

Dickinson College

# The Consumer-based View in Higher Education

Inquiry about Its Existence and How It May Devalue Grades

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FYS 28: Ouija Boards to Big Data

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#### I. Introduction

Over the past several decades, the higher education system has seen an upward trend in grade point average (GPA). In fact, based on the comprehensive data compiled by Stuart Rojstaczer on his website *gradeinflation.com*, from 1920 to 2006, the average GPA of all American universities and colleges has increased from 2.35 to 3.11, which is equivalent to an increase of 0.08 per decade (Rojstaczer n. pag.). This upward trend is commonly referred to as ‘grade inflation,’ a term used when students’ performance is incommensurate with the high grades they receive. Many factors have been adduced to explain grade inflation, including those coming from the students’ part such as evaluations of professors, student-teacher dynamics, class expectations, etc. and those coming from the part of professors like fear of student evaluations, avoidance of bad relations with students, job security, or lack of experience (D. Caruth and G. Caruth 102). Among these different factors, there is one intriguing cause that has not been exhaustively studied: the consumer-based view of higher education, also known as *student consumerism* or *consumer-based learning*.

Generally speaking, the consumer-based view is a new approach toward education: “Students were no longer considered acolytes, but consumers of a product” (Rojstaczer and Healy 10). Even though ‘acolyte’ may not be the best word to explain this term, it can still be

understood that students are treated less as learners but more as payers whose desired products are good grades and degrees. On the other side, professors, especially those who are adjunct or non-tenured, want favorable student evaluations to keep their job. Additionally, institutions want larger enrollment, higher retention rate, and more job opportunities for its graduates (D. Caruth and G. Caruth 102). As a result, professors and institutions may try to satisfy their customers – students – by giving easier grades, which leads to grade inflation.

Because of the ubiquity of the consumer-based view among schools and the profound effects it may have upon students' careers, I set out to examine whether this view exists at one selective liberal arts college, referred to as College X, and if it does, how it can devalue grades. This study is provided with grade data from the college over the past 15 years. My research adds to the literature in two ways. First, since there are not many studies on the consumer-based view of higher education, especially in the context of a liberal arts college, my research would expand the understanding of this relatively new term. By employing the highly detailed data set available, I would be able to test hypotheses related to the existence of consumerism at College X, which can possibly be applied to a lot of other liberal arts colleges. Second, I studied the connection between consumerism, grade devaluation, and future careers of students, which tends to be overlooked by other studies. I also provided several policy recommendations that may help colleges combat this consumer-based view.

## **II. Previous Literature**

Within studies on the consumer-based view, there exist two contradictory opinions. Several studies refute the existence of the student consumerism, stating that this is not a real issue in higher education grading. Many other researches, on the contrary, argue that the student consumerism does exist in a lot of institutions. The latter opinion seems to be held more widely,

as the number of studies supporting it completely overwhelms the number of those substantiating the first opinion.

The two most significant studies that refute the existence of the consumer-based view are “Grade Inflation and the Myth of Student Consumerism” by Elizabeth Boretz, and “Effects of Grading Leniency and Low Workload on Students’ Evaluations of Teaching: Popular Myth, Bias, Validity, or Innocent Bystanders?” by Hebert Marsh and Lawrence Roche. While both studies contended that student consumerism was just a myth, they did so in different ways. Boretz straightforwardly stated that “Students are not consumers who demand high grades from instructors in exchange for favorable teaching evaluations; instead, students aim to succeed through a communal effort to support their learning...,” and then supported this claim by analyzing previous literatures (42). She also proposed other probable causes of grade inflation such as improved pedagogy or better student quality so as to implicitly prove that the student consumerism was not a valid cause of grade inflation. Marsh and Roche, on the other hand, discredited the consumer-based view in a more methodical way. Because the consumer-based view is believed to force professors and colleges to please students, Marsh and his colleagues conducted several quantitative surveys to examine this notion. Their surveys found the correlation between grades and evaluations to be 0.20, an insignificant number; so they concluded that “teachers cannot get higher than the average SETs [Student Evaluations of Teaching] merely by offering easier courses and giving students higher than deserved grades” (Marsh and Roche 224). What they implied was that the student consumerism could not be real when there was no incentive for educators to please students.

In contrast, there are many more studies that agree upon the existence of the student consumerism. First of all, these studies succeeded in showing the evidences of the consumer-

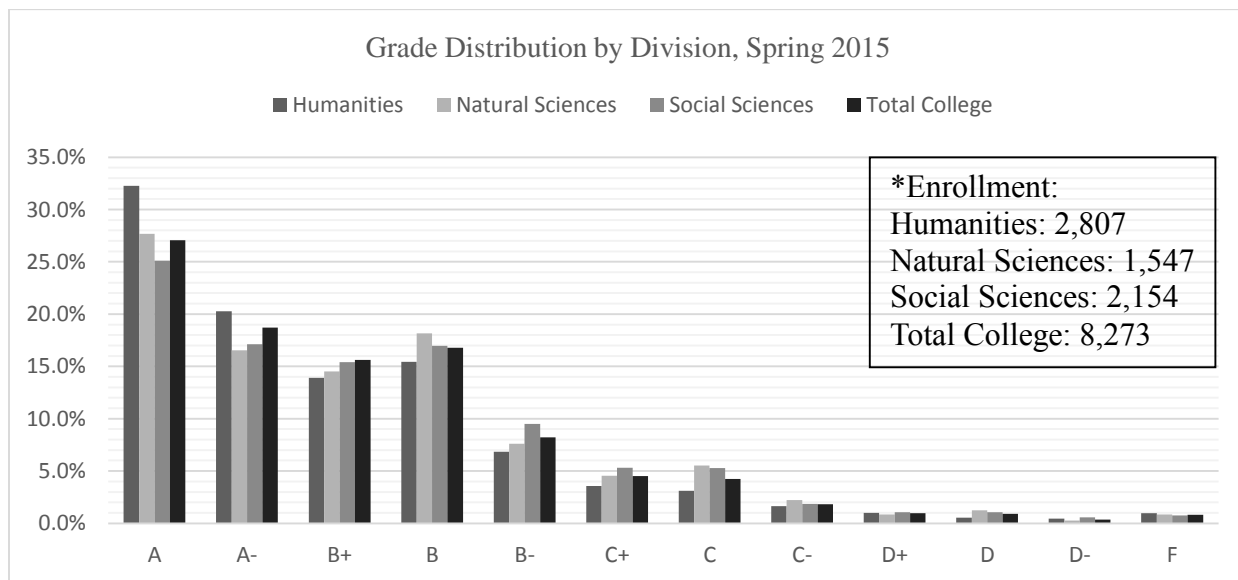
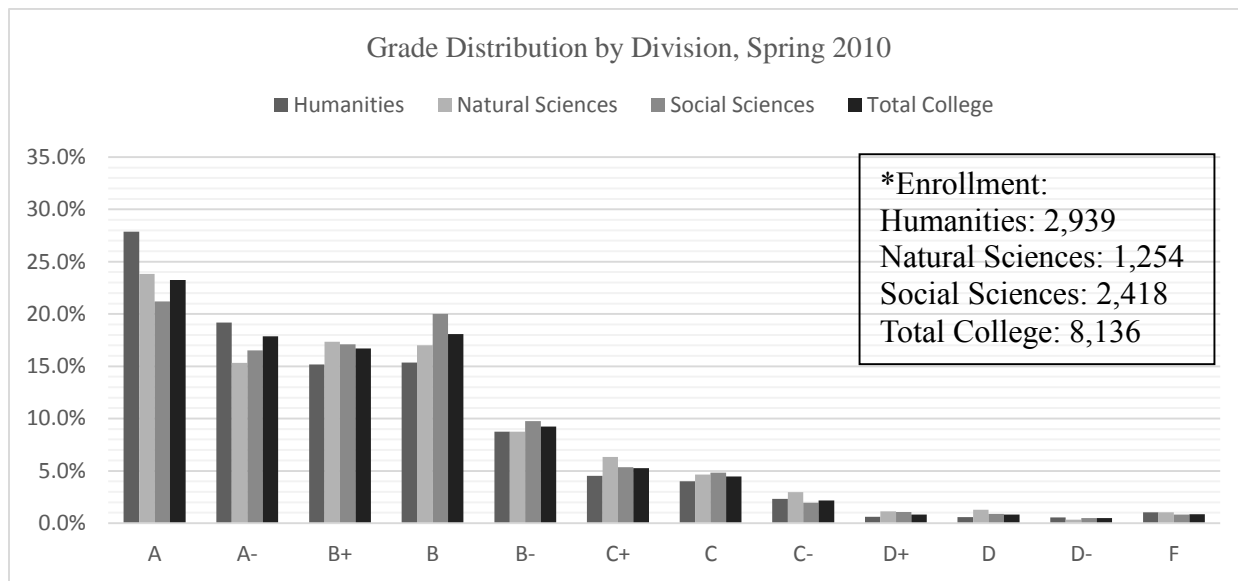
based view. By conducting a comprehensive study at Cornell University, Bar, Kadiyali, and Zussman found that if students knew about grades given in different courses, they would choose those that were leniently graded (101). Additionally, Rojstaczer recounted that in the early 1970s, Haverford College had explicitly stated that they changed their grading policies to provide their future alumni with an advantage in finding jobs (n. pag.).

Not only did those who acknowledged the student consumerism show the proof, they could also offer some explanations. The first reason they suggested was the rise in student expectation. Carter and Iris-Franz showed that students often believed they were entitled to an A grade, and that they expected their rights to be catered to them (as cited in Costley 2). The second reason was that because students were burdened by increasing tuition and shrinking financial aid, they wanted their money, time and effort at college to yield worthwhile results. Tomlinson, in his 2008 study, suggested that students expected colleges to increase their future employability and job prospects, not necessarily through intellectual engagement but through better academic credentials (Tomlinson 41).

When I analyzed these studies, I realized that, whether they denied or confirmed the consumer-based view, they all implied that this was a bad thing. Even though this is true because student consumerism can cause grade inflation, it can also increase students' satisfaction with classes and foster an amicable professor-student relation (Rojstaczer 10). For instance, in order to satisfy the consumers/students and get good evaluations, professors may try harder to create a more engaging and interesting learning environment for students. Besides, because students want good grades, they may work harder to earn their "desired products." Therefore, maybe the consumer-based view is not that bad intrinsically, but the ways people choose to apply it have turned it into a negative phrase.

### III. Methodology, Data Analysis, and Results

From the set of data I received, only two semesters – spring 2010 and spring 2015 – had the detailed grade distributions of these three divisions: Humanities, Natural Sciences, and Social Sciences. In order to visualize the trend and discover patterns, I created two column charts.



There are several things that can be easily seen from the two charts above. First of all, in both spring 2010 and 2015, the percentage of the grade generally increases as the grade gets

higher, with A being the most common and F being the rarest. The second thing is that the Humanities has the highest percentages of A's and A-'s, but the lowest percentages of grades below A-. Interestingly, in these two semesters, the number of students who enrolled in the Humanities was also the highest of the three divisions: 2939 – 1254 – 2418 students (Humanities – Natural Sciences – Social Sciences) in 2010, and 2807 – 1547 – 2154 students in 2015. In other words, there exists a correlation: the Humanities has the highest GPA and the highest enrollment. I put forward two possible explanations: the first explanation is that this correlation is the result of the consumer-based view, which means that students assume they can get higher grades by taking Humanities and consequently choose these classes; the second explanation is that since College X is a liberal arts school, students would be particularly interested in and good at Humanities. The appropriate reason must be able to explain both sides of the correlation: (1) Why the Humanities has the highest enrollment, and (2) Why it has the highest GPA, or the biggest percentages of A and A-.

In order to examine the validity of the first explanation, I calculated the differences between the percentages of each grade between 2015 and 2010, using the equation: **Difference = Percentage in 2015 – Percentage in 2010**, and came up with Table 1:

*Table 1. The differences between % of grades of 2015 and 2010*

|    | Humanities | Natural Sciences | Social Sciences | Total College |
|----|------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| A  | 4.40%      | 3.90%            | 3.90%           | 3.80%         |
| A- | 1.10%      | 1.20%            | 0.60%           | 0.80%         |
| B+ | -1.30%     | -2.80%           | -1.70%          | -1.10%        |
| B  | 0.00%      | 1.20%            | -3.00%          | -1.30%        |
| B- | -1.90%     | -1.10%           | -0.30%          | -1.00%        |
| C+ | -0.90%     | -1.70%           | -0.10%          | -0.70%        |
| C  | -0.90%     | 0.80%            | 0.50%           | -0.30%        |
| C- | -0.70%     | -0.80%           | -0.10%          | -0.40%        |
| D+ | 0.40%      | -0.30%           | 0.00%           | 0.20%         |

|    |        |        |        |        |
|----|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| D  | -0.10% | -0.10% | 0.20%  | 0.10%  |
| D- | -0.20% | 0.00%  | 0.10%  | -0.20% |
| F  | 0.00%  | -0.20% | -0.10% | -0.10% |

Looking at the table, one can see that the Humanities has the biggest rise in the

number of A's, the second biggest rise in the number of A-'s; and the percentages of other lower grades either remain the same or decrease (with the exception of D+). This fact indicates that professors in the Humanities are giving more A's than those in Natural Sciences and Social Sciences do. As a result, the average GPA of the Humanities remained the highest of the three divisions (3.24 in 2010 and 3.32 in 2015). It is possible that students have sensed this trend or learned about it from upperclassmen. If students (the consumers) assume that they receive higher grades when they take humanities courses, they might be more likely to choose these over Natural Sciences or Social Sciences, which exactly is the consumer-based view. This reason, therefore, can be a possible explanation of the correlation because it fully explains why the Humanities has the biggest enrollment and highest GPA.

The second explanation for the correlation of higher grades and larger enrollment in the Humanities is that the students of this selective liberal arts college are particularly interested and talented in this division. First, I examined whether College X's students are peculiarly interested in Humanities. To test this hypothesis, I calculated the average number of students per department for each division. This number can tell whether the largest number of students enrolling in the Humanities resulted from the fact that there are many departments, or the fact that the Humanities is really interesting to students. If the calculation yields a big number, it means that College X's students are especially fond of the Humanities, and if it yields a small result, it means that this division has the largest amount of students because it has the most departments. Before I actually made any calculation, I noticed that the Humanities and the Social



Sciences had approximately the same number of students although the Social Sciences had a significantly fewer departments.

*Table 2. Average number of students per department*

|                  | 2010       |                       |                                    | 2015       |              |                                     |
|------------------|------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|------------|--------------|-------------------------------------|
|                  | Enrollment | Number of departments | Avg. number of students/department | Enrollment | #Departments | Avg. number of students/departments |
| Humanities       | 2939       | 24                    | 122.46                             | 2807       | 23           | 122.04                              |
| Natural Sciences | 1254       | 9                     | 139.33                             | 1547       | 9            | 171.89                              |
| Social Sciences  | 2418       | 8                     | 302.25                             | 2154       | 9            | 239.33                              |

The table shows that the average number of students per department of the Humanities is much lower than that of the Social Sciences and the Natural Sciences, which is not surprising as I have anticipated it beforehand. Furthermore, according to the U.S. News & World Report, the five most popular majors for College X's 2014 graduates are International Business & Management (11%), Political Science (10%), Biology (7%), English (6%), and Psychology (6%) (U.S. News & World Report online). Of these five most popular majors, only English can be categorized as Humanities. Hence, it is not true to say that the Humanities are particularly interesting to the students of College X. Second, I wanted to test whether Humanities students were really good in their fields. However, it is very difficult, if not nearly impossible, to decide whether students who take the Humanities are better in their fields than those who choose the Natural Sciences or the Social Sciences. For example, how can one know that a Philosophy student is better than a Math student in his own field, provided that they both get an A? Therefore, arguing that the Humanities has the highest GPA because students are good at this division is unsubstantiated. In conclusion, the second explanation cannot explain both sides of the correlation, thus being eliminated.

After having examined two possible explanations above, I concluded that the second hypothesis was completely fallacious while the first one was appropriate because it could be used to fully explain the correlation. For that reason, it is fair to say that the consumer-based view does exist at this selective liberal arts college.

#### **IV. Discussion**

Since the consumer-based view had been indicated to happen at College X, I proceeded to study how this view could devalue grades. First and foremost, one needs to understand the values of GPA in order to see how these values are being diminished. GPA has been widely deemed one of the most significant and valuable measures of academic achievement, which is why graduate schools and employers tend to take it into consideration when they review an applicant's profile. Indeed, GPA does hold some merits that are helpful to any recruiting process. The first advantage of GPA is that it is a number which can easily be interpreted and compared. For example, a student who gains a 3.33 GPA is obviously an assiduous and bright one, but he might not be as good as another student with a 4.0 GPA (provided that they take the same courses from similar colleges). Furthermore, previous research suggested that GPA was related to some variables such as mental ability, conscientiousness, motivation, etc. (Roth and Bobko 399). Therefore, it is reasonable for companies and graduate schools to use college GPA in order to admit applicants. Acknowledging that GPA plays an important role in the recruiting process, students strive for higher grades, adopting the view of a consumer whose sole interest is excellent GPA instead of knowledge. This brings about a counterproductive situation: students want to get A's in order to get into graduate schools or to find a high-paid job in the future; however, as more students have roughly the same GPA, its credibility begins to decrease. In the article "Does Grade Inflation Affect the Credibility of Grades? Evidence from US Law School

Admissions,” Wongsurawat, through extensive research and analysis of quantitative data, showed that “during the late 1990s, institutions witnessing higher levels of grade inflation were more likely to enhance their emphasis on standardized test scores” (Wongsurawat 531). In another study, Robert D. Bretz proved that undergraduate GPA, when compared to other factors, is an insignificant indicator of salary, career satisfaction, or work-related achievement (Bretz 16-17). What can be deduced from these studies is that grades have partially lost their values in the eyes of recruiters due to the rise in GPA. Graduate schools would rely more heavily on standardized test scores, while companies would pay more attention to other factors such as internships or experiences. Then, what is the meaning of an A if many others get the same point? The consumer-based view urges students to achieve better grades, pressures professors to give these grades, and encourages institutions to help their students by inflating grades. All of these gain nothing but make graduate schools and employers more doubtful about grades.

## **V. Conclusion**

Through data analysis, my research suggested the existence of the consumer-based view at one selective liberal arts college. Nevertheless, it still has one limitation. All of my conclusions were based solely upon grade data, which might be affected by numerous factors other than the student consumerism. In order to reinforce the validity of my deductions, two additional surveys are required. One survey would be on whether students choose classes based on professors’ easiness, and the other one would be on students’ interest in different divisions. Another point in my research is that the student consumerism has devalued grades. In the future, I want to receive more data about the percentage of students going to graduate schools or entering the workforce in relation to their GPAs. This data would enable me to conduct further studies about the extent to which grade values have been diminished.

There are several policies that College X, as well as other universities and colleges, can adopt in order to reduce the negative effects caused by the consumer-based view. The fundamental method is to educate students on the purposes and values of higher education once they move onto campus. Although the ability to find a dream job after graduation is a desirable goal for students, this should not be their primary purpose for going to college. Higher education allows students to discover their dormant interests and talents, to broaden their knowledge, and to challenge themselves academically and socially. In order to deliver these values to students, during the orientation week, this college could feature some students talking about how satisfying it is to earn good grades fair and square, or about how rewarding it is to take classes based on interest even when those classes may be deemed “harder.” In this way, students would understand that they are treated as learners instead of consumers.

Another way to tackle this issue is to incorporate cross-grading between professors in different sections of the same course. After a professor has finished grading, several tests or papers would be randomly chosen and re-graded by another professor. Not only would this policy unify the varied standards among professors, but it could also prevent any professor from succumbing to treating students as consumers.

The last method is to adopt the Relative Performance Index (RPI) model, which is used by Dartmouth College. In short, the RPI model is implemented by dividing the student’s grade by the class average, then including the result in the transcript of the student (Boretz 44). By using this method, schools could shift the focus from a student’s grade to the relation of the grade with the class average. Boretz stated that “grades, relative to one another, become more meaningful than when reported in absolute terms” (Boretz 44). Without the RPI model, students would choose classes that give higher grades because recruiters can see their grades only. With

the RPI model, students would instead move from classes that give high grades to those that assign fair grades because now recruiters could compare their grades with the whole class performance. When students have shifted their focus, classes will automatically begin to be graded more fairly.

Last but not least, what is extremely important is that regardless of whichever policy is applied, it has to be incorporated by every college and university. The reason is that if several colleges try to combat the student consumerism while others do not, there will be a discrepancy between grading standards among colleges, which in turn will exacerbate the situation. In order for grades to have greater value for graduate schools and employers, institutions should stop giving way to the consumer-based view and start giving students the grades that reflect their ability.

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