

Monday, 14 January, 2002, 23:41 GMT

## **Grades row at Harvard**

Harvard says its students are still the best

**By Tim Franks in Washington**

Charges of slipping standards and "grade inflation" at one of the America's premier universities, Harvard, have renewed a debate about dumbing down in the country's educational system.

The man at the centre of the latest row is Harvard Professor Cornel West, from the university's Afro-American studies department.

He recently made a hip-hop CD, which is part of the extra-curricular activities that have apparently attracted the disapproval of the new president of Harvard, Larry Summers. Mr Summers is concerned that Professor West should spend more time on academic projects. He is also concerned about what is known as grade inflation, the idea that far too many students in the Afro-American studies department get As.

Professor West is not happy.

"The one thing that I do not tolerate is disrespect, being dishonoured, and being devalued," he said.

And for that reason, Professor West is threatening to quit for a rival university and take most of his department with him.

### **Culture of complaint**

But talk to academics inside Harvard and they say that grade inflation is a problem across the university.

Janine Bempechat taught at Harvard for 14 years. One reason she gives for grade inflation is a consumerist culture of complaint.

"Students have come to expect if they pay a great deal of money for the education at Harvard, they deserve to have very high grades," she said. Ms Bempechat admits that she has herself buckled under the pressure to mark generously.

And as an expert in educational motivation, she says she knows what she is talking about when she says that in the long run, grade inflation is only counter-productive.

### **'Ironic grades'**

So much so that it has driven one Harvard professor to take dramatic steps.

Up one flight of stairs in the school of government is the office of Professor Harvey Mansfield.

Since last spring, he has been handing out two sets of grades. One set he calls "ironic grades" - the marks that will go on public record, replete with A's and A minuses. The second set are private grades - the marks, generally lower and, he says, more accurate, which he gives the students for the same work but which only they and he will ever know.

So far, the university authorities have yet to stop him, and enrolments for his courses are up twofold. Professor Mansfield admits surprise.

"I was afraid that the students would hate me for the true grade, despite the fact that it wasn't going to be on their records. But in fact, they seem to concede that many of the grades they were getting were inflated," he said.

### **'Upward trend'**

The university prefers to talk about an "upward trend" in grades, rather than inflation.

But the official figures do show that the number of A grades handed out to undergraduates has more than doubled in the last fifteen years.

Susan Pedersen is one of Harvard's academic deans. She argues that her students are working harder than ever and are as good as ever.

"Our students continue to go out into the world. They compete for graduate school. They apply for medical school, for law school, for jobs. We always come out on top for those," she said.

And as for the students themselves - well, the ones I found in the science centre canteen, glass-eyed with exhaustion, didn't take too well to the suggestion that now they had got in, all they had to do was turn up.

"It's disheartening, and it's like, why are you discrediting my work when you have no idea what I am doing," one student said, adding, "you come take the classes and see how you fare".

Another student said: "I go to the law school, and it's very difficult to get an 'A'".