



Unit

1

Challenges in Higher Education

Lead-in

“When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them.”

—Confucius (551 BC–479 BC), Chinese philosopher

“The mark of higher education isn’t the knowledge you accumulate in your head. It’s the skills you gain about how to learn.”

—Adam Grant (1981–), Professor at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania



Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, you will be able to

- ✓ achieve a level of understanding of challenges in higher education;
- ✓ distinguish different attitudes towards issues regarding challenges in higher education;
- ✓ name elements of an argument according to Toulmin's Model and describe the function of each element;
- ✓ identify elements of an argument in an argumentative essay.

Reading

Introduction to Text A

Text A is adapted from an editorial article, first published in print on March 8, 1998 of the national edition of *The New York Times* with the headline: "Why Colleges Shower Their Students with A's". The author of this article, Brent Staples, has been a member of the *Times* editorial board since 1990. In 2019, Mr. Staples won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing, *The New York Times*' first winner for editorial writing in 23 years. Editorials and essays from throughout his career are included in dozens of college readers.



Why Colleges Shower Their Students with A's

① The economist Milton Friedman taught that superior products **flourished** and **shabby** ones died out when consumers voted **emphatically** with their dollars. But the truth of the marketplace is that shabby products can do just fine if they sustain the **veneer** of quality while slipping downhill, as has much of higher education. Faced with demanding consumers and **stiff** competition, colleges have simply issued more and more A's, **stoking** grade inflation and devaluing degrees. Grade inflation is in full **gallop** at every level, from struggling community institutions to the elites of the Ivy League. In

some cases, campuswide averages have **crept** up from a C just 10 years ago to B-plus today.

② Some departments shower students with A's to fill poorly attended courses that might otherwise be canceled. Individual professors inflate grades after consumer-conscious administrators **hound** them into it. Professors at every level inflate to escape negative evaluations by students, whose opinions now **figure in tenure** and promotion decisions. The most **vulnerable** teachers are the part-timers who have no job security and who now teach more than half of all college courses. Writing in the last issue of the journal *Academe*, two part-timers suggest that students routinely corner adjuncts, threatening to complain if they do not turn C's into A's. An Ivy League professor said recently that if tenure disappeared, universities would be "free to sell diplomas **outright**".

③ The consumer appetite for less **rigorous** education is nowhere more evident than in the University of Phoenix, a profit-making school that **shuns** traditional scholarship and offers a curriculum so superficial that critics compare it to a drive-through restaurant. Two hundred colleges have closed since a businessman **dreamed up** Phoenix 20 years ago. Meanwhile, the university has expanded to 60 sites spread around the country and more than 40,000 students, making it the country's largest private university.

④ Phoenix competes directly with the big state universities and lesser-known small colleges, all of which fear a student drain. But the elite schools fear each other and their customers, the students, who are becoming increasingly **restive** about the cost of a first-tier diploma, which now exceeds \$120,000. Faced with the prospect of crushing debt, students are treating grades as a matter of life and death—occasionally even suing to have grades revised upward.

⑤ Twenty years ago students **grumbled**, then lived with the grades they were given. Today, colleges of every **stature** permit them to appeal low grades through deans or permanent boards of inquiry. In *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Professor Paul Korshin of the University of Pennsylvania recently described his **grievance** panel as the "**rhinoplasty** committee" because it does "cosmetic surgery" on up to 500 transcripts a year.

⑥ One way to **stanch** inflation is to change the way the grade point average is calculated. Under most formulas, all courses are given equal weight, so math, science and less-challenging courses have equal impact on the averages. This arrangement rewards students who **gravitate to** courses where high marks are generously given and punishes those who **seek out** math and science courses, where far fewer students get the top grade.



⑦ Valen Johnson, a Duke University statistics professor, **came under** heavy **fire** from both students and faculty when he proposed recalculating the grade point average to give rigorously graded courses greater weight. The student government **beat back** the plan with the help of teachers in the humanities, who worried that students might abandon them for other courses that they currently avoided. Other universities have expressed interest in adopting the Johnson plan, but want their names kept secret to avoid a **backlash**.

⑧ Addicted to **counterfeit** excellence, colleges, parents and students are unlikely to give it up. As a consequence, diplomas will become weaker and more **ornamental** as the years go by.

(628 words)



Words

backlash	<i>n.</i>	a strong feeling among a group of people in reaction to a change or recent events in society or politics (社会或政治方面的) 强烈反响, 强烈反对
counterfeit	<i>adj.</i>	made to look like the original of something, usually for dishonest or illegal purposes 伪造的; 仿造的; 假冒的
creep	<i>v.</i>	to move slowly, quietly, and carefully, usually in order to avoid being noticed (通常指为避免注意而) 缓慢行进, 悄悄移动, 潜行
emphatically	<i>adv.</i>	in a forceful way 坚决地, 断然地
flourish	<i>v.</i>	to grow or develop successfully 茁壮成长; 繁荣; 蓬勃发展
gallop	<i>n.</i>	a fast speed 高速度
grievance	<i>n.</i>	a complaint or a strong feeling that you have been treated unfairly 不平, 委屈; 不满, 抱怨, 牢骚
grumble	<i>v.</i>	to complain about someone or something in an annoyed way 发牢骚, 抱怨, 嘟囔
hound	<i>v.</i>	to chase someone or to refuse to leave someone alone, especially because you want to get something from them 追赶; (不停地) 烦扰
ornamental	<i>adj.</i>	beautiful rather than useful 装饰性的, 装饰用的; 装饰的

outright	<i>adv.</i>	completely or immediately 彻底地，完全地；立刻；当场
restive	<i>adj.</i>	unwilling to be controlled or be patient 难驾驭的，不受管束的；焦躁不安的
rhinoplasty	<i>n.</i>	an operation to change the shape of the nose 鼻成形术
rigorous	<i>adj.</i>	careful to look at or consider every part of something to make certain it is correct or safe 严密的，缜密的；严谨的
shabby	<i>adj.</i>	looking old and in bad condition because of being used for a long time or not being cared for 破烂的，破旧的
shun	<i>v.</i>	to avoid something 避开，避免
stanch	<i>v.</i>	(staunch) to keep something from continuing (同 staunch) 制止；止住
stature	<i>n.</i>	good reputation a person or organization has, based on their behavior and ability 声望；声誉
stiff	<i>adj.</i>	severe and difficult 严厉的，严格的；艰难的
stoke	<i>v.</i>	to encourage bad ideas or feelings in a lot of people 煽动，激起（不良想法或情感）
tenure	<i>n.</i>	the right to remain permanently in a job 终身职位
veneer	<i>n.</i>	something that hides something unpleasant or unwanted 掩饰物；虚饰
vulnerable	<i>adj.</i>	able to be easily physically or mentally hurt, influenced, or attacked 易受伤的；易受影响（或攻击）的；脆弱的

Phrases

beat back	to use force to move someone or something away from you 击退，逐回
come under fire	to be criticized 遭受批评
dream up	to invent something very unusual and usually silly 凭空想出，虚构出（通常为荒诞不经的事）





figure in	to be, appear, take part, or be included in something 出现; 参加; 被包括在……中
gravitate to	to be attracted by or to move in the direction of something or someone 吸引到; 受吸引而转到
seek out	to look for someone or something, especially for a long time until you find him, her, or it (尤指费时地) 找出, 查出, 寻找

Task 1 Reading Comprehension

A. Analytical Reading

Complete the chart about the overall structure of Text A.

Introduction to the phenomenon of grade inflation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– Faced with demanding consumers and stiff competition, colleges have simply issued more and more A's, (1) _____ grade inflation and (2) _____ degrees.– Grade inflation is (3) _____ at every level, from (4) _____ to the (5) _____.
Possible reasons for grade inflation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– For some departments: (6) _____.– For individual professors: (7) _____.(8) _____.
One example	<p>Critical comments towards University of Phoenix:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">– The curriculum: (9) _____.– The scale: (10) _____.– Grades appeal: (11) _____.
One solution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">– The Johnson plan: (12) _____.– Arguments in favor of the Johnson plan: (13) _____.– Arguments against the Johnson plan: (14) _____.

(Continued)

Conclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Colleges, parents and students are unlikely to give up grade inflation because (15) _____. – As a consequence, diplomas will become (16) _____ and (17) _____ as the years go by.
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B. Detailed Reading

Answer the following questions briefly.

- 1) What are the possible reasons for grade inflation? (Paragraph 1)
- 2) “If tenure disappeared, universities would be ‘free to sell diplomas outright’.” How do you understand the saying from an Ivy League professor? (Paragraph 2)
- 3) Why does Professor Paul Korshin of the University of Pennsylvania describe his grievance panel as the “rhinoplasty committee”? (Paragraph 5)
- 4) What do you think is meant by “rigorously graded” in “recalculating the grade point average to give rigorously graded courses greater weight”? (Paragraph 7)
- 5) What can be inferred from the last paragraph?

C. Critical Reading

Discuss the following questions with your partners.

- 1) Valen Johnson, a Duke University statistics professor, proposed “recalculating the grade point average to give rigorously graded courses greater weight”. He was opposed by humanities professors. (Paragraph 7) What might have been the source of their opposition?
- 2) What solutions to grade inflation do you think would have the greatest effect on the issue? Give your reasons.

Task 2 Vocabulary Development

A. Recognizing Word Meanings

Fill in the blanks with the words given below. Change the form if necessary.

backlash
stature

gravitate
rigorous

gallop
shabby

grievance
shun

hound
veneer



- 1) The small amount of compensation is a source of _____ to the people forced to leave their homes.
- 2) The mayor foresaw no political _____ against his proposal.
- 3) If the school continues to gain in _____, it will attract the necessary financial support.
- 4) She _____ publicity after she retired from the stage.
- 5) The arrangement that all courses are given equal weight rewards students who _____ to courses where high marks are generously given.
- 6) Refrigeration of food, improved hygiene and _____ standards in the food industry prevent gastro-intestinal infections.
- 7) Individual professors inflate grades after consumer-conscious administrators _____ them into it.
- 8) She managed to hide her corrupt dealings under a _____ of respectability.
- 9) Her home is a rented one-bedroom apartment in a _____ part of town.
- 10) We had to complete the work at a _____.

B. Making a Collocation

Fill in the blanks with phrases that are close in meaning to the expressions in the brackets.

- 1) Grade inflation is _____ (at a fast speed) at every level, from struggling community institutions to the elites of the Ivy League.
- 2) While he was at the library, Steve decided to _____ (look for) some information on the history of the area.
- 3) The child may _____ (be attracted by or move in the direction of someone) the parent that is easier to manipulate or try to play one parent off against the other.
- 4) Riot police _____ (used force to move someone away) the crowds of demonstrators.
- 5) Advertising companies _____ (invented something very unusual and usually silly) a latest ploy to sell their new products.
- 6) They denied that violence and intimidation had _____ prominently _____ (appeared or took part in) achieving the decision.
- 7) The government has _____ (been criticized) for its decision to close the mines.

C. Paraphrase

Paraphrase the following sentences.

- 1) Faced with demanding consumers and stiff competition, colleges have simply issued more and more A's, stoking grade inflation and devaluing degrees.
- 2) The consumer appetite for less rigorous education is nowhere more evident than in the University of Phoenix, a profit-making school that shuns traditional scholarship and offers a curriculum so superficial that critics compare it to a drive-through restaurant.

Introduction to Text B

Text B is adapted from an essay that originally appeared in *Inside Higher Ed* on July 11, 2013. The author, Scott L. Newstok, is an associate professor of English at Rhodes College, teaching courses in Shakespeare and his Renaissance contemporaries. Newstok argues that it's time for skeptics of massive distance education to define what they value in the classroom.



A Plea for “Close Learning”



❶ **Cutting-edge** communication systems allowed universities to escape the tired **confines** of face-to-face education. Bold new technologies made it possible for thousands of geographically **dispersed** students to enroll in world-class courses. Innovative assessment mechanisms let professors supervise their pupils remotely. True, a few naysayers **fretted** about declining student attention spans and low course-completion rates. But who could object to the expansively democratic goal of bringing first-rate education to more people than ever before? The new pedagogical tools promised to be not only more affordable than traditional classes, but also more effective at measuring student progress.

❷ Journalist Nicholas Carr has chronicled the recurrent promotion of mass mediated education over the last century: the phonograph, instructional radio, televised lectures. All were **heralded** as transformative educational tools in their day. This should give us



pause as we recognize that massive open online courses, or MOOCs, are but the latest **iteration** of distance learning.

③ In response to the current enthusiasm for MOOCs, skeptical faculty have begun questioning venture capitalists eager for new markets and legislators eager to **dismantle** public funding for American higher education. Some people pushing for MOOCs speak from **laudably egalitarian** impulses to provide access for disadvantaged students. But to what are they being given access? Are broadcast lectures and online discussions the sum of a liberal education? Or is it something more than “content” delivery?

④ To state the obvious: There’s a personal, human element to liberal education, what John Henry Newman once called “the living voice, the breathing form, the expressive countenance” (2001, p.14). We who cherish personalized instruction would benefit from a **pithy** phrase to defend and promote this millennia-tested practice. I propose that we begin calling it close learning, a term that evokes the laborious, time-consuming, and costly but irreplaceable **proximity** between teacher and student. Close learning exposes the **stark** deficiencies of mass distance learning, such as MOOCs, and its haste to reduce dynamism, responsiveness, and presence.

⑤ The old-fashioned Socratic seminar is where we actually find interactive learning and open-ended inquiry. In the close learning of the live seminar, spontaneity rules. Both students and teachers are always at a crossroads, collaboratively deciding where to go and where to stop; how to navigate and how to detour; and how to close the distance between a topic and the people discussing it. For the seminar to work, certain limits are required (most centrally, a limit in size). But these finite limits enable the infinity of questioning.

⑥ In a seminar, a student can ask for clarification, and challenge a teacher; a teacher can shift course when spirits are **flagging**; a stray thought can spark a new insight. Isn’t this the kind of nonconformist “thinking outside the box” that business leaders adore? So why is there such a rush to freeze knowledge and distribute it in a frozen form? Even Coursera cofounder Andrew Ng **concedes** that the real value of a college education “isn’t just the content...The real value is the interactions with professors and other equally bright students” (quoted in Oremus 2012).

⑦ Close learning **transcends** disciplines. In every field, students must **incline toward** their subjects: leaning into a sentence, to craft it most persuasively; leaning into an archival document, to determine an uncertain provenance; leaning into a musical score, to poise the body for performance; leaning into a data set, to discern emerging patterns; leaning into a laboratory instrument, to interpret what is viewed. MOOCs, in contrast, encourage students and faculty to lean back, not to cultivate the disciplined attention necessary to engage fully in a complex task. Low completion rates for MOOCs (still **hovering** around 10 percent) speak for themselves.