

## **Cognitive Dissonance in Higher Education: Inflating Grades and Not Feeling Guilty**

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*Although there has been growing interest in recent years in investigating the phenomena of grade inflation in higher education, little has focused on the actual psychological processes through which professors may engage in inflating grades without feeling guilty or perceiving this behavior as problematic. Social psychology has focused on the apparent inconsistency between stated attitudes and actual behavior; specifically, cognitive dissonance theory provides insights into why people may behave immorally. By outlining the role of cognitive dissonance in the grade inflation process we provide greater understanding as to how professors cope with the negative psychological arousal associated with grade inflation.*

*Keywords: cognitive dissonance, grade inflation*

### **COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: INFLATING GRADES AND NOT FEELING GUILTY**

As growing number of higher education institutions continue to face severe budget shortfall, the strategies to address these financial pressures has become a critical issue for research. In an effort to improve student retention rates, higher education institutions—whether intentionally or unintentionally—may promote the inflation of student grades as part of efforts to keep students on track in their academic programs. Grade inflation is a broad concept that refers to a professor using lenient grading standards or lighter coursework with the purpose of awarding a student a grade that does not correspond with his/her actual academic achievement (Crumbley, Flinn, & Reichelt 2010, Hu, 2005; O’Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Thus, grade inflation may include overly lenient grading that contributes to too many “A” grades, the absence of any penalty for missing class, accepting late assignments, ignoring student cheating, allowing students to retake exams on which they did not pass or secure satisfactory grades, giving easy examinations, giving open book exams, grading on a wide curve, or making coursework easier.

While considerable research has focused on the causes, outcomes, and ways to prevent grade inflation, little has focused on the actual psychological processes through which a professor accepts the unethical

practice of inflating grades and not feeling guilty. We argue that the practice of grade inflation instigates feelings of guilt within professors, which cause them to experience cognitive dissonance and psychological discomfort. Stice (1992) proposed that dissonance is analogous to the feeling of guilt because both of them are states of negative psychological arousal. Prior research posits that cognitive dissonance occurs when a behavior results in consequences from which one may feel embarrassed or guilty (Scher & Cooper, 1989). Emotions such as guilt and dissonance are important to investigate because these emotions are motivational in nature.

The belief that misconduct is immoral doesn't prevent its enactment (Stephens, 2017). There is a wide agreement that some professors inflate grades despite believing that it is wrong to do so to avoid the upsetting and negative emotions associated with the consequences of not inflating the grades (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Whitley, & Washburn, 1998). The question that was taken up in this paper concerns how the professors accept that unethical behavior and not feel guilty? We try to answer this question by focusing on the psychological processes that ameliorate the feeling of guilt. Specifically, we examine cognitive dissonance that arises from adopting or condoning the unethical behavior of grade inflation, which we argue should be inconsistent with a professor's moral values or attitudes. We propose that dissonance experiences and the methods used for dissonance reduction reduce feelings of guilt and thus positively influence a professor's tendency to inflate grades. Only by resolving this dissonance can professors continue to inflate grades and still maintain a positive self-concept.

Whether the grade inflation practice is explained by university-level factors or individual professor-specific characteristics (Jewell, McPherson, & Tieslau, 2013), engaging in grade inflation behavior causes a professor to suffer from an internal psychological conflict, as grade inflation behavior is inconsistent with his/her attitudes and beliefs. A professor has a number of important professional roles, including those related to teaching (Darley, Zanna, & Roediger, 2004). In regard to teaching, not only do faculty have a duty to provide meaningful learning opportunities for students, but they also have responsibilities related to testing and grading (Bernstein & Lucas, 2004). Indeed, in a study examining students' perceptions of the ethical responsibilities of professors, Kuther (2003) observed that students expect professors to not only show respect for students, but to grade honestly and to not tolerate dishonesty. Thus, part of a faculty member's duty to be an ethical role model for students (Mitchell, 2007), involves consistently grading students in a way that is fair and promotes high academic standards. In this way, for faculty members to uphold these ethical duties, they must practice ethical leadership. A professor should be an honest professional who thinks of himself/herself as morally upright and whose moral standards should be impeccable; thus, inflating grades would go against moral and professional standards professors should work to uphold. In this case, the internal psychological conflict is a natural feeling given our inherent sense of morality either due to maintaining a consistent and positive sense of self or to acting in accordance with societal or normative standards (Hauser 2007; Wright 1996). Internal conflicts produce mental distress or discomfort termed cognitive dissonance that individuals will strive to alleviate (e.g., Cooper & Fazio, 1984; Elliot & Devine, 1994).

Understanding the underlying psychological factors and coping strategies professors adopt to reduce feelings of guilt and cognitive inconsistency is helpful for creating effective prevention strategies tailored to challenge the psychological strategies enabling the enactment of the practice of grade inflation. Without a better understanding of exactly what a professor goes through psychologically, addressing grade inflation effectively remains difficult and research models are likely to be lacking in their causal explanations of grade inflation.

This paper makes two main contributions to the grade inflation literature. First, it sheds light on an understudied phenomenon: the psychological and cognitive reactions of professors who engage in grade inflation. Current conceptualizations of the grade inflation process have under-theorized the role of the enactor by assuming acceptance, and this paper hopes to move the literature forward by including this crucial dimension into the forefront of grade inflation research. Second, this conceptual paper draws on cognitive dissonance theory to develop a process model of the dissonance associated with grade inflation. This model specifies the methods used to protect the self-concept against the threat from cognitive dissonance caused by the practice of grade inflation.

## **GRADE INFLATION: PREVALENCE AND CONSEQUENCES**

Despite the negative consequences of grade inflation, there is ample evidence indicating its prevalence across higher education, occurring across all types of academic institutions and disciplines (Bar, Kadiyali, & Zussman 2012; Gordon, 2006; Popov & Bernhardt 2013; Wilson, 1999; Yang and Yip, 2003). Given that GPA is the most prevailing instrument for measuring student performance in the overwhelming majority of institutions of higher education (Lowe, Borstorff, & Landry III, 2008), grade inflation is closely related to an increase in GPA. There has been a striking increase in grade point averages over the past four decades (Butcher, McEwan & Weerapana, 2014; Jaschik, 2016; Lackey & Lackey, 2006; Popov & Bernhardt, 2013; Rojstaczer and Healy 2010). For example, the average grade point average increased by 0.18 or from 2.93 to 3.11 between 1991–1992 and 2006–2007 (Gradeinflaion.com). Number of studies reported increases in grades that are not associated with commensurate increases in student achievement or cognitive capability (e.g., Bar, Kadiyali, & Zussman 2007; Beito & Nuckolls 2008). The significant increase in GPA is a source of grave concern because it results in a compression of grades toward the top of the scale (Lackey & Lackey, 2006; Love & Kotchen, 2010). Grade compression distorts the information that grades convey, and hence reduces its value to various stakeholders in higher education.

It is believed that grade inflation has significant social and economic negative consequences for students, faculty, institutions of higher education, and the economy as a whole, primarily through the systematic distortion of the meaning, interpretation, and value of grades earned by students (Yang and Yip, 2003). While declining standards are problematic, grade inflation also contributes to ambiguity in regard to the signaling value of the grades to stakeholders (Pattison, Grodsky, & Muller, 2013). The ambiguity is caused by the lack of agreement on the interpretation of grades due to the lack of consistent standards that result from grade inflation within and among departments, schools, and universities (Zangenehzadeh, 1988). Given that GPA is a central medium for conveying information about student performance, it significantly affects many decisions made by stakeholders in higher education, including graduate school admission and hiring decisions by employers (Babcock 2009; Bar et al. 2007; Chan, Hao, & Suen 2007; Caulkins, Larkey, & Wei, 1996; Pope & Ma, 2004; Sabot & Wakemann-Linn 1991; Wongsurawat, 2009).

## **CAUSES OF GRADE INFLATION**

There are a number of forces that can contribute to grade inflation. First, many state-funded universities and colleges face increasing pressure to increase enrollment and retention to obtain state and tuition funding. Though grade inflation is not a new problem, it may have been exacerbated as an increasing number of public universities are subject to state performance-based funding requirements. Many of these performance-based funding models include requirements related to student enrollment and retention. While these goals are laudable, they also encourage universities to be more customer-oriented, which contributes to grade inflation and the lowering of academic standards in efforts to promote student retention and satisfaction (Jewell et al., 2013; Stone, 1995). As a result, universities may find it counterproductive to actively discourage grade inflation (Jewell et al., 2013).

This drive for recruitment can foster competition not only between universities, but also between colleges and departments within the same institution. Departments with low and declining enrollments may be pressured to adopt lenient grading standards to keep students happy and thus retain them. This implicit understanding of the effectiveness of grade inflation at every level of a university creates a commercialized culture in which students view themselves as consumers who are entitled to claim higher grades especially due to their spiraling tuition (Jaschik, 2016; Kirp, 2003; Nata, Pereira, & Neves, 2014).

Another regulatory force contributing to grade inflation is the growing pressure for greater accountability of higher education which puts further demands on universities and colleges regarding setting, monitoring, and assessing academic standards (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). Although the U.S government does not regulate higher education, as is the case in other countries, accreditation organizations play a significant role in setting and evaluating academic standards. Scrutiny by accreditation organizations

may encourage colleges, departments, and universities to practice grade inflation to meet some of the accreditation benchmarks.

Some institutional policies may facilitate the practices of grade inflation (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014). For example, some institutions foster more lenient policies that have enabled students to avoid poor grades through liberal withdrawal or incomplete grading policies (Adelman, 2008).

Colleges and universities may inflate grade to give their students an edge in the job market. That is, they help their students obtain better jobs by ensuring that they have high GPAs (Chan et al., 2007; Yang & Yip, 2003).

In addition to external forces, individual faculty members have a number of internal personally relevant motivations to engage in inflating grades. Student evaluations of teaching are considered in many annual reviews as well as tenure and promotion decisions; thus professors may be motivated to apply softer grading rules and award higher grades to elicit favorable student evaluations (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002). Several studies suggest that instructors can secure and "buy" better course evaluation scores by inflating expected grades (e.g., Eiszler 2002; Isely & Singh, 2005; Johnson, 2003; Love & Kotchen, 2010; McPherson, 2006; McPherson, Jewell, & Kim 2009).

In addition to seeking favorable employment related decisions, it may be inefficient for professors to maintain rigorous standards and give low grades because such an approach may result in a hostile working environment. Strict grading standards may result in students protesting and confronting their professor over their undesirable grades at the end of the semester (Pressman, 2007). Lenient grading standards help professors avoid these potential unpleasant confrontations and spare more time to undertake more rewarding tasks such as research and/or consulting (O'Halloran & Gordon, 2014).

Additionally, many colleges and universities place greater priority on professors' research rather than their teaching (Gordon, 2006; Lowe et al., 2008). This emphasis on research encourages professors to assign more time and effort to scholarship at the expense of teaching effort. Professors may also turn to coursework deflation in order to reduce the time spent on teaching activities in order to allow for more time dedicated to research activities.

Last but not least, faculty attitudes may contribute to a weakening of grading standards (Gentry, 2018). There is the "whatever" professor who holds both low grading standards and low expectations of their students (Gentry, 2018). Another type of professors holds very caring and friendly attitudes toward their students. These professors deemphasize the payoffs that their students may gain in their career through rigor and high standards in favor of immediate gratification by maintaining positive and overfriendly relationships with students.

### **Universities as Corrupting Organizations**

Ultimately professors are on the front-line of teaching and grading practices within universities (Bernstein & Lucas, 2004). As such, they have an ethical duty to be ethical models for students (Mitchell, 2007) and ensure that grading is done in a fair and ethical manner. However, as we have noted, there are a number of forces acting upon faculty members that encourage the ethically questionable practice of grade inflation. Furthermore, ethically questionable practices such as corruption require collective effort and are often officially sanctioned by the organizations in which they occur (Brief, Buttram, & Dukerich, 2001). As such, in this section we consider how universities facilitate grade inflation as corrupting organizations. Research suggests that organization socialize individuals to adopt immoral actions to the detriment of their moral values and own social responsibilities (Cialdini 1996; Darley 1992, 1996). Darley (1996 p. 221) posits that all organizations "have the potential to drift into harm-doing" because of financial pressures like the ones faced by many higher education institutions. Organizations socialize individuals into immoral behaviors within organizations which results in deindividuation, through which individuals are incapable or prevented from making moral judgments as individuals (Brief et al., 2001; Darley 1992, 1996). Socializing employees into corruption implies the "misuse of an organizational position or authority for personal gain or organizational (or sub-unit) gain, where misuse, in turn, refers to departures from accepted societal norms" (Anand, Ashforth, & Joshi, 2004, p. 40).

When an individual in a corrupted culture is faced with the choice between moral actions, which would undermine an institution's performance, or immoral actions which would help the institution meet its financial obligations, he/she is incentivized and socialized to choose the latter (Darley, 1996). Such bad behavior engaged in to help achieve organizational objectives (a typically laudable goal), is known as unethical pro-organizational behavior (Umphress & Bingham, 2011). We argue that academe is an example of those organizations socializing its members into immoral behaviors. Universities may foster a culture conducive to grade inflation and coursework deflation in an effort to retain and recruit students (Crumbley et al., 2010; Stone, 1995). For example, one university had a policy according to which faculty would lose his compensation for a certain a course if one or more student received a failing grad in the course (Blum, 2018). Kamber and Biggs (2002) have said: "The problem is not only that most institutions have accepted grading practices that persistently blur the distinction between good and outstanding performance, while they award passing grades for showing up and turning in work -- even when that work is poor. It is also that students and faculty members, administrators and trustees, accrediting bodies, and higher-education associations have been united for more than 25 years in their willingness to ignore, excuse, or compromise with grade inflation rather than fight it."

As such, administrators at universities and colleges tacitly or explicitly motivate faculty to adopt lenient grading standards (e.g., Pressman, 2007), and it is very difficult for faculty to speak loudly and protest against top management decisions, especially if they think that their jobs are not secure (Berntson, Näswall, & Sverke 2010). Rojstaczer's website, GradeInflation.com, suggests, "Leaders are obsessed with national reputation and the size of their endowment and not very concerned about the quality of education."

Yang and Yip (2003) developed a free-rider model according to which they argue that grade inflation can arise from a free-rider problem between universities, as the signaling value of a transcript is based on "collective reputation." They argue that universities have incentives to exploit this collective reputation by explicitly lying about the ability of a student to perform a good job, with the result that in their interior equilibrium, the expected productivity of high-grade students leaves graduate school and employers subject to adverse selection by increasing the likelihood of selecting inferior students.

***Proposition 1: Universities Socialize Professors into the Immoral Behavior of Grade Inflation***

**COGNITIVE DISSONANCE**

Although grade inflation may tacitly occur at the behest of the institution itself, making it a salient and obvious target for responsibility, it is important to understand that a professor enacts grade inflation through his/her free choice; Afterward, this professor will feel guilty because of the detrimental, society-wide consequences that his/her action may cause. The socialization of professors into the immoral behavior of grade inflation is frequently associated with rationalization tactics (Anand et al., 2004), Professors resort to several rationalization tactics (discussed later in the paper) to alleviate the guilt feeling caused by the involvement in the immoral behavior. Only by resolving this psychological tension can professors reduce this anxiety and thus continue to engage in practices that inflate grades.

To understand and model the psychosocial process a professor goes through when he/she commits an act of grade inflation, we use the theory of cognitive dissonance as an analytical framework to examine whether and how a professor experiences and resolves the cognitive dissonance caused by the discrepancy between the personal and/or normative value of integrity and the behaviors associated with grade inflation. Cognitive dissonance theory suggests when an individual perceives a discrepancy between two of his/her cognitions (e.g., beliefs, opinions, ideas, attitudes) or between these and his/her behavior or environment, he/she experiences a sense of dissonance, or emotional discomfort, which he/she aims to reduce or eliminate (Festinger, 1957). Consequently, cognitive dissonance theory offers a lens with which to view the (arguably) growing pervasiveness of grade inflation behavior in the academia. Only by reducing this dissonance, can professors feel comfortable engaging in continued practices that lead to grade inflation.

## **Grade Inflation and Cognitive Dissonance**

Many researchers considered that grade inflation is a form of deception, lying and falsifying since it misrepresents student performance (Johnson, 2003; Kamber & Biggs, 2002). Although many professors know that grade inflation has many negative outcomes to the students and society over time, in general, they continue to enact them. Accordingly, the belief that grade inflation is unethical, but the fact that professors perform such an act causes them to suffer from cognitive dissonance and associated psychological discomfort. Cognitive dissonance involving cognitions fundamental to the self-concept or to important goals, such as economic well-being, or lower order needs, such as keeping one's job, promotion, and tenure, will trigger a high degree of anxiety and psychological discomfort (Simon, Greenberg, & Brehm, 1995). The psychological discomfort caused by holding contradictory cognitions will motivate professors to eliminate the discomfort and restore a positive self-concept (Wicklund & Brehm, 1976). Only by reducing the cognitive dissonance can professors reduce this anxiety and maintain a positive self-concept.

***Proposition 2a:** Engaging in Practices That Facilitate Grade Inflation Will Cause Cognitive Dissonance*

***Proposition 2b:** The Cognitive Dissonance Associated With Grade Inflation is Likely to Trigger a Sufficient Level of Psychological Discomfort That Motivates Professors to Reduce the Tension Caused by Cognitive Dissonance*

## **DISSONANCE REDUCTION**

Possible explanations of faculty tolerating the discomfort and tension caused by the questionable grade inflation practices could be offered by cognitive dissonance reduction methods. The attempts to reduce the feeling of discomfort, guilt, and, thus cognitive dissonance is activated because we feel that we violated either the self-image and our innate sense of morality (Aronson & Carlsmith, 1962; Lowell, 2012; Thibodeau & Aronson, 1992) and/or social norms (Cooper & Fazio, 1984). Reducing cognitive dissonance is important because it helps professors attain greater satisfaction from their work environments (Simon et al., 1995). Research suggests several modes to reduce the feeling of discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance. This Dissonance reduction provides the potential to enable professors to perpetrate non-normative behavior of grade inflation, whilst remaining committed to societal espoused norms and values.

### **Attitude Change and Adding Consonant Cognitions**

Attitude change is the most cited method of dissonance reduction. In this approach, the attitude is changed (often unconsciously) to fit the behavior ("Oh, I really don't think that inflating grading is immoral"). In this case, a professor changes his/her values, beliefs or attitudes in order to make them more consistent with the expectations or norms experienced within their organization/discipline. A professor could reason that his/her strict and harsh grading standards are unfair and show a lack of understanding of the new educational environment. In fact, he/she may abandon his personal values about grading practices completely and start adopting lax grading standards (Maertz, Hassan & Magnusson, 2009). This method entails perceptual modification. People reduce cognitive dissonance by adding behavior-consonant cognitions that reduce the overall level of inconsistency or avoiding information that opposes their current choices, selectively collecting information that supports or overvalues their conflicting behavior and minimizing contradictory signs (Cotton, 1985; Frey, 1986; Freedman & Sears, 1965; Frey & Wicklund, 1978). Actively seeking new information that can talk you into believing that your actions weren't in so much opposition to your beliefs helps outweigh dissonant cognitions. A professor can change the way he/she perceives the underlying motive for grade inflation and argue that giving low grades would put his/her students at a disadvantage when they compete for jobs or admission to graduate school with students from programs or institutions that grade more generously (Gordon, 2006). In this case, a professor is restoring to a more "empathetic understanding" (Maertz Jr. et al. 2009) and may argue that grade inflation is kinder and fairer approach to his/her students who are facing unfair competition from their counterparts

in other universities. Another example of adding consonant cognitions and justifying grade inflation is for a professor to emphasize that his/her college or university places more emphasis and importance on research than teaching. Hence, a faculty would say it is worthwhile to spend his/her time on research than on rigorous grading and dealing with student complaints (Bartlett & Wasley, 2008). Thøgersen (2004) suggests that the urge to reduce dissonance is significantly lower in individuals who attribute low moral importance to the dissonant behavior. Accordingly, professors may seek to reduce cognitive dissonance by reducing the perceived importance of the dissonant elements involved in creating the dissonance (Simon et al., 1995). For example, minimizing the harm that the grade inflation will cause to the students (Simon et al., 1995).

***Proposition 3: Attitude Change, and Adding Consonant Cognitions Reduce Cognitive Dissonance and Thus Enable Practices That Facilitate Grade Inflation***

### **Trivialization**

While adding consonant cognitions aims to make the attitude-behavior relationship seem more compatible, the use of trivialization seeks not to reduce the level of inconsistency, but simply to reduce the importance of the inconsistency by reducing the importance of one or more of the dissonant cognitions (Simon et al., 1995). The use of trivialization aims to justify the immoral behavior rather than satisfies a need for consistency. A professor may think that his/her course is no longer “important enough to justify holding students to rigorous standards” (Henrikson, 1976, pp. 76, 113). Since perceived responsibility for the negative consequences influences the level of dissonance arousal, adding consonant cognitions, denial of responsibility (discussed later), and trivialization of the elements causing the dissonance should reduce it (Gosling, Denizeau, & Oberlé, 2006; Simon et al., 1995). Research identified several techniques of trivialization that describe the different rationalizations that people apply to excuse or in some other way justify their wrongdoing and hence insulate feelings of self-blame for their non-normative behavior (Sykes & Matza, 1957).

#### *Denial of Responsibility*

Reflects that one is not personally responsible for the norm-violating behavior because of external factors or circumstances beyond his/her control are operating; e.g. “it’s not my fault, I had no other choice.” Another example of denial responsibility and justification for grade inflation that would provide some relief to discomfort feeling caused by cognitive dissonance is the fact that grade inflation is a trend that is hard to address as an individual faculty and requires collective action by academe (Walvoord & Anderson, 2009). A similar technique to the condemnation of the condemner’s technique is the technique of normal practice, an extension of Sykes and Matza’s (1957) framework, which rationalizes that a behavior is acceptable if it is widespread in society – ‘everybody else is doing it’ (Coleman, 1994; Henry, 1990). The use of the normal practice technique seeks to reduce the discomfort caused by cognitive dissonance by arguing that grade inflation practices are normative, not deviant.

#### *Denial of Victim*

Implies deflecting blame for wrongdoing and questionable moral conduct by arguing that those harmed had it coming and deserved the punishment or whatever happened; e.g. “It’s their fault; if they had been fair in their student evaluation, I would not have done it”. “If they’re foolish enough to believe they deserve the exaggerated grade, it’s their own fault they were taken advantage of.”

#### *Appeal to Higher Loyalties*

Suggests that the wrongdoing is the result of an attempt to actualize higher order ideal or value. Here the wrongdoer remains loyal to the norms of a subgroup above that of wider society; e.g. “a professor may rationalize the unethical behavior of grading inflation by arguing that to somewhat I did may appear wrong, but I did it for my family”. In this case, a professor rationalizes by reference to external pressures (“if I do not do it, I’ll be fired”), or to altruism and a greater cause “this is what it takes to ensure that our students will be competitive in the job market.” I don’t want to jeopardize my students’ chances to land a good job.

Following the argument of Maertz Jr. et al. (2009), attitude change, adding consonant cognitions, and trivialization to reduce the perceived importance of the relevant cognitions all require making cognitive changes to help a professor adjust and assimilate to the institutional culture of grade inflation. The frequent use of these dissonance reduction methods will aid in professors engaging in continued grade inflation practices while still maintaining their positive self-concept.

***Proposition 4: Trivialization Reduce Cognitive Dissonance and Thus Enable Practices That Facilitate Grade Inflation***

### **Forgetting and Distraction**

Forgetting and distraction are also effective techniques to reduce the negative emotional state caused by dissonance (McGrath, 2017). Forgetting involves unconsciously overlooking important moral values and undesirable dishonest behavior (Elkin & Leippe, 1986). Distraction helps people turn their attention away from their dissonant cognitions and hence alleviate the discomfort caused by dissonance (Zanna & Aziza, 1976). The notions of forgetting and distraction are explained by the concept of bounded ethicality which refers to a variety of cognitive limitations and systematic biases that people engage in unconsciously and distract them from observing their wrongdoing and guide them to commit a dishonest behavior that is incompatible with their own values and beliefs (Chugh, Bazerman, & Banaji, 2005). These biases might change the meaning of the dishonest behavior of grade inflation, stress the impact of external sources or tone down individual moral values. Although people might easily remember well-intentioned behavior, they tend to unconsciously suppress their memories of unethical actions (Shu & Gino, 2012). Forgetting helps people maintain a sense of consistency between actual behavior and desired moral rules, and sustain a positive self-concept (Lydon, Zanna, & Ross, 1988; Ross, McFarland, Conway, & Zanna, 1983). In this case, professors would avoid memories that remind them of the grade inflation and coursework deflation actions that they have engaged in. Although a short-term tactic, it is the most efficient way of reducing dissonance. This method is likely to be used when an individual experience a low level of grade inflation-related dissonance (Leippe and Eisenstadt 1999).

***Proposition 5: Forgetting and Distraction Reduce Cognitive Dissonance and Thus Enable Practices That Facilitate Grade Inflation***

### **Self-Affirmation**

When faced with cognitive dissonance, individuals may reduce that anxiety and the threat to the self-image from engaging in an undesirable behavior in one domain, by restoring their self-concept by affirming themselves in an alternative domain. This involves focusing on cognitions about favorable traits of the self in order to restore a sense of the self-integrity against the threat caused by the dissonance (Steele, 1988). For example, having been accused of grade inflation or coursework deflation, a professor may seek to restore his/her self-image by reminding himself/herself that he/she is productive in scholarship, contributes to the service of his/her universities, or enjoys a high professor likeability implied by the high enrollment in his/her classes which addresses a pressing need for his/he university. In this example, research productivity, professor likeability, high enrollment, and university service are totally disconnected to the self-threatening accusation of grade inflation but yet serve the function of making a professor feels good about himself/herself when confronted with the grade inflation accusation. This reduces tension and heightened negative emotional arousal by neutralizing the threat to the self-image and supporting it with alternative favorable information. Simon et al. (1995) suggested that exercising self-affirmation leads to trivialization and that trivialization is the process through which self-affirmation alleviate the discomfort and tension.

***Proposition 6: Self-Affirmation Reduces Cognitive Dissonance and Thus Enables Practices That Facilitate Grade Inflation***



## **Changing Behavior**

This method involves altering future behavior to fit our values and beliefs (e.g., stop grade inflation—if one believes grade inflation is immoral, and refrain from doing so, therefore a professor cognition about his/her behavior will be consonant with their beliefs about the unethicality of grade inflation). Dissonance is similar to the feeling of guilt in that if confession relieves guilt, then one would imply that confession would ease dissonance (Maertz et al., 2009; Stice, 1992). In this case, a professor accepts responsibility for violating the value of integrity by engaging in grade inflation and alleviates the emotional distress by confessing the misconduct and promising not to repeat it again. The admission of an error and the promise to refrain from it serves as a mechanism that achieves redemption (Maertz, et al., 2009). An overwhelming stream of research supports Festinger (1957) assertion that behavior modification is the least preferred method of cognitive dissonance reduction because it is the most resistant to change and it could be difficult, or even impossible to do so (e.g., Wicklund & Brehm 1976); this may be particularly true in contexts where there is organizational pressure to engage in the problematic behavior (Brief et al., 2001).

Andiappan and Dufour (2017) argue that employees in organizations facing mounting economic and competitive pressures, similar to the ones challenging many universities, may be forced into performing certain harmful acts with which they oppose. Research suggests that even employees who don't experience job insecurity and decided to stay in their current jobs despite the availability of seemingly attractive jobs are less likely to protest (resist) their organizations' policies during times of economic difficulty (Berntson et al. 2010; Brief et al., 2001). Employees may not leave their current employment because they are satisfied with their current work environment and the perceived fit with job, organization, and community (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablinski, & Erez, 2001). As such, we expect that non-tenured faculty and adjunct faculty are less likely to resort to behavior modification to reduce dissonance because this group of instructors facing a higher risk of keeping their job if they fail to assimilate the institutionalize culture. Following this logic, we argue that many professors may stay in their current positions despite the pressures to inflate grade which may heighten the threat of cognitive dissonance from which professors suffers. Thus, professors are likely to reduce cognitive dissonance through means other than resigning their position and/or changing their behavior. If a university socialize its professor into grade inflation practice and this practice became institutionalized, over-rationalized, and routine which results in deindividuation and professors become incapable to make moral judgments, behavior change will be very unlikely and perhaps impossible to happen because professors will have little decision freedom to behave differently (Rennekamp et al. 2015).

***Proposition 7a: Behavior Change Will Reduce Cognitive Dissonance but Will Have a Negative Effect on Physiological Withdrawal and Increase the Likelihood of a Professor Leaving Their Current Organization***

***Proposition 7b: Behavior Change and Confession-Redemption is Unlikely to be Used as a Dissonance Reduction Mechanism in Universities With Cultures That Routinize The Practice of Grade Inflation***

## **MODERATORS**

Since cognitive dissonance involves self-concept (Aronson, 1969), it is very personal; people differ in their reactions to dissonance arousing experiences (Brehm & Cohen, 1962). What an individual feels as dissonant may not be perceived as dissonant by another. How hard people will try to reduce dissonance will depend on some factors.

### **Faculty Job Insecurity**

Since grade inflation involves cognitions fundamental to the self-concept or important goals, such as economic well-being, or lower order needs, such as keeping one's job, promotion, and tenure (Simon et al., 1995), it is likely to trigger higher degree of dissonance among adjunct faculty, non-tenure faculty, and faculty in programs with low enrollment. In this context, a professor classification, which is defined by the degree of risk of one's job, can be an important situational variable that could play a moderator role.

Specifically, Greenhalgh and Rosenblatt (1984) posited that the employees who face a higher degree of job insecurity are more likely to perceive job insecurity as a bigger source of anxiety and mental stress. Since the expectations of possible job loss can cause a feeling of anxiety, job insecurity is considered a work stressor (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Consequently, those vulnerable non-tenured professor, adjunct instructors, those in low enrollments departments, and professors in disciplines facing tougher labor market and few job alternatives to choose from are more likely to experience higher pressures to keep their current positions and hence higher stress and a higher degree of negative psychological arousal associated with grade inflation. Indeed, research suggests that adjunct faculty tend to give much higher grades than their full time and senior faculty (Sonner, 2000). Similarly, non-tenured professors are more likely than senior tenured faculty to give high grades (Pressman, 2007; Zimmerman, 2002).

***Proposition 8: Faculty With a Higher Level of Job Insecurity Are Likely to Experience a Higher Degree of Cognitive Dissonance Associated With Grade Inflation***

### **Religiosity**

Generally, relative to religious people, non-religious people are less likely to be emotionally disturbed by threatening internal inconsistency with regard to their religion (Exline, 2002). Religious persons are more likely than non-religious persons to experience negative emotional arousal and stronger emotions of guilt and shame when they realize self-inconsistencies with regard to their religious values because religious individuals maintain higher expectations of consistency between their religious beliefs and actual self (Yousaf & Gobet, 2013). However, it is suggested that cognitive dissonance may boost rather than reduce the negative attitude, in this case toward grade inflation (Burris, Harmon-Jones, & Tarpley, 1997; Yousaf & Gobet, 2013). This notion of dissonance bolstering attitude in the context of religious people can be explained by the argument that when religious people are able to rationalize and justify their unethical act they are likely to boost rather than reconcile their attitude (Veer & Shankar, 2011). Following this stream of research, we argue that high religiosity professors will be more inclined to engage in grade inflation when they are able to rationalize and justify their unethical act of grade inflation. That is, we suggest that the presence of grade inflation-related cognitive dissonance generally leads to boosting the attitude if a professor can perceive a justification for the grade inflation. However, when grade inflation thoughts are not suppressed and justified, the high religiosity professors' intentions to inflate grade fall significantly, as he or she no longer perceives any justification for the grade inflation action. In this case, the lack of justification will lead existing beliefs, values, and norms to prevail and attitude to change.

***Proposition 9a: Religious Professors (High Religiosity Professors) Are More Likely Than Less Religious Professors to Experience Emotional Discomfort and Urge to Reduce Grade Inflation-Related Dissonance***

***Proposition 9b: Religious Professors Are More Likely to Reduce Dissonance Through Rationalization Rather Than Attitude Change***

### **Extraversion**

One of the factors suggested as a possible moderator of the effects of cognitive dissonance is the personality trait of extraversion (Matza, Hofstedt, & Wood, 2008). Extraversion—the degree to which someone is outgoing, sociable, and assertive. An extravert is comfortable and confident in relationship with others; an introvert is more withdrawn and reserved. Introverts are found to experience more psychological discomfort than extraverts when experiencing dissonance (Matza, et al., 2008). These results are explained by the notion that extraverts have a less excitable nervous system than introverts, and therefore are apparently less susceptible to experience the negative emotions associated with cognitive dissonance (Eysenck, 1967, Eysenck, 1990). Because introverts are more prone to dissonance discomfort than extraverts, they are more likely to change their attitude as a coping mechanism to reduce the dissonance discomfort. In contrast, extraverts are less susceptible to the negative arousal and are therefore less likely to change their attitudes in order to restore cognitive coherence (consonance) than were introverts.

**Proposition 10a:** *Professors Who Are Introverts Will Experience More Negative Arousal From a Perceived Inconsistency Associated With Grade Inflation Than Professors Who Are Extroverts*

**Proposition 10b:** *Professors Who Are Introverts Are More Likely to Change Their Attitude Than Professors Who Are Extraverts When They Experience Dissonance Associated With Grade Inflation*

### **Self-Monitoring**

Self-monitoring reflects the degree to which someone is able to adjust and modify behavior in response to the external, situational factors. High self-monitors tend to draw on the social context around them, and both willing and able to change behavior from one situation to the next. A person low in self-monitoring, on the other hand, tend to display his/her true dispositions and attitudes in every situation, to regulate themselves according to their own internal beliefs, and to act consistently regardless of circumstances. Accordingly, high self-monitors should experience less dissonance than low self-monitors because of their tendency to change their opinions based on the social cues around them.

Research has found that low self-monitors are more prone to the negative arousal associated with cognitive dissonance (Debono & Edmonds, 1989; Snyder & Tanke, 1976). However, high self-monitors are found to be more likely than low self-monitors to change their attitudes when they experience cognitive dissonance (Debono & Edmonds, 1989).

**Proposition 11a:** *Professors low in self-monitoring will experience more negative arousal from a perceived inconsistency associated with grade inflation*

**Proposition 11b:** *Professors high in self-monitoring will more likely to change their attitude than professors low in self-monitoring when experience dissonance associated with grade inflation.*

### **DISCUSSION**

As we have argued in this paper, grade inflation is problematic in that it distorts the true level of academic performance. Any attempt to address grade inflation should start with changing the organizational culture of higher education institutions. If universities and colleges are not willing or able to address the institutional policies that directly or indirectly facilitated the behaviors of grade inflation and the ensuing cognitive dissonance, professors will be left to alleviate the dissonance through a cycle of “amplification” (Lowell, 2012) through which they unconsciously employ increasingly more extreme forms of unethical behavior without which they will not be able to function.

As institutions make strides to create a culture that does not promote grade inflation, they must address the role of cognitive dissonance in grade inflation behaviors. Part of these actions must involve steps to explicitly address and prevent dissonance reducing mechanisms other than behavior change. For example, institutional leaders can proactively address common rationalizations used to reduce dissonance thereby making these rationalization less effective for faculty to rely upon.

Furthermore, we suggests that professors who use dissonance reduction methods other than confession, will gradually reduce the level of stress that they feel and thus increase their grade inflating behaviors. Universities have to change institutional policies that may inadvertently encourage the practices of grade inflation. For example, given the strong evidence that student evaluation of teaching is both invalid and unreliable instrument and a significant contributing factor to the behaviors of grade inflation, universities need to find alternative valid and reliable approaches to assess faculty teaching performance such as the use of a group of instruments such as class observation by colleagues, the use of teaching portfolio.

In addition to considering institutional roles in grade inflation, it is important to consider individual faculty members as well. One important implication of our model for research and practice is that yielding to a university pressure to practice grade inflation may not be enough to relieve a professor from the psychological tension, which is detrimental to job satisfaction and job performance. Unresolved cognitive dissonance could result in increased absenteeism, lower productivity and performance and various range of

counterproductive behaviors as a result. Even a professor who developed and implemented the desired behaviors might not be able to cope with the resulting psychological tension. Engaging in grade inflation behaviors may relieve anxiety caused by lack of fit with corporate culture and the uncertainty that it may create; nevertheless, it may increase anxiety from an internal inconsistency and threat to the self-concept. In short, internalizing and assimilating the practices of grade inflation entails balancing the self-consistency vs. organizational fit.

As the culture of grade inflation is entrenched and may take years and fundamental policy modifications to change, counseling and training to professors is essential in facilitating the process of coping with cognitive dissonance. For example, universities may provide professors with workshops that educate them on how they can foster an attitude of both high academic standards and high expectations of student learning. Those workshops should emphasize setting high bar not only for students but also for the professors. Those workshops should de-emphasize the immediate gratification attitude in favor of the long-term gains from adopting the high academic standards and high expectations of student learning attitude.

One short-term solution to alleviate the grade inflation associated dissonance is selecting professors who are extravert, higher on self-monitoring, self-complexity to minimize extreme dissonance arousal, especially for tenure track or adjunct faculty. Additionally, faculty should be taught how to proactively speak up and handle pressure related to grading. However, such strategies should be accompanied by culture development efforts that support such behaviors.

We also believe that this paper makes a number of potential contributions to research on grade inflation. First and foremost, we have highlighted the role that cognitive dissonance reduction strategies play in grade inflation occurring. Thus, these propositions should be tested to better understand how grade inflation is enabled through faculty members being able to reduce the cognitive dissonance that they would otherwise experience.

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