

# We Must Re-Establish Standards in Higher Education

**Michael Wesley Suman**

*Editors' Note: Professor Suman was asked to comment on the General Education curriculum at UCLA as part of the Academic Senate Program Review process. His response, written on November 2, 2022, follows below.*

Dear Review Team:

I have taught Communication 10, Introduction to Interpersonal and Mass Communication, since spring 1995. I was also a TA for the class from the mid-1980s until 1992. So, I have over thirty-five years of experience with this class.

I applaud the efforts of the General Education Governance Committee (GEGC) to uphold standards for General Education (GE) classes. However, given the general state of the university and larger trends in education, the battle for standards is being lost.

One main trend I have noticed over the last several decades is that students are being given ever-higher grades for ever-lessening amounts of work. Expectations of students have been diminished. At the same time, grade inflation is out of control, and this has a devastating effect on student learning. You have access to the class GPAs so you know that many classes have an average grade of "A." At the same time, as anyone would see if they gave challenging exams and paper assignments, the quality of student work varies widely. Therefore, in many classes, there are no standards of which to speak.

What lessons do students learn from this? How would they know how to distinguish outstanding from excellent from very good from good from fair from poor work? It all gets an "A." This is obviously a

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**Michael Wesley Suman** is a sociologist and senior continuing lecturer in the Department of Communication at UCLA; [msuman@ucla.edu](mailto:msuman@ucla.edu). He wrote "Equity Begins at the Top: A Modest Proposal," which appeared in our winter 2021 issue.

disincentive for working hard. It is also the case that some classes are so easy, requiring so little effort, that there is no way to distinguish quality work.

At the same time, given that UCLA has more applicants than any other college/university in the country, it is astonishing how many poor students are admitted, poor both in terms of quality of work and amount of effort put forth. For example, every quarter I have students who cannot even write a proper sentence in English. And here I am not talking about foreign students for whom English is a second language. Yet these very same students are “achieving” high grades in many classes. How is this possible? It is obvious that many students are admitted to UCLA on grounds other than intellectual and academic merit. This also has the effect of pulling down standards.

I have heard many defenses of giving away high grades. In the end, these rationalizations are nonsense. Guilty instructors are not doing their jobs. The real reasons include laziness, cowardice, the desire to be popular, and avoidance of the difficult job of truly educating students.

On the other hand, those instructors who do attempt to do their jobs responsibly are punished with smaller enrollments and bad evaluations.

Some years ago, UCLA lecturers were threatened with layoffs. This motivated me to teach an undergraduate class across town at USC. I had heard that the standards at the school were considerably looser than at UCLA, so I adjusted a bit to survive there. For example, work that I would have given a “C” at UCLA, I gave a “B.” But this did not suffice. A student said to me, “Why am I getting an ‘A’ in all my other classes, but a ‘B’ in yours?” I did not say so, but of course the reason was that these other classes had no standards. I remember walking through the USC campus and thinking that the whole educational process there, or at least the part that I was participating in, was an elaborate charade. That same question (“Why am I getting an ‘A’ in all my other classes, but a ‘C’ in yours?”) was recently leveled at me at UCLA. I am afraid that our university has followed the same path toward mediocrity, or worse.

We need to expect more of students. We need to increase the amount of work required of them. We need to reverse grade inflation and reward hard work and merit. We need to reestablish standards.

The university is beset by a whole host of other problems, but those issues are for another day.

Thanks for reading my letter.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Suman". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first letter of each word being capitalized and prominent.

Michael Wesley Suman  
Lecturer in Communication