schools. Not even at a majority of schools. But some administrators are now overriding teachers' grades. And these practices appear to be growing, as administrators succumb to the pressure -- the pressure to make sure that all students do well, that all kids get a blue ribbon and - quote "succeed." Putting all students, regardless of merit, into a big box labeled SUCCESS is not only disingenuous... it's a dis-service to students and... to society.

Now, switch to our higher education institutions. Surely, no one would expect administrators to lean on faculty to inflate grades or deflate requirements, right? Unfortunately, public universities across the country now operate under the same kind of pressure faced by their colleagues in K-12. It's the pressure of increase enrollment, better retention and higher rates of graduation.

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Similar to the K-12 system, every college student is now expected to succeed.

And if this doesn't happen... it's now the professor's fault. Yes, the joy and logic behind No Child Left Behind has finally arrived at college.

And the directive to increase retention and graduation rates comes straight from the higher education governing bodies in state capitols across America. A university president's job depends on growth at all costs.

<<< THIS NEXT PART MIGHT BE TOO MUCH INSIDE BASEBALL... UNLESS YOU DEFINE "D-W-F" GRADES FOR US: "At more than one campus, chairpersons are directed to target courses with higher rates of D-W-F grades—and "do something about it." To prevent any

appearance of violating academic freedom, the caveat is added: “but don’t let standards drop.” For the growing number of adjunct faculty hires, there is no need to mention this. They know that if they give many D/F grades, they will not be hired back. >>>

Increasingly, at college campuses, faculty members are being pressured to reduce the number of failing students while at the same time being told to not let standards drop. For the growing number of adjunct faculty hires, there's no need to mention this. They already know that if they give too many Ds and Fs... they won't be hired back.

<< ADVISE TO STRIKE THIS SECTION FROM RADIO VERSION FOR TIME, AS WE ARE NOW TRYING TO ADDRESS TOO MANY PROBLEMS IN ONE PIECE: "Adding more tutoring is perhaps a legitimate way to try to improve retention. But universities are now reducing the credit hours required to graduate. Some advise students into easy courses first, holding off rigorous courses until later—a tactic that can cost students another year of school. Others reduce their general education by reducing the more rigorous subjects (usually math and sciences)." >>

Why do administrators feel empowered to coerce teachers into grade inflation? Why do some feel that having a school where everyone graduates is now a legitimate goal?

Look no further than at our political scene. Our president and even our governor call for a dramatic increase in college graduation rates. This has legitimized the effort to place student “success” ahead of actual academic performance.

ACT and SAT scores show that less than one-third of high school seniors are ready for college. And yet, our colleges are being asked to turn out twice this many graduates. That kind of math doesn't add up.

Some people say today’s college degree does what yesterday’s high school diploma used to do. If that's true then today's high school diploma will mean even less in the future.

K-12 teachers and college faculty have a responsibility to our good students to resist pressure to water down the curriculum and drop our grading scales. Good students want a degree that means something. WE should want that too. Society deserves nothing less.

In 1969 25% of college students had grades of C or less. It's now 7%. In 1969, 5% had grades of A- or higher. Today, it is 41%. Been a long and steady climb