

Case #6: Retroactive Grade Inflation

Last year, Loyola Law School Los Angeles retroactively inflated its students' GPAs by 0.333. In other words, an A- will automatically become an A and an A will automatically become an A+ under Loyola's new grading system. The change included all grades that had been earned while the school's existing grading system—adopted in 2004—had been in place. Loyola is only one of over ten law schools who have altered their grading policies in an effort to award their graduates higher GPAs to make their students more attractive in the highly competitive legal job market. Law schools are notorious for using a strict bell curve in grading and putting students under great pressure to make the cut. But now, some schools are making their curves more lenient. Other schools have dropped this practice altogether and have instituted a pass/fail system in its place. Yet more schools have employed tactics to increase their students' marketability without changing their grading policies. For example, some schools have paid firms to hire their graduates and other schools have given students stipends while they complete internships.

Law schools have adopted these changes to help their graduates find jobs during the economic recession, when many law school graduates are finding it difficult to gain employment and even begin paying off their large student loans. Additionally, these law schools must protect some of their own most important assets—their reputation and national rankings—despite the fact that they can no longer promise their students that their degrees will translate into gainful employment. The schools maintain that they are not artificially enhancing the students' grades, but merely bringing their students' grades in line with the grades received by students at other law schools.¹ According to Student Bar Association president Samuel Liu, “Loyola . . . had a mean first-year grade of 2.667; the norm for other accredited California schools is generally a 3.0 or higher.” Liu noted that the lower mean GPA prevented Loyola students from receiving clerkships with hard GPA cutoffs and disadvantaged them in their careers generally.

Retroactive grade changes have been met with a good deal of skepticism from the academic and legal communities because many consider the grades artificially inflated and an inaccurate reflection of student performance. Employers, in particular, are often aware when a school has changed its grading policy, so the higher marks may not make job candidates more any more attractive than they were before the change. Indeed, the change may be harmful to the students because employers may believe that the graduates were given the high grades undeservingly. Even students whose grades have been inflated are complaining that they will no longer be able to use their GPAs as an accurate measure of their performance in law school. Law students suggest that if law schools really wanted to help their students survive in a harsh job market, they would lower tuition.²

¹ Catherine Rampell, “In Law Schools, Grades Go Up, Just Like That,” *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/22/business/22law.html>, June 21, 2010; see also “Law school grade inflation: Rewarding losers?” *The Week*, <http://theweek.com/article/index/204345/law-school-grade-inflation-rewarding-losers>, June 23, 2010; Larry Gordon, “Loyola Law School boosts grades, provokes debate,” *Los Angeles Times*, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2010/04/loyola-law-school-ups-grades-provokes-debate.html>, April 2, 2010.

² Anne Chaconas, “Law School Grade Inflation Causes Controversy,” *PowerScore: LSAT and Law School Admissions Blog*, <http://blog.powerscore.com/lsat/law-school-grade-inflation-causes-controversy/>, June 22, 2010;