



# College GPA'S Impact on Students' Learning Initiative—Taking X University as an Example

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**Abstract.** Grade Point Average (GPA) was introduced in Chinese Universities as a method to facilitate students to learn and create a more ideal environment for competition to select elites. However, it is causing troubles gradually. In China, GPA system improve the learning outcome dramatically, but also incur the grade inflation and a dropping of free explorations. Learning under the shadow of GPA and the following cruel competitions, students' learning initiative is shrinking due to the lack of room to make mistakes as well as the high pressure of chasing grade-maximization. The system which aimed to improve the operating efficiency now leads to individual flattening, utilitarianism prevailing as well as the lacking of self-meaning. This research will focus on students' real experience to see how GPA impacts them in mental and behavior aspects and try to analysis the interaction between the GPA evaluation system and the atmosphere or culture it created. In the end, it will make suggestion on how to improve the system based on students' real need, not experts' allegations.

**Keywords:** GPA · Higher Education · Students' Initiative · student's development

## 1 Introduction

In 2005, the Chinese Education Department enacted the Provisions on the Administration of Students in Regular Institutions of Higher Education, which gave more discretion to universities to decide how to evaluate students' performance. It fueled the improvement of the credit system by adding knock-out system, which means with the help of grade system. It laid the foundation for the prevail of Grade Point Average (GPA). Introduced in 2015, GPA system was a response to build "Double-first Class" which carrying the expectation to catch up with Western universities.

There is no doubt that the GPA system has drove China's higher education evaluation system to a higher level. However, the achievements always mixed hidden danger. Till 2020, the gross enrollment rate of higher education in China has reached 54.5%, which is more than fifty times than that in 1978 [1]. It means there will be millions of students attend universities every year. The high penetration of higher education reflects the progress of Chinese education, but also causes diploma inflation. Entering universities is no longer the destination of learning, but an early warning of another cruel competition,

especially in top universities. To select true elites, the evaluation system is constantly being de-contextualized and simplified. In some universities, GPA can take up 90% in the comprehensive assessment of students. From awards recommendation, postgraduate recommendation, oversea learning to obtaining employment, the importance of GPA is enhancing, and the meaning of GPA is no longer the proving of one-aspect ability, but the only pronoun of one student.

Different from former researches which focus on the system or just show the feeling of regret for the falling of humanistic spirit, this research hope to reflect the true feeling of students under the GPA system now and try to know their real needs. Taking one of the top universities – X University, for example, the researcher expects to make further contribution in the exploration of higher education through questionnaires and interviews, and try to offer some practical ways to improve the current situation.

## 2 Research Background

For the importance of higher education, educators and researchers in this field, both Chinese and the western, have conducted lots of studies which focus on the educational system and practical process.

“Involution”, was first used in analyzing Java’s economic response to population growth and Dutch Colonial rule [2]. The theory of involution holds that a greater input (such as time and energy) does not yield proportional output (more meaningful innovation). This word now used to describe Chinese students in universities who input increasingly more in study but produce less useful production, or gain nothing on cultivating personal ability at all.

There are some scholars who thought this terrible situation was caused by the expansion of Chinese universities [3]. As we have mentioned, the popularizing rate of higher education in China has reached 54.4%. The proportion seemed lower than western countries, but the total number of students attend higher education will be astonishing when the population base in China is considered. It means great progress has been made obviously, but it also causes troubles when the requirement overstretches the capability of high-quality educational and social resource. With the dividend of reform and opening up come to a bottleneck, there are less and less job position to offer to present graduates. Additionally, the popularization of bachelor degrees coming along with the devalue of diploma.

Due to the fading of advantages, students need to compete among peers to get the opportunity to get high mark to attend further learning. Analyzed by Yuan Jinshan and Xin Taiqi (2021), nowadays students in universities need to take the initiative in the battle among educational field, which means getting grades as higher as they can and holding every opportunity tightly to make sure they will not lag behind [4]. Combined with this need of reality, GPA evaluation system generally become the effective way to quantify students’ abilities.

In September 2020, an article named Top Colleges: A Breakthrough in life under GPA soon caught out after publishing. The author dissected the outstanding image of “top students” to find the sensitive but dumb heart of them. “GPA can almost decide everything. If you cannot get a GPA of 3.6 or higher, it means you lots opportunities to

have a double minor. Additionally, you need to rank in top 10% of all in GPA ranking to get the entering ticket for postgraduate recommendation. Even in working fields, such as finance and IT, GPA can even decide which level of company you can go to" [5].

Deeply immersed in a competitive environment, being top not only means you get one high mark, but in all courses you attend. Just the same as grade inflation emerged in western universities, Chinese students also confronting the dilemma for chasing higher mark endlessly. The majority of energy and time must be paid on how to "make" grade high, which will stifle their intention to try new areas and ponder in a question deeply, for there is no commitment for high marks.

### 3 Literature Review

There are lots of scholars who have done previous researches related to this topic. Dr. Chen Yuxiang (2009) tried to rationalize the mechanism of selection in higher education in China, for it will facilitate students to learn and maximize the resource utilization rate. This idea built the foundation of GPA evaluation system from institutional legitimacy, justice and efficiency [6]. When grade inflation was widely discussed, Dr. Liu Qiang (2016) thought the "cooperation" between professors and students created this dilemma, for students were keen on high marks and professors wanted to make peace through giving them what they want. Dr. Liu's research mainly focus on what faculties can do, such as create a flexible learning atmosphere or replace hundred-mark system by grading [7]. He recognized the impact of GPA system, but cannot offer practical suggestions to smooth the current tense between students and grades.

In 2020, with the spreading of photo of a student who was watching his computer while riding a bike in Tsinghua University, the public started to focus on "involution" in higher education. Before that, Dr. Guo Fangfang (2012) had mentioned the learning culture change caused by GPA evaluation. She thought GPA system put too much attention on the grade and ranking, but not the improvement of ability and knowledge. "The non-contextualized and results-oriented evaluate system has objectified students in the process of learning and lead them to flatten in this process of competition" [8]. In Dr. Guo's opinion, the grade-oriented culture created by GPA made students only pay attention to the result and the quantitative score, but not the pleasure of learning. Moreover, this way can only select students who are suitably well to the GPA system, but not the elites with sound minds that people and the society expected. Based on existing evidences, Dr. Guo suggested educators should try to create an atmosphere which focus on the process and comprehensive aspects to replace the grade-oriented one.

Dr. Zhu Wenhui (2021) recognized that if involution emerged in one field, people should pay attention on both the outer factors and the inner. Although his research mainly focused on the involution in academic output, the idea of the "interaction between individual and system" [9] could inspire deeper understanding of the relationship between GPA system and students. He suggested that until the evaluation system was improved, the call for curiosity and courage to explore would not be realized. Dr. Yuan Jinshan and Dr. Xin Taiqi (2021) thought the involution in higher education cause the effectlessness of GPA evaluation, for students have created the method to cater what evaluation system need, such as only choosing easy courses and only focusing on how to get a higher grade

but not gaining knowledge. Furthermore, the competition which focuses on the quantifiable factors would lead to the lack of meaning, for there are no one focus on knowledge and learning but only care about grade and ranking [4]. Immersing in involution for a long time, students' initiative and personality will be stifled. If things continued in this way, the graduates would be all who only care about personal interests with a barren inter-mind.

Having considered the perniciousness of involution caused by GPA system, Dr. Lin Yangqian (2021) suggest we should set up early warning mechanism of involution with the assistance of big data [10]. Additionally, psychological counseling and the improvement of resource allocation can make a different to current situation. She mentioned that besides the chasing of high mark, the obsession with the all-rounder also cause anxiety among students.

Previous researches have made a great contribution to the study of GPA system and involution culture, however, most of them focus on the improvement of whole system which lack of feasibility in a short time. They also suggested students change their mind but this still cannot make a difference.

## 4 Methodology

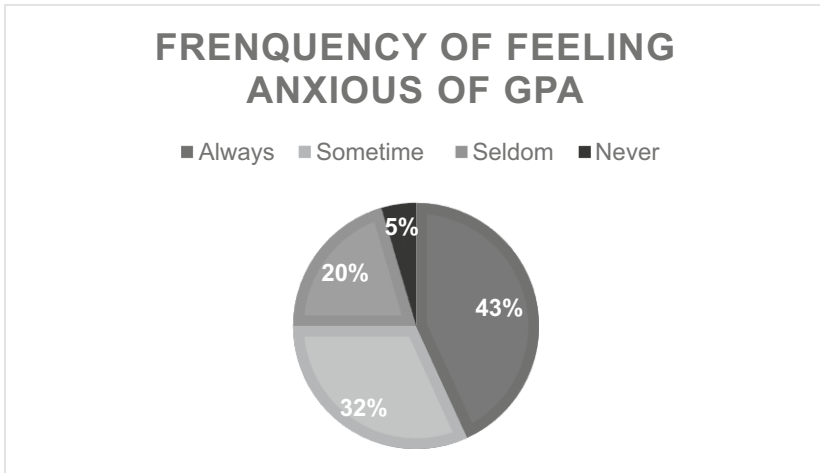
In this research, the researcher will collect first-hand information about X University student's attitudes and feeling about GPA by questionnaire. Based on students' true feelings and requirements, the researcher will then try to give some suggestion to improve the situation based on an overview made by Dr. Cao Wenzhen and Dr. Wang Taoli on the existing GPA systems in Chinese universities.

## 5 Analysis

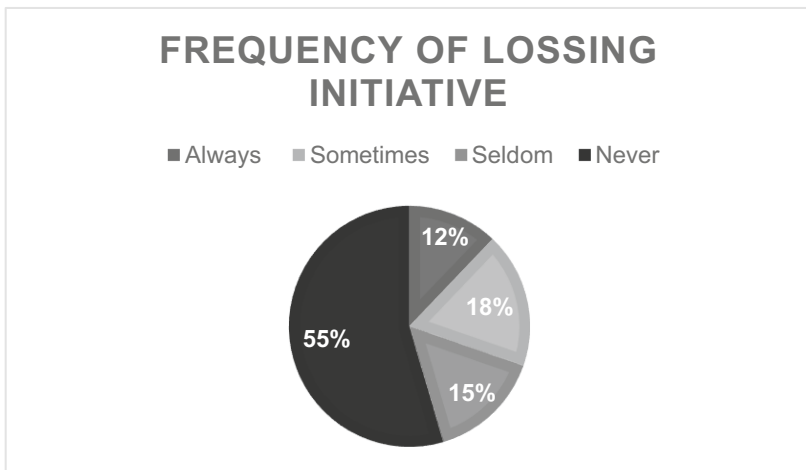
This questionnaire survey got 65 samples in total, which has reached the basic need of sociological analysis. Most of participants major in linguistics and literal arts, and mainly their GPAs are concentrated between 4.0–3.0.

The statistics show that 75% of them are ready to chase a high grade as possible as they can. There are three main reasons why they need a high grade, respectively are "a high GPA can offer me postgraduate recommendation and will be helpful when I get employment in the future", "a high GPA can offer me more freedom to do what I want without being held back, such as study double major or exchange abroad" and "a high GPA means I am good enough". Only one student chose "A high GPA means I master the knowledge".

When comes to Fig. 1, it shows students attitude toward GPA, where more than 40% students say "they are always anxious about GPA", only 5% of the total take no notice of it. More than 34% for a nice grade, and 43.18% of them will do it much or less. To get a high GPA, 65.91% of the them say they will give up things which not related to courses when the exam week coming. However, there are still 11.36% of students saying they almost drop everything they like for a high mark. When they performed poorly in one term and experience a shrink of GPA, about 45% of them experienced anxious until the GPA has risen.



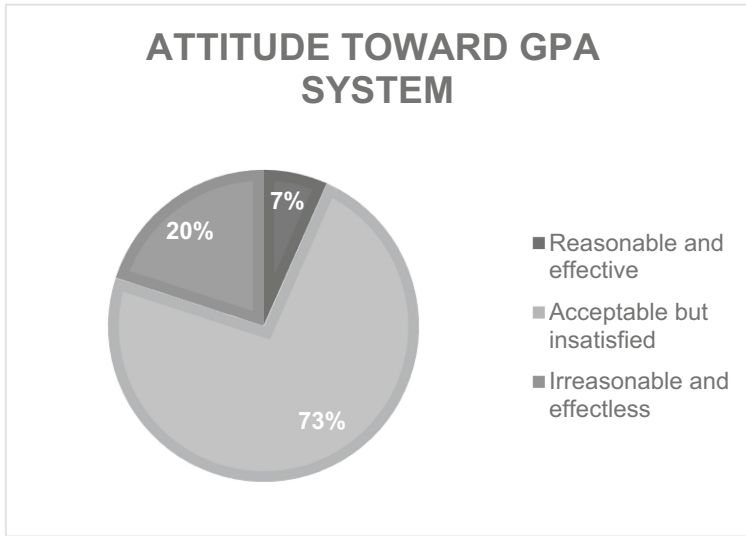
**Fig. 1.** Frequency of feeling anxious about GPA (credit: original)



**Fig. 2.** Frequency of losing initiative 2 (credit: original)

Figure 2 shows that about 85% of students feel lack of opportunity and courage to try new area for the competition of GPA. 29.54% of them thought they have become grade-oriented robots which lack the curiosity and initiative to learn.

According to Fig. 3, 75% of students thought that “Although GPA evaluation system fuel the interpersonal coldness, jealousy among peers, and utilitarianism, it still realized need of selection in higher education with efficiency and equity.” 9.09% of students thought the law of the jungle is the original color of social life, therefore GPA system have no defect to criticize.” 15.91% of them thought “GPA system is not good at all, for it can only flatten people but lack of the function to select the real elites with sound minds.”



**Fig. 3.** Attitude toward GPA system (credit: original)

The existing GPA system in X university now only allow students to retake the course when they fail the exam. To this situation, 36.36% of students hope they can get one more chance to retake the course which they cannot get an ideal mark. The same proportion of students wish some courses can take pass system instead of scoring system. 27.27% of them thought faculties should consider more factors when they recking students, for they have attached too much weight on the proportion of GPA grade (90%).

## 6 Discussion

Through analyzing samples, the anxiety and involution exist widely in X University. Due to the excessive importance of GPA, there are many students who have to drop personal interests, private times and entertainment in exchange of a high grade. To survive under the competition, they will choose easy courses which they do not like and have less courage to take high-risk venture.

This situation will cause damage on both students physical and mental health. According to the statistics, almost half of the student are afraid of getting a low mark. Under this pressure, students cannot have enough time to take a break, which will lead to strain of lumbar muscles or other chronic disease. Moreover, when students attaching too much attention on high mark or success, it will make them have no courage to confront failure, which can lead to mental diseases such as depression or social anxiety [10].

Additionally, it will create an unhealthy culture among college, in which everyone only manages to get a high mark but true knowledge. Due to the fear of challenges, about 85% of students in X University are afraid of trying the new area, which will stop them to develop comprehensively. It will also cause the bad drives out the good. For there are more and more students start to attend easy courses to get high mark without caring about

the contains of courses, their high mark will threaten those who really want to learn, because understanding something takes more time than reciting, and contemplating is slower than meaningless self-cramming.

When talking about involution, public opinion and some scholars have always believed that they are students who actively pursue high utilitarian scores. However, the extreme importance of GPA system and the following cut-throat competitions do leave students no choice but focus on their grades. When grade became the only standard to rank students, students will also take grades as the only method to judge themselves. If the overall situation continues in a long run, the function of cultivating elites of universities will be damaged.

When comes to the solution, the empty advice had been proved effectless and the social resources increase is still at a far distant date. Therefore, it is necessary to make proper adjustments to the existing GPA system. According to the statistics, there are three methods that have been mentioned. In reference to the research made by Dr. Cao and Dr. Wang, more than 75% of "double-first class" universities' evaluation system in China allow the pass system and scoring system simultaneously [11]. Therefore, X University can try to add more courses to the evaluation system. Additionally, Nanjing University has allowed students to retake the course which they not perform ideal before [11], it will increase students' initiative to learn better and avoid decrease the impact of one low grade. It will certainly smooth the GPA anxiety and give students more room to try and make mistakes. Moreover, in the overall ranking of students, the university can take more factors into concern.

## 7 Conclusion

To ease college students' involution and anxiety of GPA, there is still a long way to go. It is very important for the university to understand that the factors lead to involution was not only the students' attitude, the system also has let underlying problems. Therefore, to know what student's thought are, and giving feedback about existing GPA system is quite important to manage this situation in a more effective way.

According to the statistics, it is clear that not every student only care about GPA when they first attend to college and have no initiative to learn new things. However, the existing system and cruel competition they may face leave them no choice but focus on the grade. Additionally, the grade-oriented culture and peer pressure also push students to left knowledge for pure grades. Although the lack of initiative to learn was a compounded problem, the university still have methods to improve it and try to make it the best under the current circumstances.

Questionnaire is the method to collect information in this research. Due to the limitation of sample radius, the information used here were mainly from students who major in liberal arts (languages, literatures, economy, etc.) but lack of the data from scientific students. Considering the difference between learning content and learning methods of the two types of students, the result of this research may slightly deprive from the full sample situation. Additionally, due to the limit of words, strict quantitative analysis was not used in this research to get the quantitative embodiment of the impact GPA putting on students' learning initiative.

For further research, quantitative embodiment ought to be used to measure the accurate degree of students' initiative to post more scientific suggestion on credit policy making. Tracking monitoring of the changing of students' learning initiative with the adjustment of credit policy should also be taken in further study to achieve a comprehensive understanding for higher educational development.

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