



IN PERSON

‘There’s some evidence that first-semester grades are related to the quality of your high school.’ —Professor of Sociology Lee Cuba

HIGH MARKS *for* NO MARKS

“WHEN GRADES BECOME THE OBJECT of learning rather than the learning itself,” says Professor of Sociology Lee Cuba, “students are engaged in a form of ‘goal displacement.’” And in a longitudinal study of students at Wellesley and six other New England colleges, Cuba and his collaborators found that academic achievement and engagement are negatively correlated—in other words, the more time students spend thinking about getting an A, the less time they’re thinking about what it is they should be learning.

Cuba’s research has helped to drive the adoption of a new “shadow grading” policy at Wellesley. Under the program, first-year students’ first-semester grades will not appear on their transcripts but will instead be recorded as pass/no pass. Students will receive a separate report of

the grades they would have received, but these grades will not affect their overall GPA at the College. The policy will be implemented in fall 2014.

As director of the New England Consortium on Assessment and Student Learning, Cuba led seven colleges in a study of the class of 2010. The consortium (which consists of Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Middlebury, Smith, Trinity, Wellesley, and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges) interviewed 36 students at each of the seven colleges during every academic year from 2006 to 2010 and in the year following graduation. The interviews were primarily conducted by fellow students and focused on academic, social, and life-management themes.

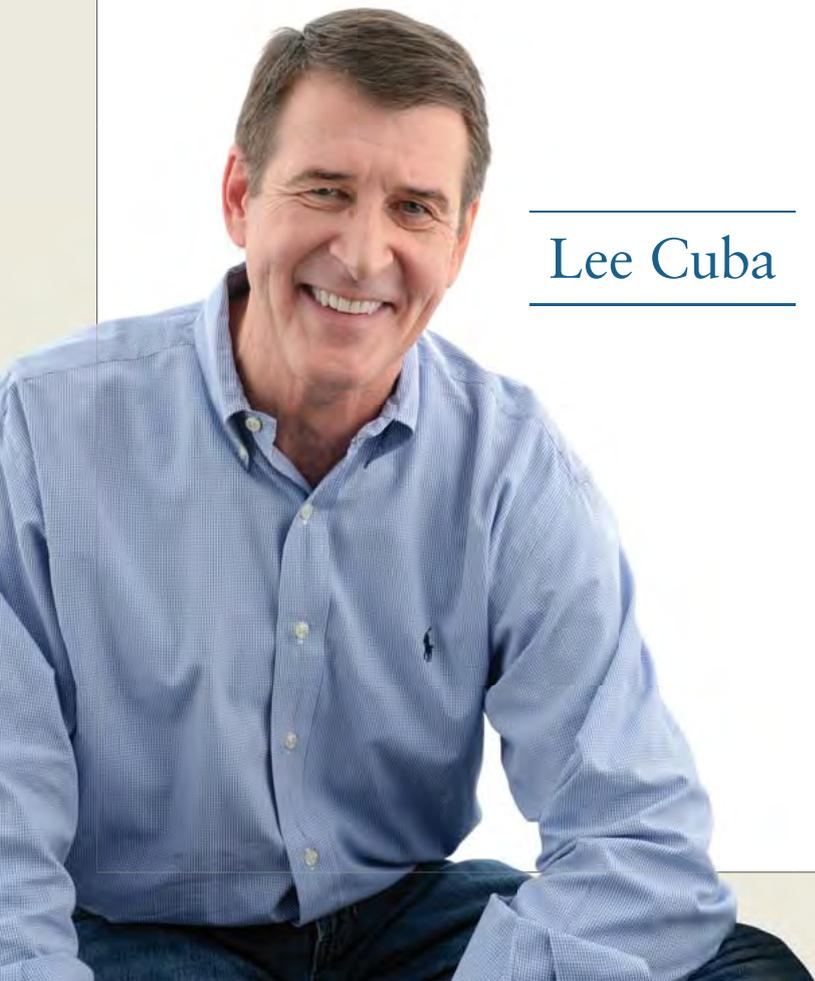
Wellesley students were distinguished from students at the other colleges in three major ways: They took academics very seriously; they had a strong interest in meeting students different from themselves; and they were inspired to attend Wellesley because of its strong alumnae network and their positive impressions of the students they met on campus.

Like students at many of the other colleges, however, Wellesley students were also intensely focused on grades. While being achievement-oriented is not in itself a negative, students need to understand that “college isn’t super high school,” Cuba explains. As a liberal-arts institution, Wellesley encourages students to engage with new and challenging subjects, develop their intellectual abilities and study skills, and enjoy learning for the sake of learning.

Cuba took his research to a Wellesley faculty committee, which studied it carefully and examined shadow-grading policies in place at other institutions, such as MIT and Swarthmore. Academic Council, the faculty legislative body, voted to adopt the policy in May 2013. The faculty hopes that by removing the focus on grades for the first semester, students will concentrate more on learning and be more willing to take academic risks.

In addition to these benefits, the policy is also intended to level the playing field at the beginning of college. “There’s some evidence that first-semester grades are related to the quality of your high school,” Cuba says. The shadow-grading policy will give all students a period of time to understand and adjust to Wellesley’s academic standards.

The faculty has committed to the new policy for the next four years, and has a plan in place to assess its impact. “It truly is an experiment,” Cuba notes, “and it will be interesting to see how it plays itself out.”



Lee Cuba

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