Credentials vs. Accomplishments

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Why was a C average acceptable for graduating engineers in the 60s, but today only straight As is acceptable? It could be that standards have slipped, but I find that unpersuasive given the scientific and engineering accomplishments. I believe what we have seen is a slow, large scale fulfillment of Goodhart’s Law. When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to be a good measure.

Grades were formerly an indicator of technical competence, work ethic, and suitability for the workplace, but crucially they were not the only indicator. As grades and high stakes testing became the targets rather than two monitors out of several, their meaning began to change. I believe the former indication was akin to:

A Exceptional ability
B Hard work
C Competence
D Close to competence
F Lack thereof

The C was meant to indicate competence, but the proof was in projects, internships, etc. where the knowledge was put to work. A recruiter focused just as much on society membership, etc. I believe we are now in a situation where

A Hard work
B Competence
C Lack thereof
D Attended every class
F Not showing up

However, the more important shift is that the grade is now the target. The teacher devises a complex and precise formula for each grade, broken down punctiliously into individual points, which to me does not offer the same holistic goal of competence. The credential is substituted for the accomplishment. It is now more important to have the credential (grade, degree, recommendation
letter), than the accomplishment (project, artifact, internship work) that proves competence.

My professor for Quantum Many-Body Theory, Ken Kowalski, had a novel solution. He wanted you to learn that subject with the same depth as you had elementary addition. "If I shake you awake in the middle of the night and ask you 'What is 2+2+?,' you will never respond '5'."

The credential/accomplishment dichotomy spills over into many aspects of an academic career, but most notably into publication. The classic credential is a publication count, which obviously ignores completely the paper content. However, citation count, impact factor, and h-index are all similar credentials which give no real indication of individual accomplishments. The culture of secret review perpetuates this replacement of accomplishment by credential because the credential (acceptance) has replaced a discussion of the merits. It would be much more beneficial to have an open discussion on the merits of a paper (since distribution can be easily and cheaply handled by archive services) in which the author can also participate. Such a record would not only record the specific accomplishments of an author, but remain as a resource for students, tenure committees, grant panels, etc.