



Viewpoint

Faculty Can Save Lives of the Elderly

A unique viewpoint on risks to senior citizens from academia.

GRANDMOTHERS OF COLLEGE students are apparently so empathetic they can put their lives in danger from worrying about the welfare of their grandchildren. According to a pioneering study by Adams that discovered the *Grandmother Syndrome*,¹ they are 10 times more likely to die the week of their grandchild’s midterm exams and 19 times more likely to die during finals!

Adams offered two potential solutions, although they have drawbacks:

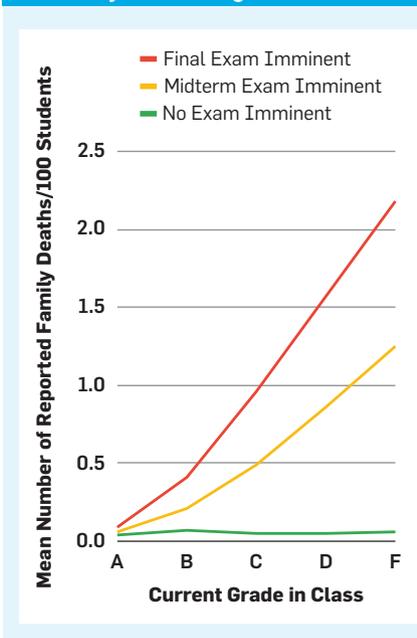
1. *Only orphans are allowed to attend college.* Adams points out the only way to keep the current college attendance level would be to create more orphans, but that solution exacerbates the family deaths problem.

2. *Stop giving exams.* While dropping exams is a short-term solution, medical schools would have to close since there would be no way to distinguish applicants. Alas, the inevitable shortage of doctors would also likely increase family deaths.

The good news is that after careful examination of the data, I may have found a better solution. The insight comes from the accompanying figure, which plots death rate versus student grades. Students can dramatically reduce the grandmother death syndrome by *studying!* For example, the grandmothers of F students are 25 times more likely to die during the life jeopardizing finals week than the grandmothers of A students.

European universities like EPFL and ETH must be unaware of the data in

Grandmother deaths versus exam imminence and student grade. Although the graph reports all deaths, when exams are imminent grandmothers are 24 times more likely to die than grandfathers.¹



the figure, as they flunk out half of their students in their first year. Perhaps this policy is the underlying reason for the shrinking populations of most European countries.²

Presumably because they *are* aware of the data in the figure, Harvard faculty took this insight to its logical conclusion. No matter how little students study, the Grandmother Syndrome is curtailed if most students get As. Here is the data that documents Harvard’s push to reduce the syndrome for the Harvard class of 2020:³

► 72% of students that responded to a survey reported a GPA of 3.7 or higher. An A- is a 3.6, according to Harvard’s grading scale.

► The most commonly reported GPA was 3.9. Just two years earlier, the most commonly reported GPA was 3.8.

These grades surely mean there are many fewer reports of grandmother deaths from Harvard students, and even that low number is likely declining over time with the rising GPAs. It also poses no danger to medical school viability, as other universities still have a grade distribution; the only downside is that Harvard might become the alma mater of more doctors.

Not all universities can match Harvard’s commitment to saving lives, but the rest of academia can help even if they cannot give all students an A. If faculty spent just a few minutes warning about the syndrome—encouraging students to study if they love their grandmothers—it is sure to reduce the number of reports of grandmother deaths in their classes. Let’s all do our share to save the lives of the elderly! **□**

References

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