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A for Average? Going Down the Rabbit Hole of Grade Inflation

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Since the 1960s, the most commonly rewarded college grade in America has shockingly veered from a C to an A. To understand such a dramatic swing, this research uses historical context from 1980-2016 to explain shifting economic attitudes of Millennials towards college and the impact of Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET) scores. Scholarly publications on the effect of SETs on grade inflation are polarizing: while some scholars believe SETs are reliable at assessing teaching quality, others claim SETs are deeply flawed devices. I composed a 14-statement survey to Washington University freshmen, in which the 96 participants responded to each claim on a 7-point scale where 1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neutral, and 7 = strongly agree. In response to the statement "If I have attended most classes and completed most of the reading for a course, I deserve at least a B," an overwhelming 54.2% of participants responded with a 5, 6, or 7. Only 27% of participants responded with a 1, 2, or 3. A disturbing 45.8% of participants answered the statement "I primarily see myself as a paying customer of a college" with a 5, 6, or 7. College students and their parents are plunged into the consumer mindset—as tuition increases, they are locked into the hopes of getting their money's worth. Colleges may function as businesses to cater to students to increase customer satisfaction—even at prestigious universities like Washington University. SETs may directly contribute to lenient grading, especially for untenured professors who may feel pressured to obtain favorable student reviews. To counteract grade inflation, ambiguous SET questions like "Is this class enjoyable?" or "Would you recommend this instructor to a friend?" must be amended to accurately reflect teaching effectiveness rather than the feasibility of securing an A.