

The Worth of Your Work: Shades of Gray Takes on Grading at Skidmore

Inflation and Equity

Bill Stitson

Tuesday's discussion featured John Brestoff (Senate, class of '08), Professor Grace Burton (interim Dean of Studies), Professor Larry Opitz (Chair, Committee on Appointments, Promotions and Tenure), Professor Bob Turner (Chair, Committee on Academic Standing), Joe Stankovich (Office of Institutional Research), Molly Appel (Senate, class of '07), and Professor Catherine Golden (Honors Council). The rest of the evening was moderated by alumna Lauren Masterson (HF President emeritus, class of '05).

Prof. Burton opened Tuesday night by describing how she thought about grades in economic terms. Nearly a form of currency in the academic world, transcripts can be cashed in to attain larger paychecks later in life. According to the "tome," there is a correlation between strong GPAs and high salary, but it was suggested that graduates with higher GPAs are simply good at what they do, and succeed in their careers based on job performance. Prof. Opitz shared his personal disbelief in grades, arguing that employers "don't care" and graduate schools instead look for strong recommendations. This was confirmed via personal anecdote from Prof. Turner, who said that past students of his with mediocre grades have been accepted to prestigious law schools based on recommendations.

For a while, many comments from the crowd suggested that grades are a motivator for students, regardless of whether or not they

"actually mattered." Catherine Golden offered yet another reason for grading, saying grades are just as much an educational tool as they are an evaluation. She terms what she does "responding" to papers, and writes lower grades increasingly smaller on the page. While her students often take grades personally, she maintains that the assessment is of the paper, not the person, and are meant to help them improve.

But what causes grade inflation? John Brestoff was concerned that colleges look better if more of their students attend graduate school. Another student said, "You can't fail someone paying \$40,000 a year." (to which many faculty replied, "Yes you can.") How about the growing applicant pool? Faculty agreed that in recent years, both the number and caliber of students applying to Skidmore have risen noticeably. Should Skidmore raise the bar with more challenging coursework to accommodate? Prof. Turner thought so, because if students realize that they can get good grades with little effort, they will take advantage, and, in short, "grade inflation leads to pot smoking."

Knowing that the current grading system is inherently flawed (you can't force an objective, quantitative system on a subjective, qualitative question, as one student put it), what are the alternatives? The evening was adjourned, well over time, in anticipation of Wednesday's follow-up. Meanwhile, Prof. Boshoff had papers to grade.

What is Shades of Gray?

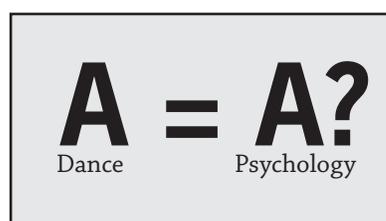
Perhaps you saw the posters, all 1,000 of them, that sprung up out of nowhere after a weekend of darkness (thank you, Linda). Shades of Gray, the Honors Forum's annual, interactive panel discussion, began just after the Enron scandal five years ago when then Honors Forum president, **Justin Rogers Cooper**, realized that many people on campus were having similar conversations, yet nothing was being done to engage in a community wide conversation. From that idea, the first Shades of Gray was born.

In the past five years Shades of Gray has been evoking controversial and relevant topics which challenging the community to come together to explore them in an intellectual setting. This type of raising awareness and promoting critical thought that occurs surrounding Shades of Gray is the Honors Forum at its best, and makes this event one of the Honors Forum's most popular.

This year Shades of Gray began with Joe Stankovich providing data from a 2003 national survey concluding that while the percentage of students with A averages are up, average study time is down. This raised many questions for the panel including: what is the phenomenon of grade inflation? Does it even exist? What is the value of grades? Is there a better alternative? And with these questions driving the conversation, thus began Shades of Gray 2006: Making the Grade.

Alternative Grading

Alli Feigen



How would you feel if there were no grades? Would you be relieved of the threat of failure and take more academic risks? Would you fear for your future in graduate school or in a career? Would you never write another paper for the rest of your life?

These questions and others were explored at the second of the two Shades of Grey discussions. The proposal of alternative grading brought about many aspirations as well as concerns for panelists, Larry Opitz (Theater, CAPT); Mary DiSanto-Rose (Dance); Beau Breslin (Chair of Law and Society); Rik Scarce (Sociology); Mark Hoff-

man (Mathematics); Petria Flemming (SGA president); and Molly Lemire (Head Tour Guide), as well as the audience of about 65 people.

The lively conversation ran the gamut of assessment possibilities from breaking down grades into identifiable and quantifiable parts to eliminating grades all together and implementing one cumulative, high-stakes test. The audience's general consensus was that the problem with grading is it serves two different and opposing functions: it is a means to compare students and rewards the frontrunners with the promise of bigger and better experiences later in life. It is also supposed to be an educational tool used to communicate progress

and to further learning. By understanding these contrasting purposes and recognizing that some individuals value one more highly than the other, the compromise that made most sense to the audience was keeping the current grading practice, yet supplementing it with written evaluations to increase the potential for learning.

The overall theme of this year's Shades of Grey discussion was: what is the value of grades? And, at the conclusion of the second night of discussion, even though we never reached an answer, the depth of the conversation evidenced serious, critical thought on the issue, which is a regular part of almost every Skidmore community member's life. Without a doubt, this Shades of Grey discussion series was a huge success!

HFers Take Academics into the woods

Andrew Bernstein

Creative thought matters and learning does not stop in the classroom. To bring learning out of the academic buildings and into the Northwoods, Forum members and a new campus group, the Friends of the Northwoods Committee, have collaborated to plan a semester-long biweekly lecture and nature walk series.

The series began on Saturday, January 28 with a talk by Friends of the Northwoods Committee member Professor Bob Jones about the history of Skidmore's wooded reserve. That history, which is intertwined with Skidmore's own, followed the woods through its evolution from the site of Victorian-era hotels to use as a private park.

After the hike the whole group walked around the Wood's snowy perimeter, where remnants of the structures Jones had discussed are still visible. The event was attended by students, faculty and members of the Saratoga

community. At the end of the day, the consensus among committee members was that it was great to see people in



Christina Schull '06 discusses the impact of invasive species on January 28.

the woods who might not have otherwise ventured beyond the perimeter road.

Honors Forum member Heather Moore, who is also a member of the Friends of the Northwoods Committee said about the event, "It was a great mix of people that we had on

Saturday, community outreach is a huge thing. The woods are something that can connect us to the community."

At the conclusion of that first hike, many people returned to Bolton Hall for an Honors Forum sponsored snack.

The second event in the series took place two weeks later on February 11, and featured a talk by Professor of Environ-

mental Science Karen Kellogg on the ecology and the environment of the Woods. This time the discussion was followed by a moon lit hike through the woods, again followed by a Forum-sponsored snack.

Most recently, on February 25 senior Environmental Science major Christina Schull discussed her research on invasive species in the Northwoods, and led a walk through the Woods. In the coming weeks Professor of English, Linda Hall, will discuss literature of nature, and other events have been planned for the following weeks. If you are interested in attending one of these events look for advertising around campus or contact Heather Moore at h1moore@skidmore.edu or Professor Jones at rjones@skidmore.edu. The Friends of the Northwoods Committee meets in the Dana Atrium every Thursday at 5:45.

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: David Steinberger '09

Molly Appel

David Steinberger '09 has loved ornithology since his 7th grade biology teacher first introduced him to the world of bird-watching. As his passion for it evolved, so did his skill and degree of participation. David says that after a few years of glancing through field guides, identifying birds has become second nature to him. In high school, David and a team of friends participated in the 24-hour "World Series of Birding" marathon in New Jersey (they drove all the way from hometown Clifton Park!).

The team, who had collected sponsors offering \$1 per species identified, brought back \$2000 for the Wilton Wildlife preserve.

David, a prospective biology major and studio art minor, has taken the idea of student leadership and initiative behind the HF's new Citizenship requirement to heart with a project meant to inspire some new bird-lovers. David organized a Skidmore Great Backyard Bird-hunt. The Birdhunt, organized through the Cornell Ornithology Lab and the National

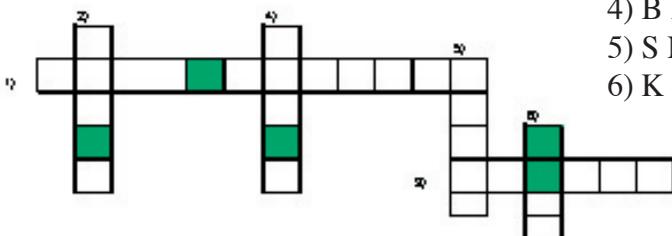
Audubon Society, is meant to encourage "citizen science": anyone can watch feeders in their own yards, tally the species, and send their data to the lab. Scientists use this data for tracking species growth. On the weekend of February 17th-20th, in spite of freezing temperatures, falling trees, and lack of power, David and five other students gathered to tally the bird species of the North Woods and Saratoga Lake area. Altogether they tallied 20 species of birds (and counted 750 geese!). Prof. Mary C. Lynn,

an avid bird-watcher herself, invited the group over to her house for some cocoa and feeder-watching. Through this successful experience, David has been inspired to start a bird-watching club that would meet in Falstaff's to eat breakfast and observe the Falstaff's bird feeders. If you would like to become involved in David's birding excursions, or simply have any questions about bird-watching, you can contact David at dsteinbe@skidmore.edu.

FORUM FUN! WORD SCRAMBLE

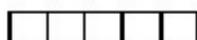
Directions: Unscramble the words to the right and place them in the designated spots on the crossword puzzle squares.

Next answer the riddle below by creating a word using the letters in the shaded boxes. (hint: the words' theme is 're-building')



- 1) S O T U C N N C R O T I
- 2) O E H L S
- 3) V H E O L S
- 4) B L U D I
- 5) S N O E I
- 6) K O W R

Riddle: What gets wetter and wetter the more it dries?



Created by Samantha Morrison

Forum Calendar

March 24th

Friday @4: What is Art at Skidmore?

March 25th

Afternoon at the Hyde Museum

April 8th

Day trip to the Norman Rockwell Museum