Student Anti-Intellectualism and the Dumbing Down of the University

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"'Why are colleges trying to force this stuff down our throats and trying to make us think when our minds and opinions are already formed?''" (Sacks 79).

A T-shirt sold at Duke University proudly announces, "You can lead me to college, but you can't make me think" (Bauer 13).

A student website offering term papers for sale is named "schoolsucks" (http://www.schoolsucks.com)

When the professor at an optional help session asked, "Now, how would we do that?" a student at the back yelled out, "'Who gives a shit!'" (Bauer 9).

"But when I looked at Justin, all I saw was blankness. I must have looked at him for several seconds, searching for an expression, a smile, a sign, a movement of his eyebrows, something to indicate that, Yea, that's good stuff and I'm glad this teacher turned me on to it. But I saw nothing. Justin's eyes met mine, and in those eyes I saw boredom and contempt. Those eyes said, 'you don't amuse me with your brand of so-called good writing. There's nothing you can do or say to impress me'" (Sacks 42).

Student Anti-Intellectualism

For well over a decade, college instructors have been complaining about students who are not only apathetic and unmotivated but who belittle and resist efforts to educate them.

Students demonstrate this anti-intellectual mindset in a number of ways: by not reading the assigned works; by not contributing to class discussions; by complaining about course workloads and lobbying for fewer assignments; by skipping class; by giving low evaluations to instructors with high standards or tough requirements; by neglecting to prepare for class and tests and not bothering to do extra-credit work or take make-up exams; by not consulting material placed on reserve or picking up class handouts; by refusing to learn any more than is necessary to get a good grade; by boasting about how little time is spent studying; by ridiculing high achievers; by being impatient with deliberative analysis; by condemning intellectual endeavors as "boring"; by resenting academic requirements as an intrusion on free time, etc., etc., etc.

These anti-intellectual behaviors and attitudes are now so rife on college campuses that motivated and engaged students are being squelched by them. "Try bringing up a book you've read, or a great lecture you've just heard in class and other students will tell you, 'keep it in class. My brain meter's not running now'" (Willimon 29). A sophomore at Duke University complains, "If you try to discuss something that happened in class, or something from your reading for class, they'll ridicule you. People want to be able to turn off the academic switch the minute they get out of class" (Willimon 30). A student told me that she went to a counsellor to find out what was wrong with her because she liked her classes. The pressure is on to display a contemptuous or derisive attitude towards all the grown-up garbage that makes up higher education (Sacks 149).

Without sugar coating it, Paul M. Levitt flatly declares, "many college kids are a sorry lot. Preoccupied with their hair, their clothes, their cars, they have never developed a critical turn of mind and have no interest in doing so" (B3). It does not bode well for higher
education that many students entering college do not have—in the words of Peter Sacks—"anything resembling an intellectual life" (Sacks 78).

Of course, there always have been students who have hated studying, found classes boring, resented demanding requirements, and expected high grades for mediocre work. And there have always been professors who complained about them. None of this is really new. What has changed, however, is the number of students who exhibit these attitudes. Nobody can say precisely how many anti-intellectual students now sit in college classrooms, but the number appears to be growing and in some contexts seems to have reached a critical mass.

Here's some evidence. UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute, which annually surveys the attitudes of high-school graduates entering college, found that record numbers of them were "increasingly disengaged from the academic experience" (Sax et al. 4). These students had spent less time studying or doing homework than ever before, and were more bored with school than any cohort that ever entered postsecondary education.

Anecdotal evidence also indicates that the number of anti-intellectual students on college campuses has reached a critical level. A philosophy professor at Virginia Polytechnic believes that "a majority of students is more or less disaffected and [that] an alarming number (10 percent? 15 percent?) seem positively alienated." "Unprecedented numbers [of students] rarely come to class,...have not read the material and have scant interest in learning it. As I talked to other faculty,...I was...disheartened to discover that the pattern was very common" (Bauer 11). An English professor who recently retired from an east-coast university said to me, "most students nowadays are reluctant to learn and to think and resent being awakened from their stupor. I shudder when I consider the future of this country."

A chemistry professor at Virginia Polytechnic estimates that only a "handful" of his freshmen chemistry students are interested in class, "no more than a few percent" (Bauer 5). James Otteson, a doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago, who has taught at Joliet Junior College and the College of St. Francis and the University of Wisconsin (Milwaukee), writes that "the majority" of his students are "generally uninterested in actual learning, [are] concerned to do the least amount of work possible, [and think] themselves entitled to special attention" (Bauer 13).

The problem is not confined to junior and land-grant colleges. When only 38 of 72 students showed up for his "Perspectives in Technology" course for non-science majors at Yale—a course for which students pay about $1,400—physics professor Werner Wolf wrote to the students who skipped to find out why. Only six students bothered to respond. They said they skipped the 1 p.m. class because it cut into their lunch hour (The Chronicle of Higher Education 5 May 1993: A39).

Laurence Thomas, a philosophy professor at Syracuse University, asked how many of his 280 students had read the material for that day. When only 18 said they had, he walked out of class and then bought an advertisement ($111) in the school newspaper to complain that they had displayed "more indifference than I would have thought possible." Was class size a factor? No, for the same problem occurred in a small-enrollment course on the Holocaust that Thomas taught. "The most stunning experience in my teaching career was that half the students in that course were unprepared" (The Chronicle of Higher Education 18 December 1991).

Commenting on the "alarming number of students [who] are not attending classes and not doing the assigned work," Warren Esty, professor of mathematical sciences at Montana State University-Bozeman, wrote in the student newspaper that the problem of disengaged students was "noticeably worse this year" [1995]. "There are now so many idle students that their behavior reinforces the behavior of others. The problem is gaining momentum" (5).
Yes it is. Now that around sixty percent of high-school graduates go on to some form of higher education, colleges are importing the anti-intellectual behaviors and attitudes undermining secondary education. In *Beyond the Classroom* (1996), Laurence Steinberg, professor of psychology at Temple University, reports that "an extraordinarily high percentage" of high-school students are now "alienated and disengaged" from education (62). Two decades ago, he observes, the average high-school classroom would have three or four disaffected students. But today, "nearly half of the students are uninterested" (184). "Across the country...students' commitment to school is at an all-time low" (13). According to Steinberg, student anti-intellectualism is a problem with "with enormous implications and profound potential consequences." It is "potentially more harmful to the future well-being of American society" than any of the other problems now grabbing the headlines (28). And Peter Sacks, (who saw the problem up-close and personal in a community college in the Rockies) in *Generation X Goes to College* (1996), contends that the growing population of recalcitrant slackers raises grave and "fundamental questions whether the existing model of higher education even applies any longer to teaching this generation" (xi).

American colleges could follow the same path as American high schools and become warehouses of anti-intellectual and anti-educational slackers. In the years ahead, the real campus war may be between those who think that students should adapt to the rigors of higher education, and those who think that higher education should adapt to the declining motivation and intellectual commitment of students. If colleges and universities do wind up providing comfortable environments for more and more slackers and screw-offs, they will likely surrender whatever is left of their academic integrity and social credibility.

**The Dumbing Down of the University**

Faced with growing numbers of high-school graduates who resent and resist the rigors, demands, and pleasures of higher education, colleges and universities have lowered standards to keep students happy and enrollments up.

The reason, of course, is obvious: body count equals money. As long as larger enrollments mean larger budgets, and larger budgets mean administrative success, enrolling and retaining as many students as possible, regardless of their attitudes or aptitudes, is more important than making sure students achieve, learn, and produce.

This explains why administrators monitor credit hours and student evaluation ratings, but not how much students actually learn. There is no economic incentive to do so. So, over the long haul, enrollment-driven funding weakens commitment to high academic standards (Stone 20-21).

Faculty, of course, are complicit in the dumbing down. Few ever question the recruitment, enrollment, or grading policies that ultimately bring money to their departments. Most department heads and chairs champion educationally fraudulent policies and practices, even when they are ultimately ruinous to staff morale, as long as they believe such policies and practices strengthen the department and protect it from being cannibalized. So, as long as administrators control the purse strings, "there is a great incentive for faculty collectively to support the administrative emphasis on growth" regardless of its negative impact on academic quality and standards (Stone 15).

This explains, in part, the phenomenon of grade inflation, for which faculty must bear most of the blame. "The incentive for institutions to emphasize rigorous grading standards is minuscule" because grade inflation--higher grades for lower achievement--keeps more students on campus, and more students on campus means larger budgets for all (Stone 10). "In essence, there is a substantial body of informed opinion suggesting that grade inflation has come about mainly because enrollment-driven funding has made grade inflation bureaucratically profitable" (Stone 9).
Lower standards and grade inflation make campuses safe for students who have little hunger for knowledge, little love of learning, and almost no appetite for hard work. Although students have many reasons for going to college, a very large number--71.3 percent of the entering class of 1995--do so not to enrich their minds but their pocketbooks. "The only reason most of us are going to school is society says, 'this is your meal ticket" (Sacks 139).

Careerism, of course, is both a result and a cause of student anti-intellectualism and disengagement. Increasingly, career-minded students see college--or at least required courses--as an imposition between high school and the good life, an obstacle to be gotten over as soon as possible, just like high school was. Core courses are especially resented by career-minded students, who find it difficult to learn material they resent having to study. Since many students believe that college is "a necessary evil to be endured before Wall Street," their top priority "is to get through college with the highest grades and least amount of time, effort, and inconvenience" as possible (Willimon 24; Stone 13; see Toom 122). This is why, as Andrei Toom points out, it makes no sense to students "to understand anything after the test" (Toom 126). What students really want for their tuition dollars are high grades and credentials--the trappings of learning--not real learning itself.

To attract and reassure such students, colleges and universities are wont to talk about them as being consumers of higher education. This notion implies, of course, that the desires of the customer reign supreme ("consumer sovereignty"), that the customer should be easily and completely satisfied, and that the customer should try to get as much as possible while paying as little as possible. When this consumer model is applied to higher education, it has disastrous effects on academic standards and student motivation.

The consumer model implies, for instance, that university "services"--among them, courses--should be shaped to satisfy student tastes, and that students can use or waste these services as they see fit. When students think of themselves as consumers, they study only when it is convenient (like shopping), expect satisfaction with little effort, want knowledge served up in "easily digestible, bite-sized chunks," and assume that academic success, including graduation, is guaranteed. After all, failure--or consumer dissatisfaction--is "ruled out upon payment of one's tuition" (Sykes 162).

When taken to its logical conclusion, as many students do, the consumer model implies that students buy grades by paying for them through learning. Students who subscribe to this notion try to be consumers by paying--that is learning--as little as possible (Toom 125). A few carry it even further, and believe that whenever they learn something they have actually lost in the exchange (Toom 125).

Needless to say, instructors who try to teach students more than the students have bargained for are going to run into trouble. Andrei Toom, an adjunct math instructor from Russia, reports his dismal experiences trying to teach anti-intellectual undergraduates consumed by the consumer mindset. "As soon as I started to explain to them something which was a little bit beyond the standard course, they asked suspiciously: 'Will this be on the test?' If I said, 'no,' they did not listen any more and showed clearly that I was doing something inappropriate" (Toom 125). When asked by students why he gave math problems unlike those in the textbook, Toom responded: "Because I want you to know elementary mathematics." Immediately an imposing train of students "stood up and tramped out" (Toom 127). A colleague of Toom's was also criticized for asking his students to learn more than students in another section (Toom 127). Students viewed this not as better teaching but as an iniquity.

The only safe course, under these circumstances, is to fall short of the syllabus, "but never go beyond" (Toom 124). No instructor ever need fear students or administrators showing up at the office demanding harder courses, more demanding workloads, and stricter grading. The system makes this impossible.
So, the message to instructors is, "the less you teach the less trouble you will have from students and administrators" (Toom 123). Both groups are perfectly willing to accept trivial courses, inflated grades, and mediocre standards because these corruptions help guarantee what both constituencies want--satisfied customers.

And, thanks to the consumer model, when students do not get what they want--praise, bonus points, an A, easier regulations, dumbed-down courses, a diploma--they naturally see themselves as victims of consumer fraud. Norman Wessells, provost at the University of Oregon, says "The students are telling us, 'I pay so much to go to school here--you can't give me D's and F's!'" (Willimon 22). A student imperiously wrote to Sacks, "If I don't get a decent grade because of your critical attitude, I will be speaking to your superiors" (154). Here is a note written on an evaluation form to the chair of the math department: "Please inform Mr. Toom about the grading system and instruction methods of THIS country.... Please straighten this man out" (Toom 123). Another student reports, "I have friends who expect to get good grades and they don't study. They get mad at the teachers and blame them if they don't" (Sacks 169). Three students went to a dean to complain when a teacher in a "Mickey Mouse" course actually gave students "assignments!" (Bauer 13). And, then there was the slacker who hired another student to take an exam for her, and when the imposter flunked it, complained to police (Newsweek 17 December 1993: 58) about a breach of contract!

The business of the university, according to one administrator, is to "sell degrees" (Bauer 21). It is the job of administrators--the merchandisers of the consumer model--to keep consumer complaints to a minimum. One way they do this is by making sure that academic standards are not high enough to upset students or endanger their academic success. After all, high expectations and rigorous grading could interfere with the mutually profitable economic transaction that occurs every semester between students and administrators (Stone 19).

To make sure that standards are low enough to satisfy anti-intellectual students, more and more administrators are dropping the use of even "recentered" SAT scores in admissions (Murray 12; USA Today 14 May 1996, 10A). Some are also dropping entrance exams, giving more weight to inflated high-school GPAs (The Chronicle of Higher Education 29 September 1993: A32). And most administrators have not raised minimum GPA requirements to keep pace with grade inflation.

The president of Miami-Dade Community College actually rescinded a requirement that students pass a test to become college juniors or to receive an associate's degree (The Chronicle of Higher Education 2 June 1995: A26). And the president of the University of Chicago--which boasts 64 Nobel Prize-winning alumni--led a movement to get students out of the library. When U. of C. placed last in a survey of campus nightlife on 300 campuses, campus bureaucrats quickly distributed a pamphlet encouraging scholarly students to get out of the Regenstein Library and into the bars. The poster showed The Reg branded with a circle-and-slash emblem. To their credit, students, who knew what they were at the University of Chicago to do, proudly donned shirts with a big numeral 300 (The Chronicle of Higher Education 15 November 96: A49; 17 January 1997: B3).

Administrators have done a number of other things to make sure that academic standards do not discomfit anti-intellectual students. They have established, for instance, "peer counseling" for students "traumatized" by classwork, they have chastised professors for "hounding" students about their poor writing, they have warned professors about imposing standards that are too high, they have forced professors to give a second exam when "too many" students flunk the first, they have surreptitiously raised final grades on course transcripts, they have exempted unprepared students from competitive placement requirements, and they have removed professors from class when students have complained about hard requirements or low grades.
Professors who are trying to maintain academic standards in the face of student unwillingness to work should not look to their "leaders" for support (Bauer 20).

Under almost constant pressure from students and administrators to relax and lighten up, many instructors have caved-in over the years, watering down courses and doling out high grades. Lowering standards is not hard to do when it pleases both clients and bosses, and when the collapse can be explained not as an ignoble capitulation to insidious pressure but as a humane "adjustment" to the "abilities and needs" of students.

So, instructors help to dumb down the university by offering innovative "fun" courses, by stripping tough courses of "boring" material, by refusing to apply codes of conduct and traditional academic standards to students unprepared for or "overwhelmed" by college, by relaxing academic standards to accommodate different "learning styles," by re-defining anti-intellectualism and disengagement as "learning disabilities" exempt from normal sanctions, by lavishing praise on students to puff up their self-esteem, by assigning fewer books and papers, by giving students exam questions days before the test to improve scores, by permitting students to re-take tests or re-write papers until they get the grade they want, or by giving high grades for mediocre work.

But, in the seclusion of their offices, most professors will admit that what they are really doing is bending over backwards "to appease unmotivated, acutely passive students" (Sacks 165). Peter Sacks heard confessions from a number of faculty who knew "they were watering down their standards in order to accommodate a generation of students who had become increasingly disengaged from anything resembling an intellectual life" (Sacks 78; Willimon 17).

Professors go along with this charade more out of fear than conviction. Few professors can afford to ignore what students say about them on evaluation forms--especially when these forms are factored into administrative decisions about hiring, retention, tenure, promotion, and merit-pay. Adjuncts and untenured faculty are especially vulnerable. As Andrei Toom puts it, "I could not afford to care about my students because I had to care about my safety from their complaint" (Toom 127). So, professors buy good ratings by giving their student "customers" what they want--easier courses and higher grades. Students know the power they have. I overheard one of them telling her friends to take courses from adjuncts because they have to give out lots of A's to get high evaluations so they can keep their jobs one more year.

Even tenured professors are vulnerable to the economic and psychological pressures of student evaluations. As Toom remarks, the criticism of academic bureaucrats can be easily ignored, but "censure of [the] market goes to the bones" (Toom 126, Note 4). How many times can even the most thick-skinned professor be denounced as an elitist swine before caving-in to make students happier and to be better liked?

It seems unlikely that instructional evaluation forms ever helped improve teaching: student academic performance has declined during the twenty-five or so years that these forms have been used as a measure of "good" teaching. And now there is growing evidence that they have contributed significantly to grade inflation and a dumbed-down curriculum. "When job security is put at risk, the free flow of high grades for everyone is hardly surprising" (Patrick Groff, San Diego State University, Newsweek 3 May 1993). J. E. Stone believes that using evaluation forms as a basis for administrative decisions on promotion, tenure, and merit pay "has been a major contributor to the academic decline and devaluation of the past twenty-five or so years" (13).

The whole corrupt situation was summed up with painful bluntness by a thoroughly disenchanted undergraduate: "'most kids nowadays just go through the motions of getting a college education...[and] colleges and universities go through the motions of teaching students'" (qtd. in Bauer 13).
The psychological tensions and moral compromises entailed by teaching increasing numbers of anti-intellectual students are taking a toll on professors. Confronted with more and more students who are ill-mannered, surly, disrespectful, demanding, whinny, and apathetic, professors are themselves disengaging from students, reallocating their time and energies to professional endeavors that are more fulfilling than trying to stimulate students who resist and resent efforts to remedy their intellectual shortcomings. No wonder so many professors in my discipline now find it more fun to write about Madonna or transgendered dwarves than to teach students who can't and won't read even mildly challenging novels.

But faculty disengagement is only one troubling sign of the times. Some professors--fed up with the entitlement mindset of arrogant slackers--are as contemptuous of students as some students are of professors. A study at the University of Michigan, for instance, found that many faculty members were "embittered to a quite surprising degree," racked by "disaffection, cynicism," and "contempt for students" (Elmer J. Jensen, Change Jan./Feb. 1995).

Peter Sacks is one of the few to speak personally and honestly about the frustrations, indignities and moral dangers that await those who teach today's students. He writes, "there was potentially great danger for an instructor trying to cope with students. Whenever they'd act childish, rude, or bored, a teacher might have to pinch himself real hard to keep from blowing up, walking out of the room, and telling them to all go back to high school or whatever Neverneverland they'd come out from" (94). "You were out there," Sacks points out, "and if you flubbed up or weren't entertaining enough or otherwise crossed students' sensibilities, or if you showed any weakness, students would smell blood and like sharks would devour you" (8). Evidence is mounting that Sacks is right: the situation that now prevails between some students and some faculty is nothing less than an "unarticulated, undeclared culture war" (75-76). The best-attended session of the 1996 meeting of the Modern Language Association was "Professors on Prozac."

**Some Remedies Within Reach**

Adults throughout the social system--parents, culture producers, teachers, professors, administrators--have failed to socialize many young people to understand and experience the personal and social benefits and pleasures of learning. We have not conveyed to them that it is more fulfilling to be skilled than unskilled, to know than to not know, to inquire than to be self-satisfied, to strive than to be apathetic, to create than to be fallow. We have failed to empower them to take responsibility for their own intellectual development, or even to care about it.

Sad to say, the problem of anti-intellectual students is only going to get worse. It is the result not only of misguided educational policies and practices K through 16, but of vast social and cultural forces well beyond the classroom. These forces include family dysfunction and divorce, disengaged and permissive parenting, peer pressure to regard education derisively, youth-culture activities that militate against serious and sustained intellectual engagement, a widespread deligitimation of reading and print culture, and, an ambient popular culture that glorifies triviality, coarseness and mindlessness. How is it possible to overhaul the entire system--from popular culture and family life to the educational establishment--simultaneously?

The whole situation is immensely depressing.

But I do not counsel despair, because the remedies to the problem are so obvious.

Of course primary and secondary schools must be made more rigorous, challenging and--therefore--engaging. William Damon believes that students have become anti-intellectual and disengaged--anti-educational--because primary and secondary classrooms have been stripped of "challenging intellectual material and rigorous standards." Students become
bored, give up on school and find more engaging things to do (Damon 19). The only way to academically re-engage students, Damon contends, is to raise standards at every level and to challenge students to strive for excellence (23, 57-58, 79, 120, 203-04).

To accomplish this, the quality of textbooks will have to be raised, the curriculum tightened, and teachers better trained in new teaching techniques and authoritative mentoring. When it comes to teacher training, colleges of education are going to have to raise standards and demand more from their majors. Right now too many education majors are themselves beneficiaries of anti-intellectual practices and policies in college.

Schools must institute measures and policies that convince students that academic success will have future payoffs and that underperformance will be penalized. This can be done through standardized national exams, exit exams, and exams for federal college aid. Another way is to publish data on how students at the school perform, and to provide more useful information to future employers. Another is to set minimal achievement requirements for graduation. Another is for colleges to send reports to high schools about how their graduates perform in postsecondary institutions.

Teachers will have to encourage students to recognize that hard work, not luck or innate abilities, is the key to academic success. So enough of self-esteem already. Let's talk about hard work again. But teaching strategies and techniques will have to change to accommodate students who can't and don't want to read or write or think very hard. The ideal would be for teachers all the way through the system to use instructional methods that better engage media-distracted students without dumbing down the material. Students should be included in all discussions about how to make classroom instruction more engaging. Administrators will have to increase the risk of student failure, as well as experiment with new ways to motivate students to study (incentive cards, cash rewards, scholarships, parking passes, etc.).

Career counsellors will have to direct students to schools that match their preparation and degree of commitment, and forthrightly tell others to take time off to better prepare themselves for the rigors of higher education. Counsellors should also stop touting college as the only passport to a happy life or a decent job--it is not. They should encourage more students to enroll in vocational and technical schools.

And perhaps colleges and universities should rethink requirements, including core requirements, that force students in to courses they resent having to take. Disgruntled students poison the atmosphere and put psychological pressure on increasingly frustrated instructors. "As one young man graciously explained to me, he had no desire to take my course but had enrolled in it merely to fulfill a requirement that he resented" (Roberta Borkat, "A Liberating Curriculum," Newsweek 12 April 1993). What good is this doing?

If students learned more in grade school and high school, they could then be allowed to take the courses they want to take in college. Almost every important reform of higher education depends upon reforming K through 12 education.

I turn now to remedies within the reach of most college instructors.

First, study and teach the problem of student anti-intellectualism. Henry Bauer has suggested that before we can profitably "conjecture how to rescue education as a socially useful activity," we must first understand the "priorities and values of the non-studying student" and how and why the problem came about in the first place (Bauer 3). I agree. To fully understand how and why students become disengaged, professors should ask students themselves to confront and analyze what has been done to them as they moved through the system and the culture.

This could be done by asking students to fill out surveys and questionnaires about their attitudes on education, teaching, studying, reading, etc. Local high-school students should
also be surveyed. Professors should collaborate with concerned high-school teachers in garnering and analyzing the data.

It could also be done by turning freshman seminars, and appropriate courses in philosophy, sociology, education and composition, into forums “for some frank dialogue between students and teachers” about all aspects of this problem (Sacks 186). During spring semester 1997, I had students in my freshmen writing class confront the problem by reading and responding to Charles Sykes’ *Dumbing Down Our Kids*, and Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, a dystopian novel about an anti-intellectual society whose citizens no longer want to learn anything. These students responded admirably to the challenge, taking the problem quite seriously and speculating provocatively about how to remedy it. (I thank them for helping restore some of my lost faith in students.)

Second, spread the word. Tell colleagues, administrators, and the general public that the integrity of education is being compromised by students who are disastrously unmotivated. Write op-ed pieces for local papers, publish letters and essays in professional journals, present papers at scholarly and educational conferences, appear on local TV, speak at campus panels, talk to local groups, contact alumni, and network with educators at all levels, etc. The general public should be made aware that college-bound children are learning perverse habits and attitudes that increasingly threaten the knowledge-making enterprise of higher education.

At Montana State University-Bozeman, the Teaching Learning Committee, chaired by my colleague Michael Sexson, sponsored a university-wide discussion of this general issue during Spring semester 1997. Under the title “Reading the Ruines: Assessment and the Decline of Intellectual Standards in Higher Education,” the colloquium involved faculty, administrators, and outside speakers (Todd Gitlin and Peter Sacks) in a series of forums and panels over two months. Many from town came to hear the debates.

Third, raise your own expectations, grading standards, and course requirements! If universities are in the business of ‘producing’ graduates, then professors are the real quality-control experts on the assembly line. They must fulfill this responsibility honorably--regardless of the personal and professional costs--or the whole enterprise will be discredited. None of us can control what our colleagues do, but each of us can set an example for others to follow. If each professor refused to dumb down his or her courses to accommodate disengaged and anti-intellectual students, the problem would be less pronounced than it is. And, despite the complaining from aggrieved students, you just might sleep better.

Fourth, practice “authoritative” teaching. Evidence shows that students raised by authoritative—not “authoritarian”—parents do best in school, as measured by their grades, attitudes toward school work, and the time they invest in their studies (Steinberg 117). Such parents mold children into healthy adults through careful cultivation. They are caring but they also set limits. They are less concerned about whether the child is happy and more about whether the child is responsible and mature. Their children are more confident, poised, persistent, self-reliant and responsible than children who are not. They know that they, not their teachers, their genes, or the luck of the draw, control their scholastic fate (Steinberg 124).

College instructors would do well to adopt some of these traits. Research shows that “the teacher who receives high ratings from students but is below average in terms of student achievement appears to be a highly expressive extraverted type who is friendly.... The teacher who engenders high levels of student achievement but is not highly rated by his students...[is]...a tough taskmaster who pays little or no attention to students' personal needs.... The teacher who excels in both student ratings and student achievement is apparently able to draw a delicate balance between being strict and demanding on the one hand, and friendly and expressive on the other...” (H. A. Murray, “Teacher ratings, student
achievement, and teacher personality traits," a paper read at the annual meeting of the Canadian Psychological Association, qtd. in Damron 13).

I would like to call this delicate balance authoritative teaching. Authoritative instructors are more concerned with students' long-term development than with students' short-term desires or end-of-semester "happiness." Authoritative instructors do not coddle students, or release them from their obligations, or give them easy praise or undeserved high grades out of a misguided desire to raise self-esteem. Instead, authoritative instructors announce clear and high (but reasonable) expectations and standards and commit themselves to helping students achieve them, but hold them responsible when they do not. The authoritative professor tries to engage students, but does not dumb down material so that everybody is having a good time. One might say that the authoritative professor is "a warm and fuzzy brick wall." A professor cannot make up for eighteen years of bad parenting, but he or she can refuse to perpetuate it.

And fifth, instructors concerned about the decline of education should establish campus Save-Our-Standards committees (Sacks). It is important that faculty members work not only individually but collectively to empower themselves and to guard against any further erosion of merit distinctions and academic rigor. It is only by banding together that professors can change the system itself. SOS committees should consider pursuing the following goals:

(1) the elimination of student evaluations, especially numerical evaluations, in administrative decisions regarding retention, tenure, promotion and merit pay. As J. E. Stone puts it, relying on "student ratings of instruction as a measure of teaching quality encourage[s] accommodation to students, not the exercise of independent judgment" (Stone 23). Given today's anti-intellectual students and their constant demands for easier courses, lighter workloads and higher grades, the dumbing down of higher education will proceed apace as long as institutions continue to use student evaluations to determine faculty rewards. For many years, experts in assessment have recommended that these forms not be used: "Steps should be taken to eliminate the questionable practice of using the results of student rating for purposes of administrative assessment. If increased pay and promotion are possible consequences, we have an open invitation for the teacher to teach for the evaluation" (S. C. Erikson, "Private Measures of Good Teaching," Teaching of Psychology 10, 133-136, qtd. in Damron 19).

There are other, less pernicious ways to evaluate instruction for administrative purposes. For example, the process of evaluating classroom instruction can involve a number of different sources of credible information, such as self review, document review (syllabus, handouts, grade sheets, etc.), classroom visits by individual department colleagues, classroom visits and/or document review by a committee of distinguished educators from across the campus, Danforth review, engaged-student interview (students selected for their reputation as hard-workers and achievers), exit interviews, and alumni feedback (asking long-graduated students to comment on staff members). Getting rid of numerical evaluation forms should be the first priority for SOS committees. "Significant change in grading practices is likely to take place only when academic standards are reinstated as the centerpiece of the academic enterprise and when faculty are encouraged to render objective and discriminating judgments regarding student performance" (Stone 18).

(2) constant surveillance of administrators to make sure they work to create the best possible environment for learning and teaching possible. Faculty should demand: honest recruiting material and public announcements that make clear to students, parents and politicians that excellence and achievement--not comfort or efficiency--are the educational goals of the institution, and that students are primarily responsible for how much they learn and how well they do; the implementation of policies and programs that support and reward faculty who uphold high academic standards and scholarly ideals in the classroom; the public exposure of any and all policies and practices that lower standards or that exempt
some students from normal assessment protocols and procedures, the establishment of long-range plans that reallocate to academic endeavors resources now spent for non-academic ventures, such as divisions of Student Affairs, Public Relations, and Athletics.

(3) the raising of admission standards. Higher admission standards would motivate students--and their teachers--all the way down the line. "The question of standards goes to the heart of what we want our colleges to be. There should be no disagreement about helping academically qualified, financially needy students. All such should be aggressively sought out and strongly encouraged to attend college" (Manno 81). But the time has come "for colleges to...stop admitting students who are underprepared for the rigors of higher education" (Levitt B5). This should include students who do not have the appropriate attitudes and values to contribute to--not just consume--a thriving and rigorous academic climate. The calibre of the student helps determine the quality of the college. Students can go elsewhere or re-apply should they acquire the study habits and commitment that respectable schools should be demanding.

It will be difficult to raise admission standards, or enact other quality-control measures, as long as budgets are driven by enrollment. Attempts to improve the quality of higher education are "doomed to be circumvented or undermined," Stone contends, as long as "bureaucratic profit" is increased primarily through enrollment. The quality of higher education will suffer until the "fundamental incentives to which the administrative bureaucracy responds" are changed (Stone 20). Faculty should lobby administrators and legislators to devise funding formulas that have a less pernicious impact on academic standards and quality.

(4) the inclusion of all administrators--from the president to assistant deans--in classroom teaching every semester. Every administrator should teach one class each semester in his or her field of expertise. Such a policy would save the university money by allowing more course offerings without added expense; would enable administrators to stay pedagogically current in expectation of their eventual return to an academic department; would give students access to some of the most productive scholars on the staff; and, would force administrators to confront how organizational policies play out in the classroom.

(5) the elimination of remedial education at four-year colleges and universities. Students who need remedial education should not be attending four-year schools. "Rather, students who have managed to complete high school but who lack the necessary college entry skills should be required to pursue remedial coursework at local community and two-year colleges before they can apply for admission to more advanced institutions of higher education" (Steinberg et al.192; see also "States Step Up Efforts to End Remedial Courses at 4-Year Colleges, The Chronicle of Higher Education 24 February 1993).

(6) the establishment of mentoring/tutoring relationships between concerned faculty and highly motivated students. Personal, nurturing relationships with supportive professors will liberate engaged students from the influence of anti-intellectual peers and help them overcome the demoralizing effects of having to sit in classrooms where the atmosphere has been poisoned by disengaged slackers.

Conclusion

The most recalcitrant and urgent problem now facing higher education is student anti-intellectualism. As J. E. Stone points out, "Higher education cannot meaningfully improve without improved student performance, and student performance cannot improve without students devoting great time and effort to study" (22-23). But that won't happen until students want to learn.

Moreover, as colleges and universities attempt to accommodate the hostile attitudes and slacker work habits of more and more students, academic standards will decline even
further. As higher education graduates larger numbers of semi-skilled, incompetent, and undermotivated students, its status as a crucial social institution, already decidedly problematic, will be discredited even further.

Educators must assert control over educational quality, and must find ways to entice students to commit themselves to their own self-improvement and enrichment if the already frayed integrity of American education is not to disintegrate entirely.

Works Cited


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