

Student disengagement in universities:

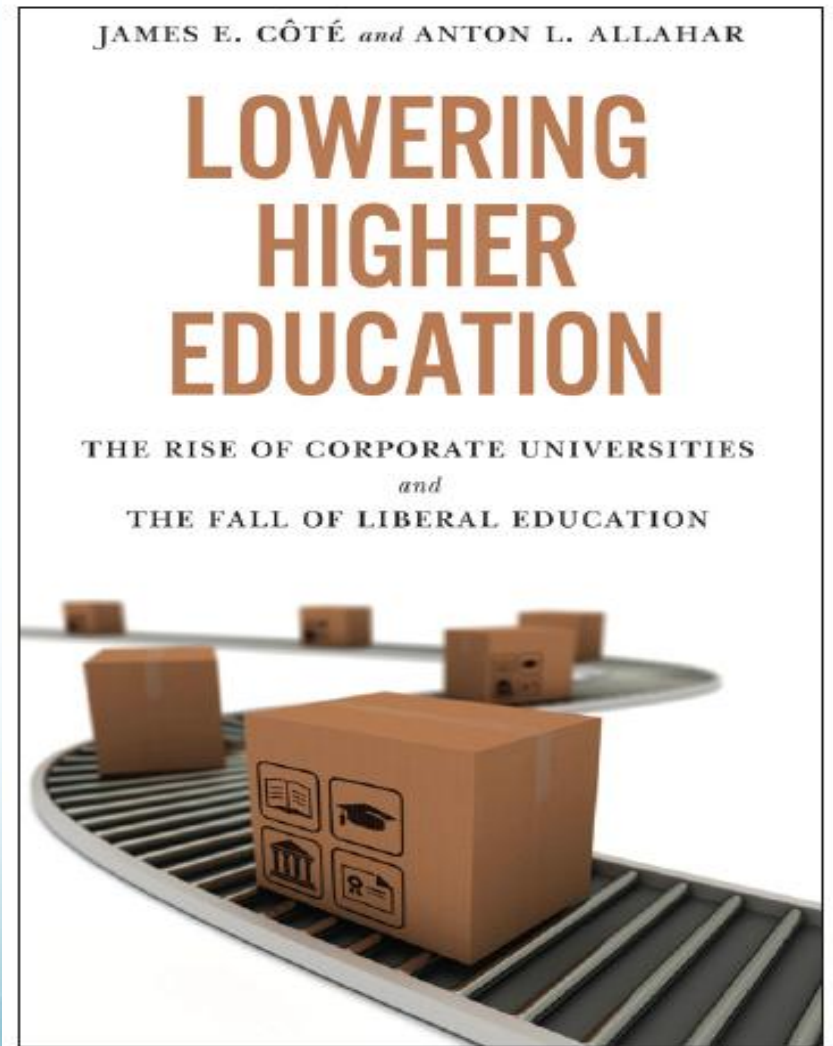
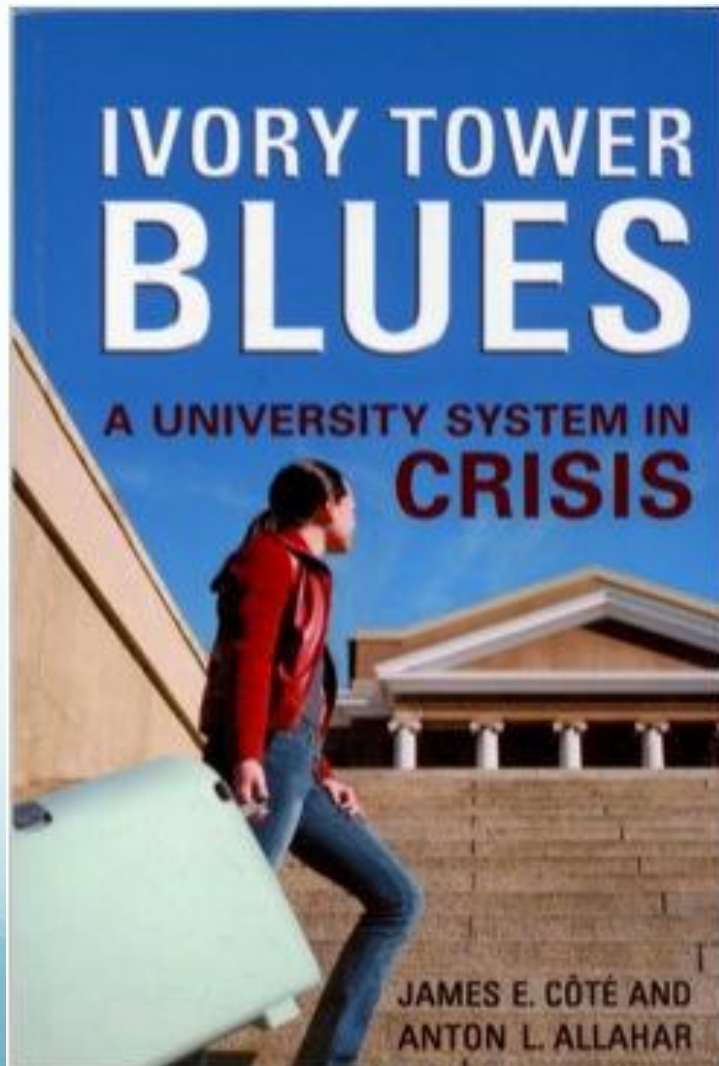
An evaluation of explanations

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Outline

- Empirical evidence: US, Europe, Canada
 - Declines in study time
 - Grade inflation
 - Twin problems: standards?
- Explanations by casual observers
- Plausible sociological explanations
- Solutions?

Côté & Allahar, 2007, 2011



Decline in study time: Historical evidence

- Babcock & Marks, "The Falling Time Cost of College"

Appendix Table A.1
Average Weekly Time Use - Time Diary Surveys

	1925 ^a 1	1928 ^b 2	1933 ^c 3	1965 ^d 4	1975 ^e 5	1985 ^f 6	2003 ^g 7
A. All Students							
Academic Time	38.3	38.5	39.2	34.1	23.6	18.0	14.2
Study Time	-	21	-	18.2	11.1	8.9	7.2
Class Time	-	17.5	-	15.9	12.5	9.2	7.0
Obs	503	100	53	18	58	163	862
B. Full-Time Students^h							
Summer-Winter Break Excludedⁱ							
Academic Time Use	38.3	38.5	-	-	-	-	23.7
Study Time	-	21	-	-	-	-	12.1
Class Time	-	17.5	-	-	-	-	11.6
Obs	503	100	-	-	-	-	363

Figure 1
Average Study Hours

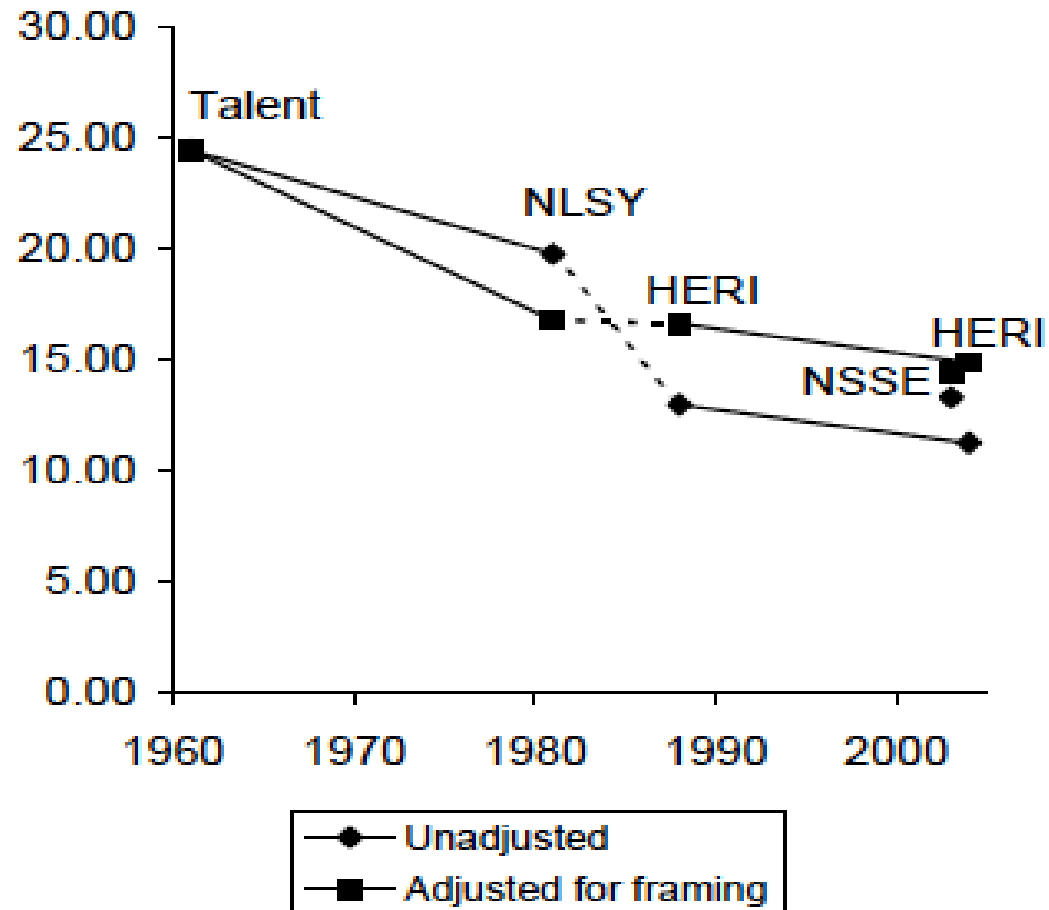


FIGURE 2

AVERAGE STUDY TIME FOR FULL-TIME STUDENTS
AT FOUR-YEAR U.S. COLLEGES BY WORK STATUS,
PARENTAL EDUCATION, AND GENDER, 1961 AND 2003

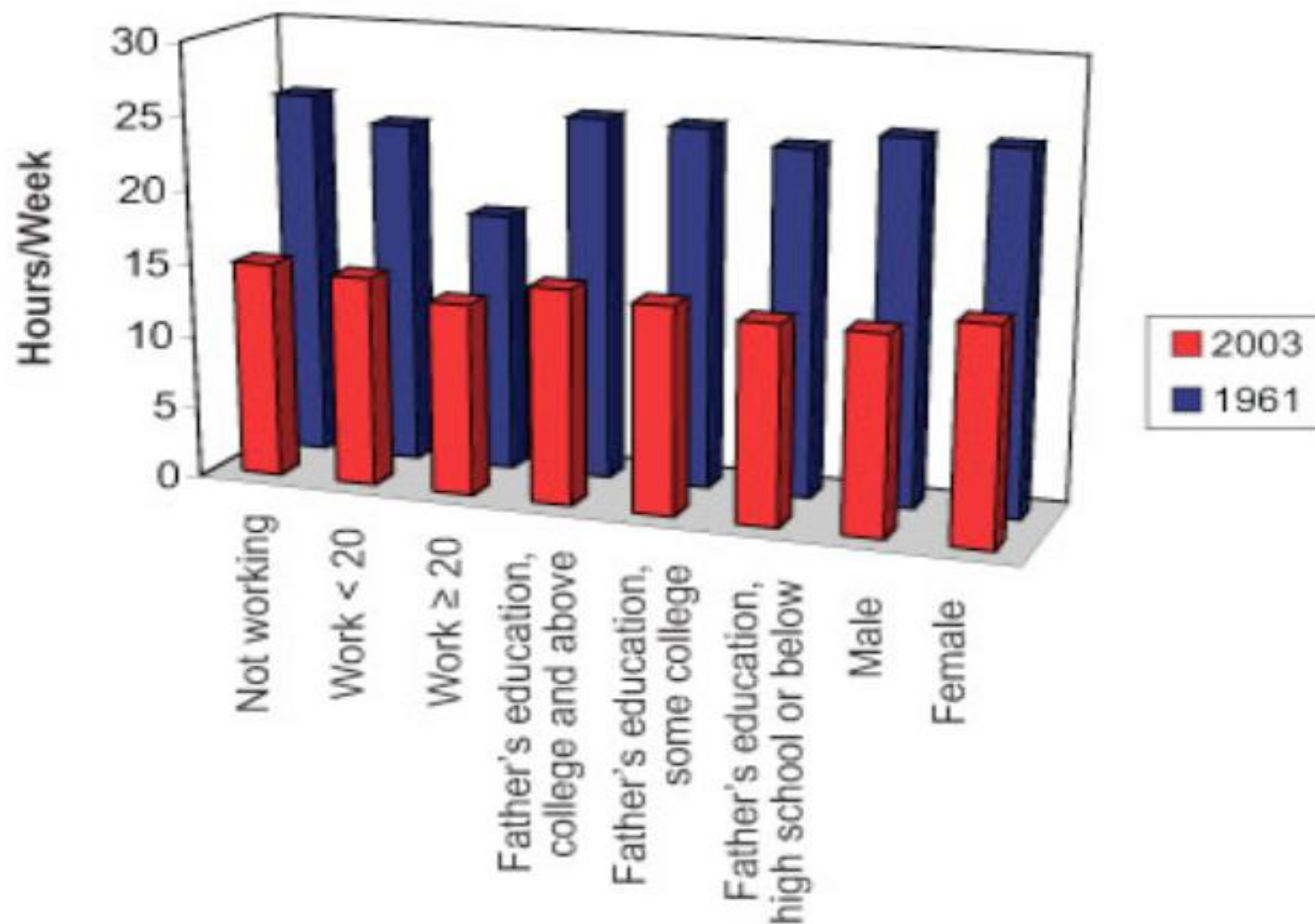


FIGURE 3
AVERAGE STUDY TIME FOR FULL-TIME STUDENTS
AT FOUR-YEAR U.S. COLLEGES BY MAJOR, 1961 AND 2003

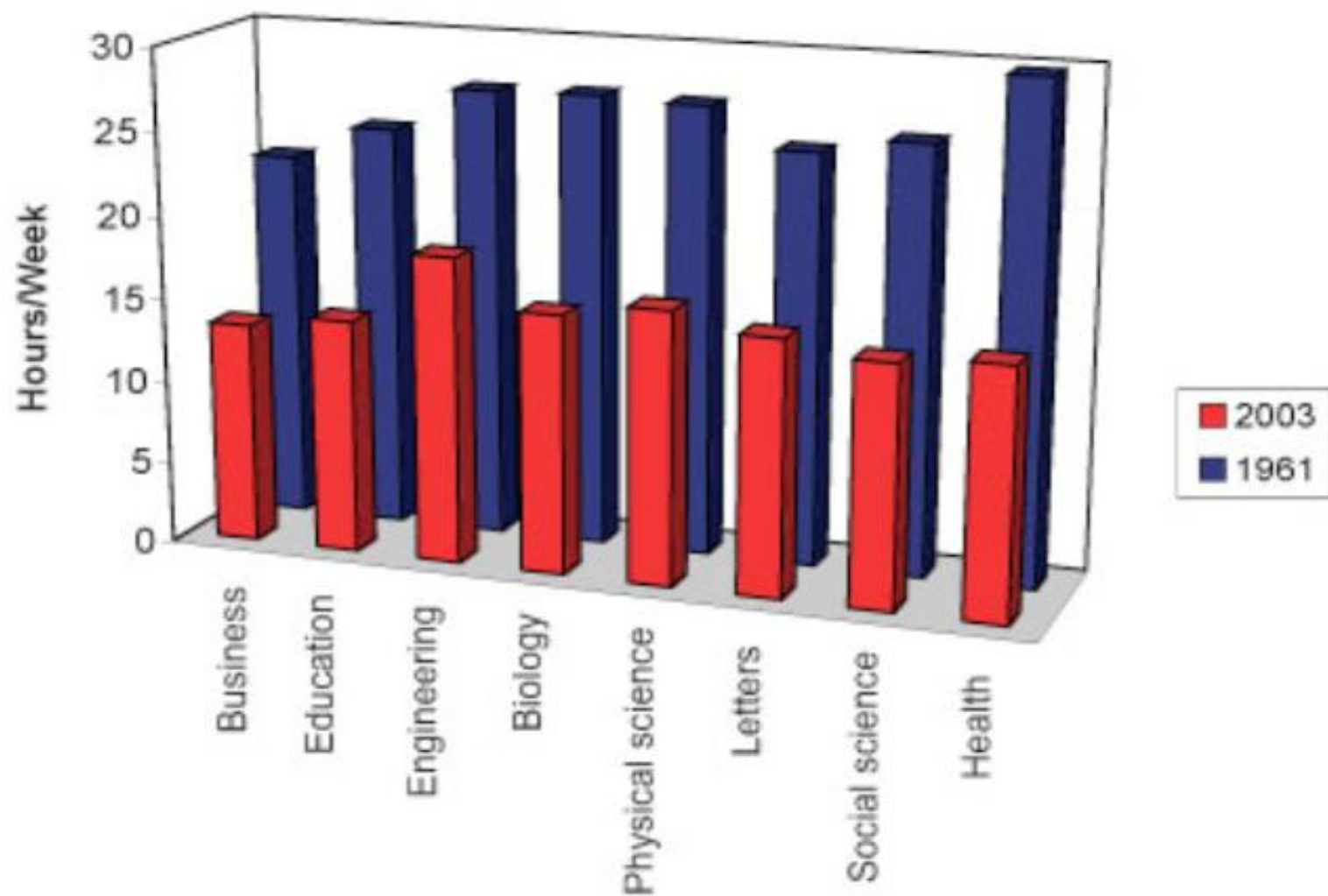
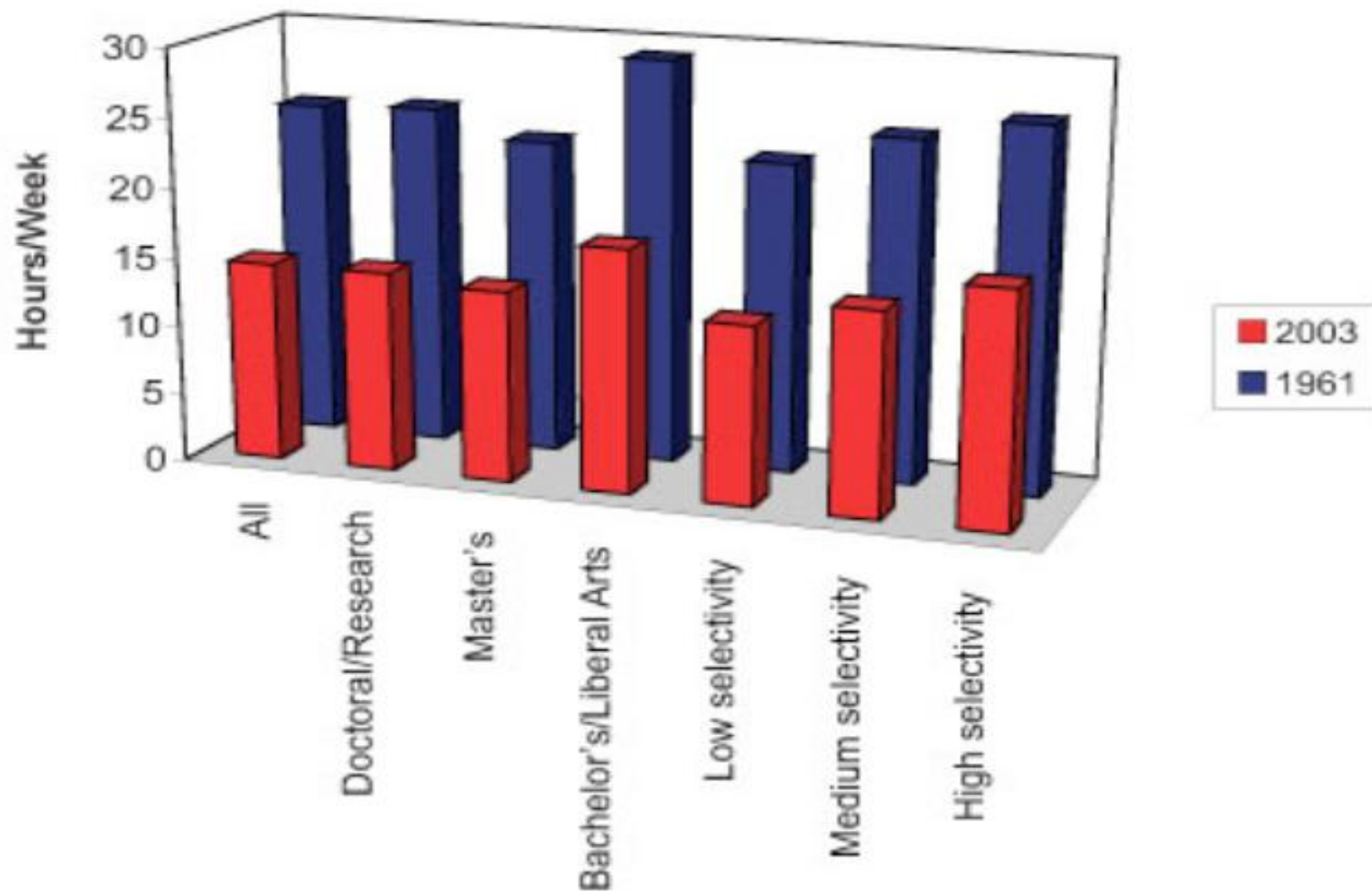
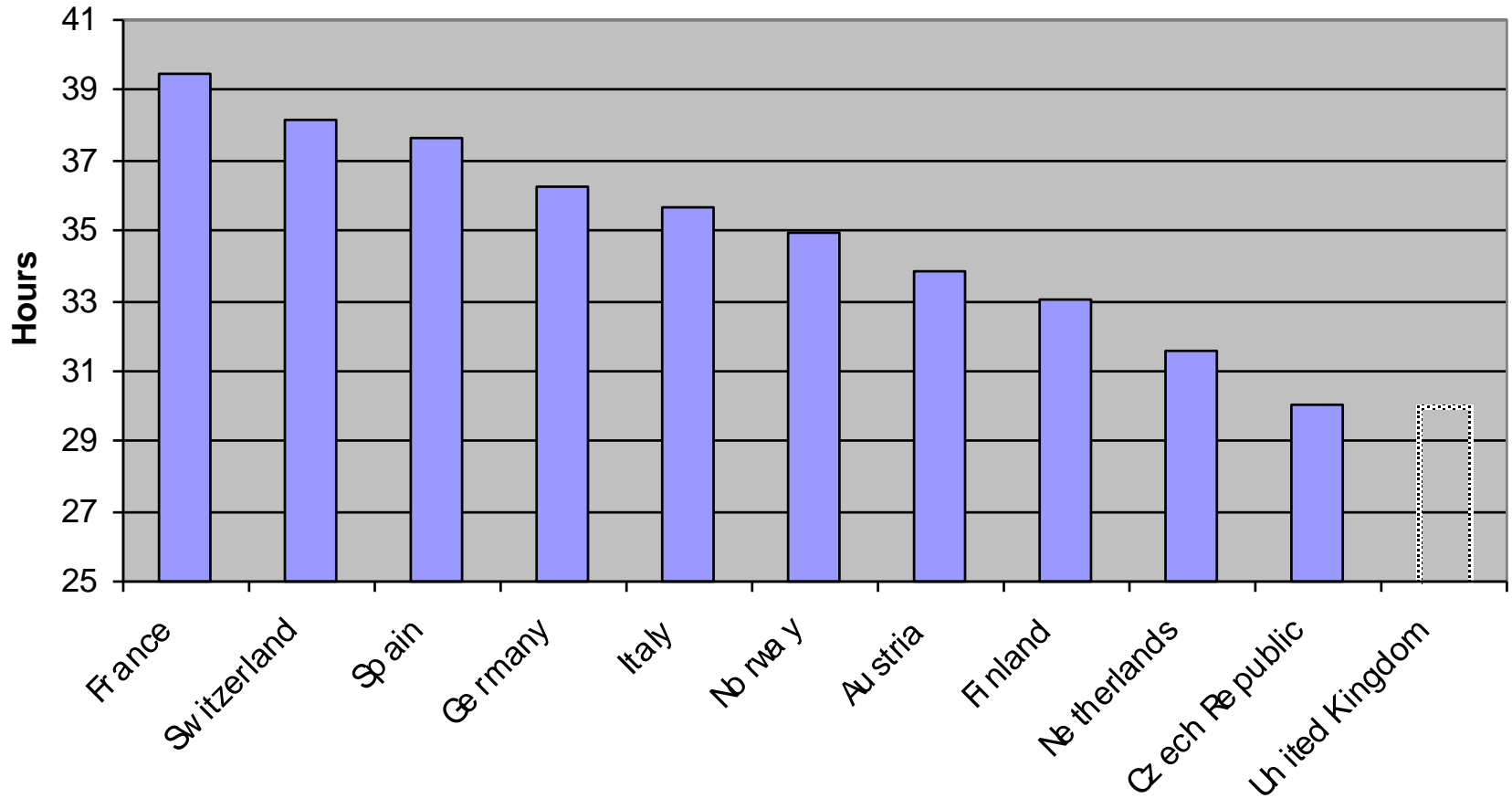


FIGURE 4
AVERAGE STUDY TIME FOR FULL-TIME STUDENTS
AT FOUR-YEAR U.S. COLLEGES BY INSTITUTION TYPE
AND SELECTIVITY, 1961 AND 2003



Comparative evidence (1):

European comparisons of study time plus class time



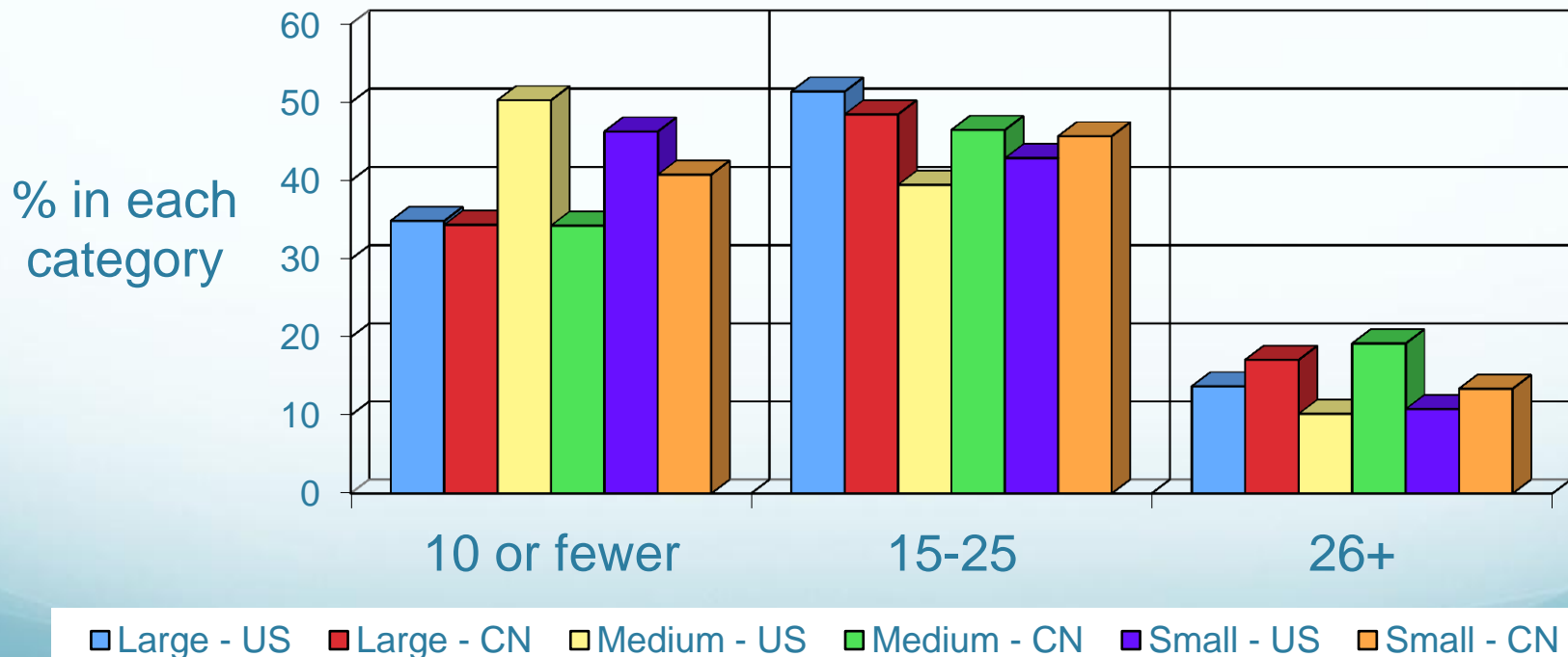
Source: **The Academic Experience of Students in English Universities 2009 Report** by **Bahram Bekhradnia**

Comparative evidence (2):

Study time, out of class - Canada vs. US

Data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE 2006; $n=10,459$; Côté & Allahar, 2011)

Study hours among full-time Canadian and American university students: Percentages

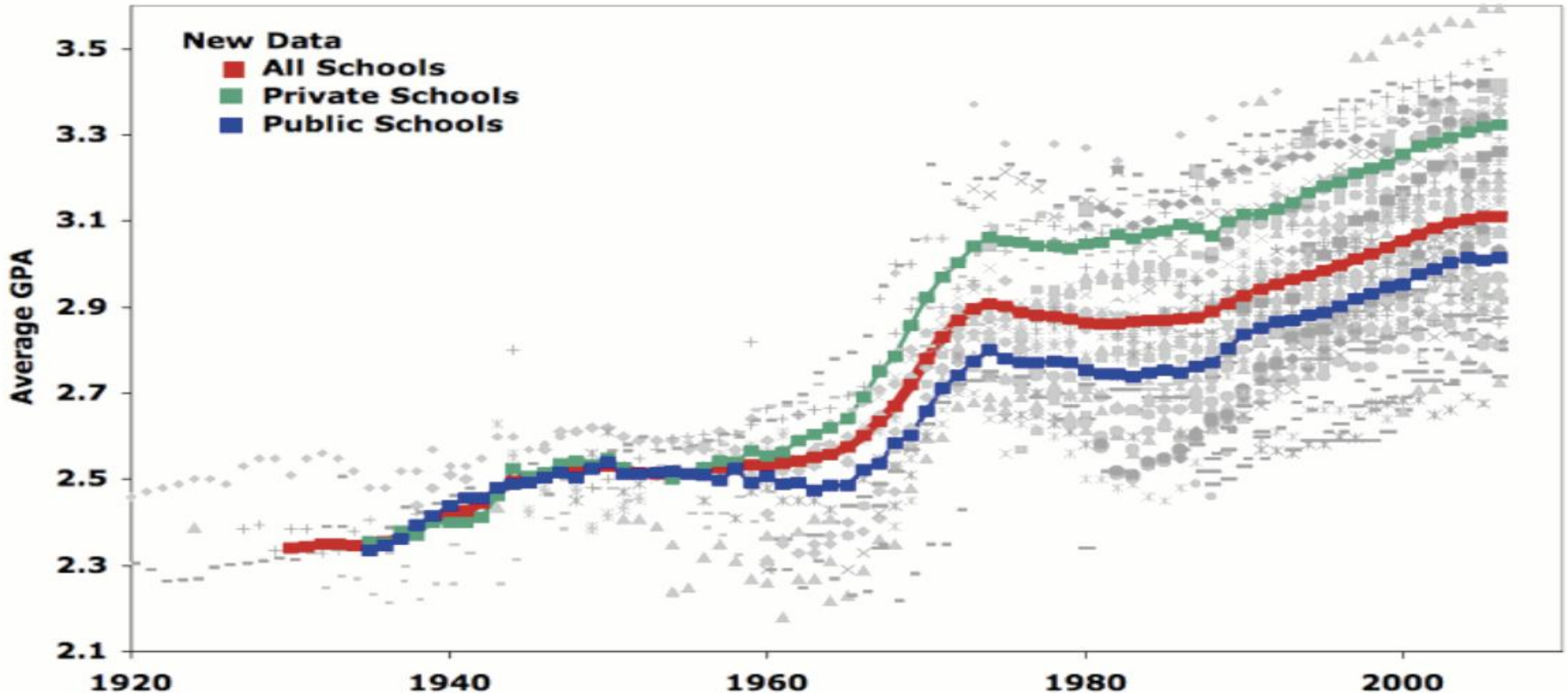


Mean study time = US = 12-13 hrs/wk; CN = 13-14 hrs/wk

Grade inflation:

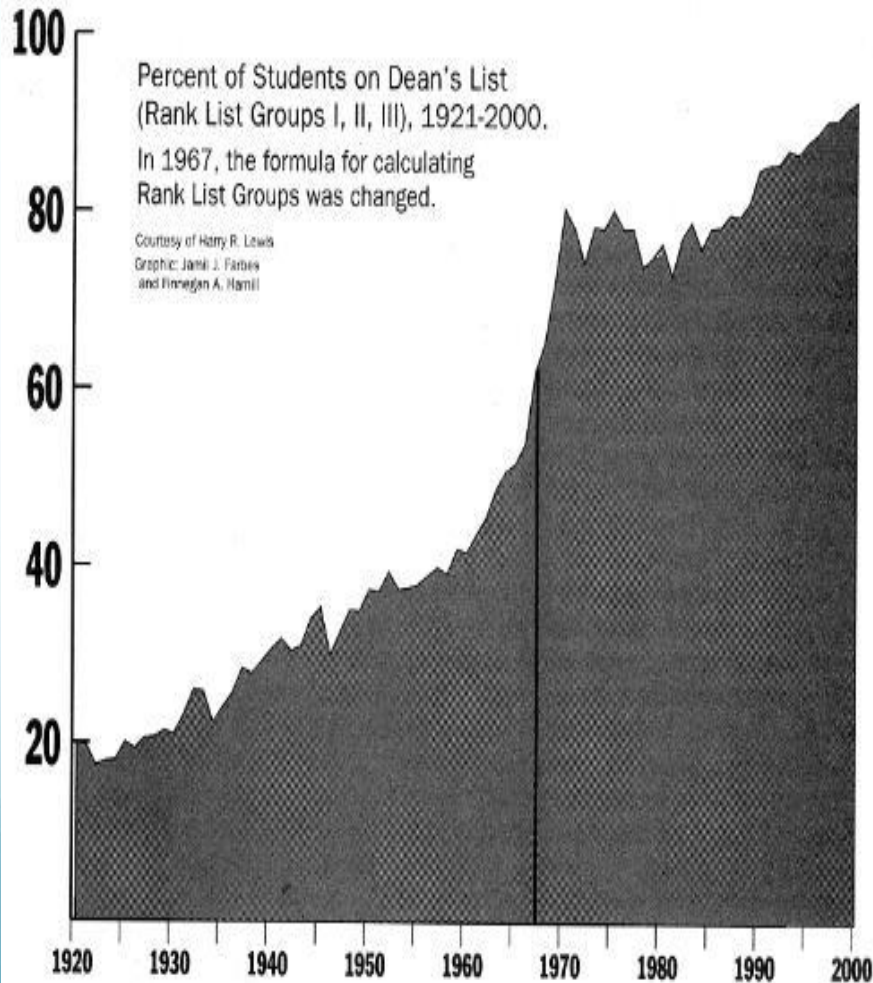
Historical evidence from the US: Cs to Bs

Variability in Grading, US Colleges, 1920-2006



Source: Stuart Rojstaczer, <http://gradeinflation.com/>

Grade Inflation: the consumer model even at élite schools?



- ... Lewis (2006: 161):
“making students happy
rather than educating them”
- The case of Harvard
University
 - Over 90% now awarded
honours grades (A or B)
 - *Summa cum laude* (top 5%)
vs magna cum laude
 - now requires a cut-off at 3
decimal places

Comparative data:

Canadian-American university grade compression

(Côté & Allahar, 2011; NSSE 2006 – $n = 9,489$)

Percentages			
Grade	American students	Canadian students	Total
C	10.3	16.0	13.2
B	49.0	54.6	51.9
A	40.7	29.4	34.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Current grade expectations (Canada) (Runté, 2006)

students' perceptions of grade equivalents

1985

- A = excellent
- B = respectable
- C = satisfactory
- D = scraping through
- F = failure

2005

- A+ = excellent
- A = respectable
- A-
- B+ = satisfactory
- B
- B- = scraping through
- C+ = failure

Twin problems?

Low study time + grade inflation =

- The disengagement compact
- George Kuh (founder of the NSSE): a tacit agreement not to challenge each other to work harder:
 - **Students:** “You give me at least a B for whatever I hand in, and I will give you peace of mind by not hassling you over the grades you assign”
 - **Professors:** “I’ll give you at least a B for whatever you hand in, and you won’t ask me to take the time to justify the grades I assign.”
- Institutional consent for a “culture of disengagement”
 - “Administrators let them in; professors let them out”

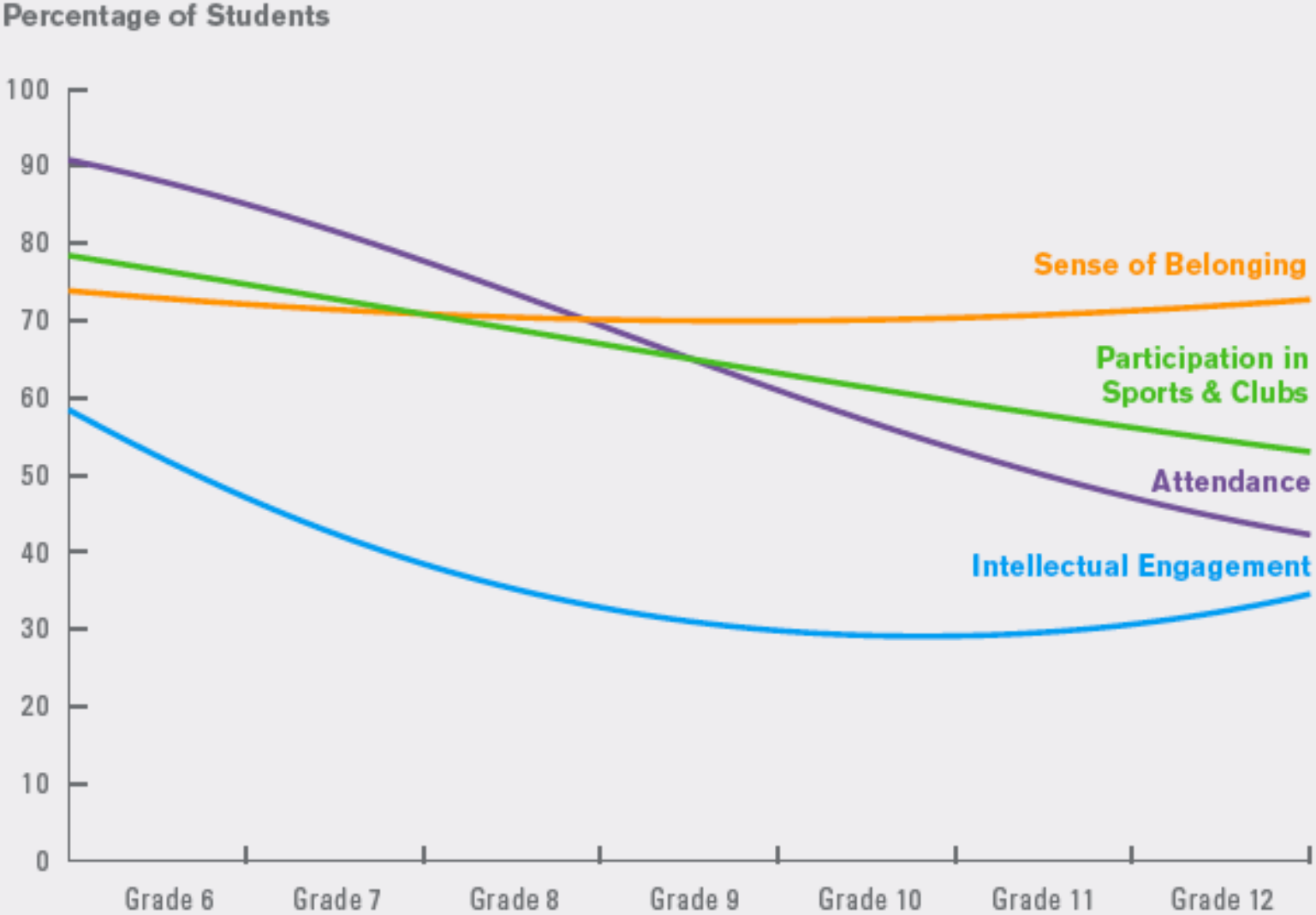
Low engagement meets high grades: Canadian and American students

(Côté & Allahar, 2011; NSSE 2006 – $n = 9,468$)

Percentages				
	Study hours			
Grade	10 or fewer	11-25	26+	Total
C	16.7	11.7	8.6	13.2
B	55.4	51.1	45.3	52.0
A	27.9	37.3	46.1	34.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

$r = +.15$ between study time and grades

Figure 8. Percentages of students with a positive sense of belonging in Grades 6 through 12



A regional example: Grade inflation in Ontario high schools

- ◆ High-school graduates with A averages:
 - ◆ Early 1960s = 5 to 10%
 - ◆ Late 60s = ~20%
 - ◆ Currently = 40%
- ◆ university applicants with A averages:
 - ◆ 1983 = 38%;
 - ◆ 1992 = 44%;
 - ◆ 1995 = 53%;
 - ◆ 2004 = 61%
- ◆ ... A+ averages:
 - ◆ Historically rare; 9.4% in 1995; 14.9% in 2003

A case study of grade inflation: Western University (Canada)

- Traditional grading standards:

Table 1: 1970s guidelines at Western	% As and Bs	Mean range
First-year - 020	30-40	64-67
100/200/300 level	35-50	66-70
400/500 level	< 80	73-77

The effects of a funding-per-student policy

Table 2: Thirty five years of grade distributions: Median percentages of As and Bs (and Fs)

Year	Arts & Humanities		Science		Social Science	
	First Year	All levels	First Year	All levels	First Year	All levels
74/75 to 78/79	51.0 (9.0)	60.0 (NA)	42.0 (17.0)	49.0 (NA)	43.0 (7.0)	52.0 (NA)
79/80 to 83/84	56.0 (7.0)	64.0 (NA)	45.0 (16.0)	50.0 (NA)	42.0 (8.0)	49.0 (NA)
84/85 to 88/89	55.0 (7.0)	65.0 (5.0)	40.0 (18.0)	49.0 (13.0)	42.0 (8.0)	52.0 (6.0)
89/90 to 93/94	53.4 (9.0)	65.7 (5.8)	42.9 (15.8)	51.9 (11.3)	39.3 (8.2)	54.9 (5.8)
94/95 to 98/99	52.8 (11.3)	64.8 (7.3)	44.6 (14.0)	55.4 (10.1)	41.4 (10.5)	55.6 (7.2)
During the late 90s the "Enrollment Contingent Funding" policy was introduced						
99/00 to 03/04	62.8 (7.5)	69.6 (5.8)	53.7(11.2)	60.8 (8.5)	50.1 (7.4)	60.7 (5.6)
04/05 to 08/09	63.4 (6.7)	71.5 (4.7)	64.4 (7.3)	67.3 (5.8)	54.2 (7.1)	65.8 (4.2)

In each cell, the first figure is the median percentage for As and Bs combined for the five-year period. The figure in parentheses is the median percentage of Fs for that time period.

Individual-level studies ...

- “Academic entitlement” (US: J. Youth Adol., 2008)
 - 15-item uni-factorial scale:
 - “If I have attended most classes for a course, I deserve at least a grade of B” (34% agree)
 - “A professor should be willing to lend me his/her class notes if I ask for them” (25% agree)
 - “I would think poorly of a professor who didn’t respond the same day to an e-mail I sent.” (15% agree)
 - Negative correlation with work orientation and prosocial attitudes; positive correlation with extrinsic motivation and academic dishonesty

... individual-level studies

- “Degree purchasing” attitude (CN: *Canadian J. of Higher Education*, 2005)
 - Value degree over learning: 2 factors from 7 items
 - Degree as a ticket (to a job)
 - Learning as unimportant
 - The attitude undermines its own goal:
 - Correlates with poor study habits, lower grades, classroom “resistance,” and negative emotions ...

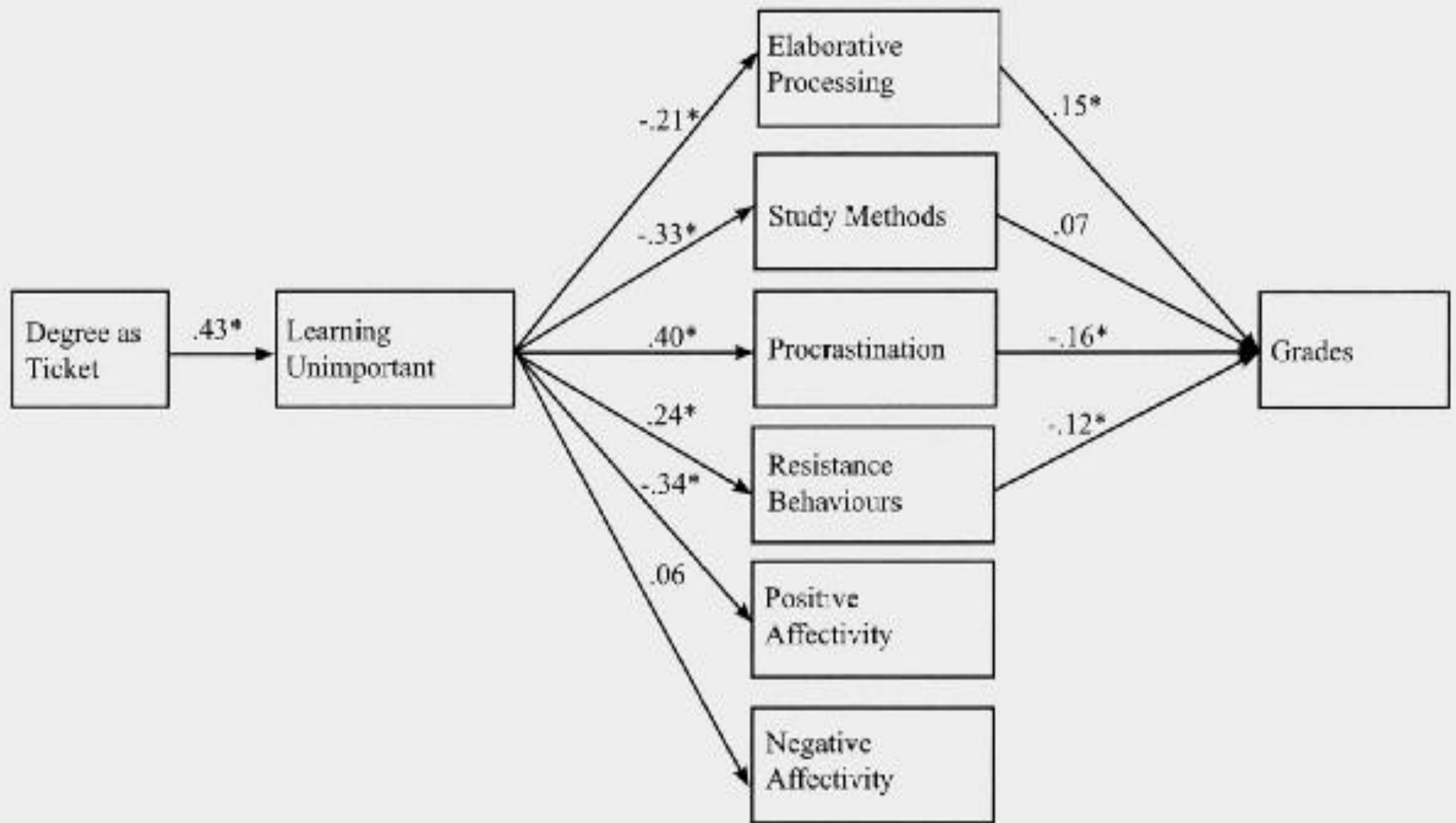


Figure 1
Standardized Parameter Estimates of the Structural Relations

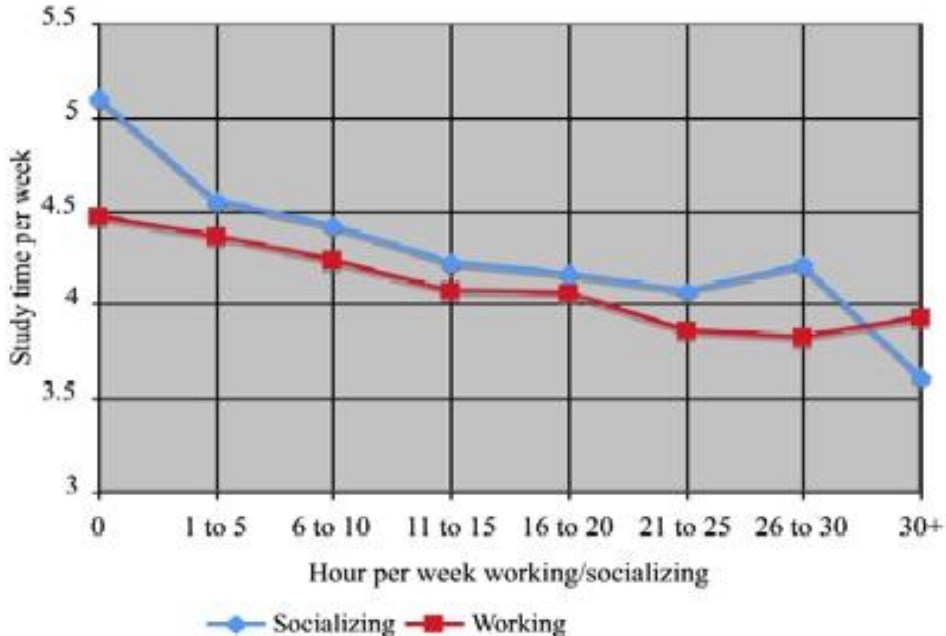
Explanations by casual observers

- It is unrealistic to expect mass systems to do better
- It has always been like this
- Professors are bad teachers
- Students are smarter now
- Technologies save time
- Students have busy lives, especially because of higher tuition ... have to do more paid work ... →

Too busy, especially working?

(Côté & Allahar, 2011)

Figure 5.1: Course engagement by working and socializing



- Non-significant or positive effects on study time
 - caring for dependents
 - commuting
 - working (on campus)
 - co-curricular activities
- Significant negative effects
 - socializing (7.5 hours/week)
 - working (3.0 hours/week)

5.0 = 16 to 20 hours/week

4.0 = 11 to 15 hours/week

Plausible sociological explanations

- Functionalist: e.g., Trow: élite to mass to universal?
 - ... lower ability levels/Americanization
- Political economy:
 - E.g., “revolt of the élites” (Lasch, 1995): retrenchment
 - Neoliberalism: paradox of “accountability”
 - pseudo-vocationalism < “human capital” / learning
 - State stewardship: managerialism
 - poor oversight of standards = credentialism
 - Corporatization: ... surviving underfunding
- Cultural:
 - E.g., Macro: anti-intellectual, hedonistic → micro ...

From whence a “culture of disengagement”?

- The historical moment: the BA-lite
 - Most severe in countries with Americanized secondary systems ... spreads to tertiary levels
 - low levels of engagement rewarded with high grades ... across all institution and student types
- The paradox of neoliberal managerialism of mass systems with poor stewardship under conditions of underfunding
 - Lower standards/quality are the unintended consequence of “efficiency” and “accountability”
 - Efficiency: quantity over quality - vendors of “soft” credentials to mass consumers
 - Accountability: e.g., teaching evaluations absorb student discontent, but create grade inflation
 - Customer satisfaction trumps educational standards ...

Few complaints from the “customers”

(Côté & Allahar, 2011; NSSE 2006 – $n = 9,468$)

How would you evaluate your entire educational experience at this institution? Percentages

	Study hours			Total
	10 or fewer	11-25	26+	
Poor	3.6	2.3	3.5	3.0
Fair	16.5	12.1	14.5	14.2
Good	52.2	50.6	44.6	50.4
Excellent	27.7	35.1	37.5	32.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Solutions?:

Restoring the Liberal Education Mission

- Liberal education: critical thinking vs. pseudo-vocational training
- Funding: not enrollment-based – 15-1 max. student-teacher ratio
- Grade distributions: System-wide standards
- Entrance/exit exams: disciplines set standards like professions; writing/speaking skills
- Teaching evaluations: student engagement & outcomes vs. customer satisfaction
- Administrators: teach as part of stewardship

Thank you for your attention

