Making The Grade
April 30, 2003

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Grade inflation is a phenomenon frequently noted and widely lamented in American education. And studies confirm that higher grades—more A’s and B’s—are routinely awarded to students than C’s or lower grades.

But those who might worry about grade inflation have no reason to fear that the phenomenon might spread from education to other public domains. In particular, there is no indication that grade inflation extends to the evaluations that citizens make to public institutions or public officials.

The most recent evidence for this conclusion comes from the just released 2003 Madonna Young Omnibus poll. (Madonnayoung.com) The poll asked 800 randomly selected adults living in the state to grade some of the Commonwealth’s most important institutions. Respondents were asked to grade using A, B, C, D, and F scores.

The question used is similar to the question Gallup uses for the Phi Beta Kappa Poll evaluation of education. Here is how it was worded:

Grades are often used as a way of rating the quality of work someone performs. I would like to ask you to grade some familiar Pennsylvania institutions in the same way. What grade would you give to each of the following? Would you give an A for excellent, a B for good, a C for average, a D for below average, or an F for failing?

All together fifteen institutions were graded. The institutions under review were: state government, local governments, state elected officials, local elected officials, local public schools, public colleges and universities, private colleges and universities, state and local courts, local police, and several high profile state executive branch departments—Transportation, Public Welfare, Environmental Policy, Aging, Conservation and Natural Resources, and Revenue.

Overall grades were calculated by averaging individual grades given by each poll respondent - for example if an agency received 10-percent A’s, 15-percent B’s, 55-percent C’s, and 20-percent D’s, its “final grade” would be a C.

One thing that is very clear from analyzing all the data—the public is a tough grader.

None of the fifteen institutions graded finished with an A. The closest (and the highest graded) in the study were private colleges and universities (28% A) followed closely by local police (27%) and public colleges and universities (21%)

These three plus the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR) finished with a B average. So, the B’s include private colleges (70% B or better), public colleges (69% B or better), local police (69% B or better) and DCNR (52% B or better).
That is about as good as it gets.

The other eleven institutions studied all compiled C averages. PennDOT and public schools were the highest in this group. Most of the other institutions graded were clustered closely together in the C range. The Department of Public Welfare scored the lowest of these.

Who got the worst grades overall--the highest percentage of D's or F's? That distinction goes most notably to the Department of Public Welfare to which almost one in four people (23%) awarded a D or F. Welfare was followed by local public schools, awarded a D or F by almost one in every five (19%). And about one in six people gave a D's or an F to local government, to local elected officials, and to PennDOT.

A follow-up question asked people to judge the best performing Pennsylvania institutions:

Now, thinking about the list that I read to you, who on that list would you say was doing the best job overall?

The responses are interesting because they force people to make a choice among the fifteen graded institutions. Which is the best?

In general, the results are consistent with the individual grades awarded to specific institutions. The support for these Pennsylvania institutions seems very broad, if not always particularly deep.

Each of the fifteen institutions received at least one percent of the votes as doing the best job overall. However, only two institutions scored in the double digits: local police, judged best by 17 percent, and public schools, judged best by 13 percent. Two others, state government and private colleges, were rated best by nine percent.

A final question asked people to judge the worst performing Pennsylvania institutions:

And thinking about the same list, who is doing the worst job overall?

As with the previous question the responses are interesting because they force people to make a choice among the fifteen graded institutions. Which is the worst?

First the good news: two of the fifteen institutions received less than one percent of the vote as doing the worst job overall - public colleges and universities and private colleges and universities. Three additional institutions received three percent or less of the worst votes - DCNR, Department of Revenue, and state and local courts.

And the not so good news: five other institutions received the lion's share of the worst votes -- PennDOT (12%), local public schools (11%) and Department of Public Welfare (11%), state government (8%) and local government (7%).

So, what can we deduce from all of this? Are these good grades or not so good, and what significance might they have for public policy and government?
First, the obvious: the grades are drawn from a single poll. And the survey needs to be done periodically to determine if the results are stable and consistent over time. And we do plan to periodically repeat the survey and probably add other agencies to the grading.

Second, what do the grades mean? This is harder because the poll asks only what the grade should be, but not why. For example, is Public Welfare's low grade a reflection of its actual performance or more a reflection of the unpopularity of welfare programs?

And why are local police and colleges and universities so highly graded, while other institutions--including local government and local officials -- don't do so well?

Finally, what does it mean that statistically at least most of our institutions are "average" - that is most of us give most of them a C most of the time. Is average good enough?

Perhaps it is, but many would argue otherwise. Most of us do not strive to be average in our personal life, so why would we want it in our public life?

And average grades do little to inspire confidence and trust in government. Believing that our governmental institutions are average undoubtedly feeds widespread cynicism about government in general.

In the end, the question raised by these grades may not be whether average is good enough - but is average as good as we can do.

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