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HEADLINE: The Legacy of 68

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BODY:

At the height of the Paris campus unrest in May 1968, students at the Sorbonne commandeered classrooms and led impromptu seminars on "the organization of the struggle," "the colonial question," and "methods of teaching." Among the spray-painted slogans that month: "Exams = servility, social promotion, hierarchical society."

The student activists failed to do away with France's famously rigorous baccalaureat -- which ordinarily consists of a grueling series of written and oral tests. But amid the chaos, the government did briefly loosen the reins, reducing the exam that year to a pair of orals. The number of passing grades spiked by 30 percent.

Did that mean French universities had admitted a crop of feeble students who couldn't keep up with the work? Apparently not, according to a recent study by two European economists. French men born in 1948 or 1949 -- that is, men who probably would have taken the baccalaureat in 1968 -- have significantly higher wages and education than men born in the surrounding years.

Even more striking, the children of French men born in 1948 or 1949 are less likely to have been required to repeat a grade -- a common practice in France -- than the children of men born earlier or later.

"The argument is sometimes made," says one of the researchers, Sandra McNally, a research fellow at the Center for Economic Performance at the London School of Economics, "that if we expand the education system, and implicitly lower standards, that the marginal entrants won't benefit, that it would do them better to go out and get a job, because they won't really benefit from university. Our case is an example of where that didn't happen."

So if some Parisian Archie Bunker drove by the Sorbonne in 1968 and shouted, "Get a job!" he probably got his wish.