Grade Inflation Confirmed

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The Association of College Honor Societies (ACHS) was formed in 1925 to encourage all general and specialized honor societies to join forces for the establishment and maintenance of desirable standards and useful functions in higher education. Eighty-five years later it is continuing this mission through its certification process. The minimum eligibility standard was set as a percentile rank: upper 35 percent for specialized and leadership honor societies and the upper 20 percent for general honor societies.

One difficulty having to do with selection of candidates is the qualifying language: "shall rank not lower than the highest ___percent of their class in overall scholarship." In general honor societies, candidates are selected from the junior and senior classes (or their equivalent semester hours) across the university. In specialized honor societies, candidates are selected from the second semester sophomore, junior, and senior classes (or their equivalent semester hours) in the specialization itself.

ACHS was concerned from the beginning about comparable standards among universities, and therefore the association adopted the percentile ranking system for the membership classifications. In recent years internal higher education representatives and the media have brought attention to the matter of grade inflation and its implications for quality. It is an old and thorny problem. Many non-ACHS member honor societies adopted a GPA standard; in most cases it is 3.0 for all classifications of organizations.

It was assumed that grade inflation had increased over time, but there was little research to show the impact on honor society eligibility standards. In 1997 one ACHS member honor society, interested in gauging what was happening in the eligibility process, began tracking lowest grade point averages for the minimum standard of the upper 35 percent classification for specialized honor societies. With 12 years of statistics in this case, grade inflation is confirmed (Table 1).

Table 1. Lowest Undergraduate Grade Point Average for Upper Thirty-five Percentile Rank

Year	% LGPA=3.0	% LGPA=3.25	% LGPA=3.5	% LGPA=3.75	% Used Equivalents	% No Response
2008-2009	12	23	42	19	1	3
2007-2008	11	27	42	17	3	0
2006-2007	12	30	43	13	2	0
2005-2006	12	31	43	12	2	0
2004-2005	13	34	37	9	2	4
2003-2004	14	37	30	10	1	8
2002-2003	14	35	37	0	0	14
2001-2002	18	46	36	0	0	0
2000-2001	17	35	37	2	0	10
1999-2000	18	34	37	4	0	7
1998-1999	45	5	21	4	0	25
1997-1998	85	8	7	0	0	0
Average	**22.6**	**28.8**	**34.3**	**7.5**	**.9**	**5.9**

n = 346 in 1997-1998; 434 in 2008-2009

There are of course limitations to the conclusion that grade inflation is confirmed. This is one research study, but it does give credence to the original decision of the founders to use percentile rank instead of GPA to recognize scholarship.