

Higher Education

The Customer Is Always Right

Those persons whom nature has endowed with genius and virtue should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens.

Thomas Jefferson

Mr. Braddock: Would you mind telling me what those four years of college were for? What was the point of all that hard work?

Benjamin: You got me.

The Graduate

THOSE MAGICAL SEVEN YEARS

Higher education is supposed to cure us of the false belief that everyone is as smart as everyone else. Unfortunately, in the twenty-first century the effect of widespread college attendance is just the opposite: the great number of people who have been in or near a college think of themselves as the educated peers of even the most accomplished scholars and experts. College is no longer a time devoted to learning and personal maturation; instead, the stampede of young Americans into college and the consequent competition for their

tuition dollars have produced a consumer-oriented experience in which students learn, above all else, that the customer is always right.

Before World War II, most people did not finish high school and few went to college. In this earlier time, admissions to top schools were dominated by privileged families, although sometimes young men and a very few women could scrape up the money for tuition or earn a scholarship. It was an exclusive experience often governed as much by social class as by merit. Still, college attendance was an indication of potential, and graduation was a mark of achievement. A university degree was rare, serving as one of the signposts dividing experts and knowers from the rest of society.

Today, attendance at postsecondary institutions is a mass experience. As a result of this increased access to higher education, the word “college” itself is losing meaning, at least in terms of separating educated people from everyone else. “College graduate” today means a lot of things. Unfortunately, “a person of demonstrated educational achievement” is not always one of them.

Bashing colleges and universities is an American tradition, as is bashing the faculty, like me, who teach in them. Stereotypes abound, including the stuffy (or radical, or irrelevant) professor in front of a collection of bored children who themselves came to campus for any number of activities except education. “College boy” was once a zinger aimed by older people at young men, with the clear implication that education was no substitute for maturity or wisdom.

But this book isn’t about why colleges are screwed up. I don’t have enough pages for that. Rather, it is about why fewer people respect learning and expertise, and this chapter, in turn, is about how colleges and universities paradoxically became an important part of that problem.

I say this while remaining a defender of the American university system, including the much-maligned liberal arts. I am personally a beneficiary of wider access to higher education in the twentieth

century and the social mobility it provided. The record of these institutions is unarguable: universities in the United States are still the leading intellectual powerhouses in the world. I continue to have faith in the ability of America's postsecondary schools to produce both knowledge and knowledgeable citizens.

Still, the fact of the matter is that many of those American higher educational institutions are failing to provide to their students the basic knowledge and skills that form expertise. More important, they are failing to provide the ability to *recognize* expertise and to engage productively with experts and other professionals in daily life. The most important of these intellectual capabilities, and the one most under attack in American universities, is critical thinking: the ability to examine new information and competing ideas dispassionately, logically, and without emotional or personal preconceptions.

This is because attendance at a postsecondary institution no longer guarantees a "college education." Instead, colleges and universities now provide a full-service experience of "going to college." These are not remotely the same thing, and students now graduate believing they know a lot more than they actually do. Today, when an expert says, "Well, I went to college," it's hard to blame the public for answering, "Who hasn't?" Americans with college degrees now broadly think of themselves as "educated" when in reality the best that many of them can say is that they've continued on in some kind of classroom setting after high school, with wildly varying results.

The influx of students into America's postsecondary schools has driven an increasing commodification of education. Students at most schools today are treated as *clients*, rather than as students. Younger people, barely out of high school, are pandered to both materially and intellectually, reinforcing some of the worst tendencies in students who have not yet learned the self-discipline that once was essential to the pursuit of higher education. Colleges now are marketed like multiyear vacation packages, rather than as

a contract with an institution and its faculty for a course of educational study. This commodification of the college experience itself as a product is not only destroying the value of college degrees but is also undermining confidence among ordinary Americans that college means anything.

This is a deeper problem than the usual stunts, fads, and intellectual silliness on campuses that capture the public imagination from time to time. There will always be a certain amount of foolishness to a lot of campus life. As a Tufts University professor, Dan Drezner, has written, “One of the purposes of college is to articulate stupid arguments in stupid ways and then learn, through interactions with fellow students and professors, exactly how stupid they are.”¹ College life, especially at the most elite schools, is insulated from society, and when young people and intellectuals are walled off from the real world, strange things can happen.

Some of this is just so much expensive inanity, harmless in itself. Parents of students at Brown University, for example, are shelling out some serious money so their children can take part in things like “Campus Nudity Week.” (One female Brown participant said in 2013 that “the negative feedback” about the event “has helped prepare her for life after college.” One can only hope.) In the end, however, I’m not all that worried about naked students amok in the streets of Providence. Instead, my concerns about colleges and how they’ve accelerated the death of expertise rest more with what happens—or isn’t happening—in the classroom.

At its best, college should aim to produce graduates with a reasonable background in a subject, a willingness to continue learning for the rest of their lives, and an ability to assume roles as capable citizens. Instead, for many people college has become, in the words of a graduate of a well-known party school in California, “those magical seven years between high school and your first warehouse job.” College is no longer a passage to educated maturity and instead is

only a delaying tactic against the onset of adulthood—in some cases, for the faculty as well as for the students.

Part of the problem is that there are too many students, a fair number of whom simply don't belong in college. The new culture of education in the United States is that everyone should, and must, go to college. This cultural change is important to the death of expertise, because as programs proliferate to meet demand, schools become diploma mills whose actual degrees are indicative less of *education* than of *training*, two distinctly different concepts that are increasingly conflated in the public mind. In the worst cases, degrees affirm neither education nor training, but attendance. At the barest minimum, they certify only the timely payment of tuition.

This is one of those things professors are not supposed to say in polite company, but it's true. Young people who might have done better in a trade sign up for college without a lot of thought given to how to graduate, or what they'll do when it all ends. Four years turns into five, and increasingly six or more. A limited course of study eventually turns into repeated visits to an expensive educational buffet laden mostly with intellectual junk food, with very little adult supervision to ensure that the students choose nutrition over nonsense.

The most competitive and elite colleges and universities have fewer concerns in this regard, as they can pick and choose from applicants as they wish and fill their incoming classes with generally excellent students. Their students will get a full education, or close to it, and then usually go on to profitable employment. Other institutions, however, end up in a race to the bottom. All these children, after all, are going to go to college somewhere, and so schools that are otherwise indistinguishable on the level of intellectual quality compete to offer better pizza in the food court, plushier dorms, and more activities besides the boring grind of actually going to class.

Not only are there too many students, there are too many professors. The very best national universities, the traditional sources

of university faculty, are promiscuously pumping out PhDs at a rate far higher than any academic job market can possibly absorb. Lesser schools that have no business offering advanced degrees—and many of which barely qualify as glorified high schools even at the undergraduate level—offer doctorates of such low quality that they themselves would never hire their own graduates. Scads of unemployed PhDs, toting mediocre dissertations in any number of overly esoteric subjects, roam the academic landscape literally willing to teach for food.

Even the term “professor” has been denatured by overuse. Once a rare title, American postsecondary institutions now use it at will. Anyone who teaches in anything above the level of a high school is now a professor, from the head of a top department at a major research university to a part-time instructor in a local community college. And just as every teacher is a “professor,” so, too, is every small college now a “university,” a phenomenon that has reached ridiculous proportions. Tiny local schools that once catered to area residents have reemerged as “universities,” as though they now have a particle collider behind the cafeteria.

The emergence of these faux universities is in part a response to an insatiable demand for degrees in a culture where everyone thinks they should go to college. This, in turn, has created a destructive spiral of credential inflation. Schools and colleges cause this degree inflation the same way governments cause monetary inflation: by printing more paper. A high school diploma was once the requirement for entering the trades or beginning a profession. But everybody has one of those now, including people who can’t even read. Consequently, colleges serve to verify the completion of high school, and so a master’s degree now fills the requirement once served by a bachelor’s degree. Students are going broke running around in this educational hamster wheel, without learning very much.²

How to solve all this is a crucial question for the future of American education. In 2016, a Democratic Party presidential

candidate, Senator Bernie Sanders, said that a college degree today is the equivalent of what a high school degree was fifty years ago—and that therefore everyone should go to college just as everyone now attends high school. In reality, treating colleges as remedial high schools is a large part of how we got here in the first place. The larger point, however, is that the cumulative result of too many “students,” too many “professors,” too many “universities,” and too many degrees is that college attendance is no longer a guarantee that people know what they’re talking about.

The failures of the modern university are fueling attacks on the very knowledge those same institutions have worked for centuries to create and to teach to future generations. Intellectual discipline and maturation have fallen by the wayside. The transmission of important cultural learning—including everything from how to construct a logical argument to the foundational DNA of American civilization—is no longer the mission of the customer-service university.

WELCOME, CLIENTS!

College is supposed to be an uncomfortable experience. It is where a person leaves behind the rote learning of childhood and accepts the anxiety, discomfort, and challenge of complexity that leads to the acquisition of deeper knowledge—hopefully, for a lifetime. A college degree, whether in physics or philosophy, is supposed to be the mark of a truly “educated” person who not only has command of a particular subject, but also has a wider understanding of his or her own culture and history. It’s not supposed to be easy.

This is no longer how college is viewed in modern America either by the providers or by the consumers of higher education. College as a client-centered experience caters to adolescents instead of escorting them away from adolescence. Rather than disabusing students of

their intellectual solipsism, the modern university ends up reinforcing it. Students can leave campus without fully accepting that they've met anyone more intelligent than they are, either among their peers or their teachers. (This assumes that they even bother to make any distinction between peers and teachers at all.) They accept their degree as a receipt for spending several years around a lot of interesting people they and their families have paid for a service.

This is not to say that today's students are intellectually incompetent. Most of the young people at competitive schools have already mastered the rituals of test taking, recommendations, extracurricular activities, and other college-bound merit badges. Unfortunately, once they defeat the admissions maze and arrive at college, they then spend the next four years being undereducated but overly praised. They might even suspect as much, and as a result they risk developing a toxic combination of insecurity and arrogance that serves them poorly once they're beyond the embrace of their parents and the walls of their schools.

Meanwhile, at less competitive schools, students have far fewer worries during the application process. As the economic writer Ben Casselman pointed out in 2016, most college applicants "never have to write a college entrance essay, pad a résumé or sweet-talk a potential letter-writer," because more than three-quarters of American undergraduates attend colleges that accept at least half their applicants. Only 4 percent attend schools that accept 25 percent or less, and fewer than 1 percent attend elite schools that accept fewer than 10 percent of their applicants.³ Students at these less competitive institutions then struggle to finish, with only half completing a bachelor's degree within six years.

Many of these incoming students are not qualified to be in college and need significant remedial work. The colleges know it, but they accept students who are in over their heads, stick them in large (but cost-efficient) introductory courses, and hope for the best. Why

would schools do this and obviously violate what few admissions standards they might still enforce? As James Piereson of the Manhattan Institute wrote in 2016, “Follow the money.” The fact of the matter is that “private colleges—at least those below the elite levels—are desperate for students and willing to accept deeply unqualified ones if it means more tuition dollars.”⁴ Some finish, some don’t, but for a few years the institution gets paid either way, and somewhere a young person can say he or she has at least “some college.”

Even without these financial pressures, the stampede toward college by unprepared students is also due to a culture of affirmation and self-actualization that forbids confronting children with failure. As Robert Hughes wrote in 1995, America is a culture in which “children are coddled not to think they’re dumb.”⁵ A junior high school teacher in Maryland captured the essence of this problem two decades later in a 2014 article she published in the *Washington Post* after she decided to quit her profession. She said that her school administration gave her two instructions that to her were “defining slogans for public education.” One was that students were not allowed to fail. The other foreshadowed the client-centered approach to college: “If they have D’s or F’s, there is something that you are not doing for them.”⁶

I have encountered this myself numerous times, and not just among children or young college undergraduates. I have had graduate students tell me that if they did not get an A in my class, their lesser grade would be evidence of poor instruction on my part. I have also had students who’ve nearly failed my class ask me for—and, in some cases, *demand*—a recommendation for a graduate program or a professional school. College students may not be dumber than they were thirty years ago, but their sense of entitlement and their unfounded self-confidence have grown considerably.

Parenting obviously plays a major role here. Overprotective parents have become so intrusive that a former dean of first-year students at Stanford wrote an entire book in which she said that this

“helicopter parenting” was ruining a generation of children. These are the parents who defend and coddle their children even into high school and college, doing their homework for them—the Stanford dean politely calls this “overhelping”—and in general participating in every aspect of their child’s life.⁷ Some are worse than others: there are even parents now moving to the same town as their children’s colleges to be near them while they attend school. This is not “helicopter parenting” but more like “close air-support jet fighter parenting.”

Another problem, paradoxically enough, is affluence. This sounds like a remarkable claim at a time when so many parents and young people are worrying about how to meet educational costs. But the fact of the matter is that more people than ever before are going to college, mostly by tapping a virtually inexhaustible supply of ruinous loans. Buoyed by this government-guaranteed money, and in response to aggressive marketing from tuition-driven institutions, teenagers from almost all of America’s social classes now shop for colleges the way the rest of us shop for cars.

The campus visit is a good example of the shopping ritual that teaches children to choose colleges for any number of reasons besides an education. Each spring and summer, the highways fill with children and their parents on road trips to visit schools not to which the young clients have been accepted, but to which they are considering applying. These are not just rich kids touring the Ivy League; friends with teenage children regularly tell me about hitting the road to visit small colleges and state schools I’ve never even heard of. Every year, these parents ask me for my advice, and every year, I tell them it’s a bad idea. Every year, they thank me for my input and do it anyway. By the end of the process, the entire family is cranky and exhausted, and the question of what the schools actually teach seems almost an afterthought.

Usually, the youngsters like most of the schools, because, to a teenager stuck in high school, all colleges seem like pretty great

places. Some choices, of course, quickly drop off the radar. An ugly town, a dingy campus, a decrepit dormitory, and that's that. Other times, prospective students fall in love with a school and then spend months agonizing like anxious suitors, hoping that a school they chose while they were barely past their sixteenth birthdays will give them the nod and change the course of their lives.

The idea that adolescents should first think about why they want to go to college at all, find schools that might best suit their abilities, apply only to those schools, and then visit the ones to which they're *accepted* is now alien to many parents and their children. Ask the parents why they drove their daughter all over Creation to visit schools she may have no desire to attend or to which she has no chance of admittance, and the answer rarely varies: "Well, she wanted to see it." The sentence few of them add is: "And we chose to spend the money to do it." College applications, at fifty bucks a pop or more, aren't cheap, but it's a lot more expensive to go road-tripping from Amherst to Atlanta.

This entire process means not only that children are in charge, but that they are already being taught to value schools for some reason other than the education it might provide them. Schools know this, and they're ready for it. In the same way the local car dealership knows exactly how to place a new model in the showroom, or a casino knows exactly how to perfume the air that hits patrons just as they walk in the door, colleges have all kinds of perks and programs at the ready as selling points, mostly to edge out their competitors over things that matter only to kids.

Driven to compete for teenagers and their loan dollars, educational institutions promise an experience rather than an education. (I am leaving aside for-profit schools here, which are largely only factories that create debt and that in general I exclude from the definition of "higher education.") There's nothing wrong with creating an attractive student center or offering a slew of activities, but at some

point it's like having a hospital entice heart patients to choose it for a coronary bypass because it has great food.

Children and young adults are more empowered in this process at least in part because loan programs have shifted control over tuition from parents to students. There is also the more general trend, however, that parents for some decades have abdicated more and more decisions about many things to their children. Either way, it is hard to disagree with the *Bloomberg* columnist Megan McArdle's observation that decisions over the whole business have migrated from parents to children, with predictable results when "students are more worried about whether their experience is unpleasant than are parents."⁸

Undergraduate institutions play to these demands in every way. For example, some schools now try to accommodate the anxiety every high school student faces about living with strangers. Once upon a time, learning to live with a roommate was part of the maturing process but one that was understandably dreaded by children still living with their parents. No longer, as a faculty member at Arizona State wrote in 2015:

At many colleges, new students already have been introduced to their roommates on social media and live in luxurious apartment-like dorms. That ensures they basically never have to share a room or a bathroom, or even eat in the dining halls if they don't want to. Those were the places where previous generations learned to get along with different people and manage conflicts when they were chosen at random to live with strangers in close and communal quarters.⁹

If a student chooses to go to Arizona State because he or she likes the idea of never eating in a dining hall, something is already wrong with the entire process. Many young people, of course, have made worse choices for even sillier reasons.

Students are young and parents love their kids. Fair enough. But when the entire carnival of applications and admissions is over, the faculty have to teach students who have walked into their classrooms with expectations completely unrelated to the actual requirements of gaining a college education. Today, professors do not instruct their students; instead, the students instruct their professors, with an authority that comes naturally to them. A group of Yale students in 2016, for example, demanded that the English department abolish its Major English Poets course because it was too larded with white European males: “We have spoken,” they said in a petition. “We are speaking. Pay attention.”¹⁰ As a professor at an elite school once said to me, “Some days, I feel less like a teacher and more like a clerk in an expensive boutique.”

And why shouldn't he? These are children who have been taught to address adults by their first names since they were toddlers. They have been given “grades” meant to raise their self-esteem rather than to spur achievement. And they have matriculated after being allowed to peruse colleges as though they were inspecting a condo near a golf course. This stream of small but meaningful adult concessions to children and their self-esteem corrodes their ability to learn, and it inculcates a false sense of achievement and overconfidence in their own knowledge that lasts well into adulthood.

When I first arrived at Dartmouth at the end of the 1980s, I was told a story about a well-known (and, at the time, still-living) member of the faculty that in a small way illustrates this problem and the challenge it presents to experts and educators. The renowned astrophysicist Robert Jastrow gave a lecture on President Ronald Reagan's plan to develop space-based missile defenses, which he strongly supported. An undergraduate challenged Jastrow during the question-and-answer period, and by all accounts Jastrow was patient but held to his belief that such a program was possible and necessary. The

student, realizing that a scientist at a major university was not going to change his mind after a few minutes of arguing with a sophomore, finally shrugged and gave up.

“Well,” the student said, “your guess is as good as mine.”

Jastrow stopped the young man short. “No, no, no,” he said emphatically. “My guesses are much, *much* better than yours.”

Professor Jastrow has since passed away, and I never got the chance while I was in Hanover to ask him what happened that day. But I suspect that he was trying to teach some life lessons that are increasingly resisted by college students and citizens alike: that admission to college is the beginning, not the end, of education and that respecting a person’s *opinion* does not mean granting equal respect to that person’s *knowledge*. Whether national missile defenses are a wise policy is still debatable. What hasn’t changed, however, is that the guesses of an experienced astrophysicist and a college sophomore are not equivalently good.

This is more than some Ivy League smart-alecks cracking wise with their professors. To take a less rarified example, a young woman in 2013 took to social media for help with a class assignment. (Where she lives or where she was studying is unclear, but she described herself as a future doctor.) She apparently was tasked with researching the deadly chemical substance Sarin, and, as she explained to thousands on Twitter, she needed help because she had to watch her child while doing her assignment. In minutes, her request was answered by Dan Kaszeta, the director of a security consulting firm in London and a top expert in the field of chemical weapons, who volunteered to help her.

What happened next transfixed many readers. (Jeffrey Lewis, an arms expert in California, captured and posted the exchange online.) “I can’t find the chemical and physical properties of sarin gas [*sic*] someone please help me,” the student tweeted. Kaszeta offered his help. He corrected her by noting that Sarin isn’t a gas and that the

word should be capitalized. As Lewis later wryly noted, “Dan’s help [met] with a welcome sigh of relief from our beleaguered student.”

Actually, it met with a string of expletives. The student lectured the expert in a gale-force storm of outraged ego: “yes the [expletive] it is a gas you ignorant [expletive]. sarin is a liquid & can evaporate . . . shut the [expletive] up.” *Kaszeta*, clearly stunned, tried one more time: “Google me. I’m an expert on Sarin. Sorry for offering to help.” Things did not improve before the exchange finally ended.

One smug Dartmouth kid and one angry Twitter user could be outliers, and they’re certainly extreme examples of trying to deal with students. But faculty both in the classroom and on social media report that incidents where students take correction as an insult are occurring more frequently. Unearned praise and hollow successes build a fragile arrogance in students that can lead them to lash out at the first teacher or employer who dispels that illusion, a habit that proves hard to break in adulthood.

CAN’T I JUST EMAIL YOU?

Client servicing and the treatment of expertise as a product are evident in colleges today, even in the smallest things. Consider, for example, the influence of email, which encourages all kinds of odd behavior that students would usually hesitate to display in person.

Even if we leave aside the occasional bad decision after a week-end of drinking and partying to write something and hit “send,” email encourages a misplaced sense of intimacy that erodes the boundaries necessary to effective teaching. As we’ll see in the next chapter, this is a characteristic of interactions over electronic media in general, but the informality of communication between teachers and students is one more example of how college life in particular now contributes to the eroding respect for experts and their abilities.

Email became common on campuses in the early 1990s, and within a decade, professors noticed the changes wrought by instant communications. In 2006, the *New York Times* asked college educators about their experiences with student email, and their frustration was evident. “These days,” the *Times* wrote, “students seem to view [faculty] as available around the clock, sending a steady stream of e-mail messages . . . that are too informal or downright inappropriate.” As a Georgetown theology professor told the *Times*, “The tone that they would take in e-mail was pretty astounding. ‘I need to know this and you need to tell me right now,’ with a familiarity that can sometimes border on imperative.”¹¹

Email, like social media, is a great equalizer, and it makes students comfortable with the idea of messages to teachers as being like any communication with a customer-service department. This has a direct impact on respect for expertise, because it erases any distinction between the students who ask questions and the teachers who answer them. As the *Times* noted,

While once professors may have expected deference, their expertise seems to have become just another service that students, as consumers, are buying. So students may have no fear of giving offense, imposing on the professor’s time or even of asking a question that may reflect badly on their own judgment.

Kathleen E. Jenkins, a sociology professor at the College of William and Mary in Virginia, said she had even received e-mail requests from students who missed class and wanted copies of her teaching notes.

When faced with these kinds of faculty complaints about email, one Amherst sophomore said, “If the only way I could communicate with my professors was by going to their office or calling them, there would be some sort of ranking or prioritization taking place. Is this question worth going over to the office?”

To which a faculty member might respond: *that's exactly the point*. Professors are not intellectual valets or on-call pen pals. They do not exist to resolve every student question instantly—including, as one UC Davis professor reported, advice about whether to use a binder or a subject notebook. One of the things students are supposed to learn in college is self-reliance, but why bother looking something up when the faculty member is only a few keystrokes away?

Education is designed to cure students of all this, not to encourage it. For many reasons, including the risk to their jobs, professors are sometimes hesitant to take charge, especially if they are untenured or adjunct faculty. Some of them, of course, treat children as their equals because they have absorbed the idea that the students really are their peers, a mistake that hurts both teaching and learning. Some educators even repeat the old saw that “I learn as much from my students as they learn from me!” (With due respect to my colleagues in the teaching profession who use this expression, I am compelled to say: if that's true, *then you're not a very good teacher.*)

The solution to this reversal of roles in the classroom is for teachers to reassert their authority. To do so, however, would first require overturning the entire notion of education as client service. Tuition-conscious administrators would hardly welcome such a counterrevolution in the classroom, but in any case, it would likely be deeply unpopular with the clients.

For many years, Father James Schall at Georgetown University would shock his political philosophy students at the very first class meeting by handing out an essay he'd written called “What a Student Owes His Teacher.” Here's a sample:

Students have obligations to teachers. I know this sounds like strange doctrine, but let it stand.

The first obligation, particularly operative during the first weeks of a new semester, is a moderately good will toward the teacher, a trust, a confidence that is willing to admit to oneself that the teacher has probably been through the matter, and, unlike the student, knows where it all leads. I do not want here to neglect the dangers of the ideological professor, of course, the one who imposes his mind on what is. But to be a student requires a certain modicum of humility.

Thus, the student owes the teacher trust, docility, effort, thinking.¹²

Schall made that essay required reading for many years before retiring. One can only imagine the howls of outrage it would provoke now on most campuses to tell students they need to work harder, have more perspective about their own talents, and trust their teachers. Many faculty members today might agree with Schall, but they cannot risk aggravating the students, because, as everyone in any service industry knows, the customer is always right.

Students, well intentioned or otherwise, are poorly served by the idea that students and teachers are intellectual and social equals and that a student's opinion is as good as a professor's knowledge. Rather than disabusing young people of these myths, college too often encourages them, with the result that people end up convinced they're actually smarter than they are. As the social psychologist David Dunning has noted, "The way we traditionally conceive of ignorance—as an absence of knowledge—leads us to think of education as its natural antidote. But education, even when done skillfully, can produce illusory confidence."¹³

Just imagine how difficult things get when education isn't done skillfully.

THE GENERIC UNIVERSITY

An administrator at a small college—excuse me, a “university”—could well read this chapter and protest that I am unfairly excoriating businesses for acting like businesses. Higher education, after all, is an industry, and it is no sin if the corporations in it compete with each other. The business analogy, however, fails when the schools themselves do not deliver what they’ve promised: an education.

The game begins long before a prospective student fills out an application. Even as colleges have moved toward intellectually low-impact programs surrounded by lifestyle improvements and nonacademic activities, they have attempted simultaneously to inflate their importance and burnish their brands. My earlier comment about the proliferation of “universities” was not a stray observation: it’s actually happening, and it has been going on since at least the 1990s. Like so much else associated with the current maladies of higher education, it is a change driven by money and status.

One reason these small schools become universities is to appeal to students who want to believe they’re paying for something in a higher tier—that is, for a regional or national “university,” rather than a local college.¹⁴ State colleges and community colleges are lower-status institutions, when compared with four-year universities, in the eyes of college-bound high school students. Hence, many of them have tried to distinguish themselves with an attempted rebranding as “universities.”

A more prosaic motivation behind this name game is to find new funding streams by grafting graduate programs onto small colleges. The competition to pull in more money and the consequent proliferation of graduate programs have thus forced these new “universities” into a degree-granting arms race. Not only are schools adding graduate programs in professional degrees like business administration,

but many of them are bloating their undergraduate programs with additional coursework for a master's degree.

Faced with this competitive pressure from other schools doing likewise, some of these fledgling universities then step up their game and add doctoral programs. And because these small schools cannot support a doctoral program in an established field, they construct esoteric interdisciplinary fields that exist only to create new credentials. It's not hard to see how this ends up creating degrees that do not actually signal a corresponding level of knowledge.

All of this borders on academic malpractice. The creation of graduate programs in colleges that can barely provide a reasonable undergraduate education cheats both graduates and undergrads. Small colleges do not have the resources—including the libraries, research facilities, and multiple programs—of large universities, and repainting the signs at the front gates cannot magically create that kind of academic infrastructure. Turning Smallville College into Generic University might look good on the new stationery, but it is the kind of move that can push what might have been a serviceable local college into a new status as a half-baked university.

This rebranding dilutes the worth of all postsecondary degrees. When everyone has attended a university, it gets that much more difficult to sort out actual achievement and expertise among all those “university graduates.” Americans are burying themselves in a blizzard of degrees, certificates, and other affirmations of varying value. People eager to misinform their fellow citizens will often say that they have graduate education and that they are therefore to be taken seriously. The only thing more disheartening than finding out these folks are lying about possessing multiple degrees is to find out that they're telling the truth.

Students will likely object that the demands of their major are a lot more work than I'm giving credit for here. Perhaps, but that

depends on the major itself. The requirements of a degree in a STEM field (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), a demanding foreign language, or a rigorous degree in the humanities can be a different matter than a major in communications or visual arts or—as much as it pains me to say it—political science. Every campus has “default majors,” chosen when a student has no real idea what to do, some of which are off-ramps from more demanding programs after students learn the limits of their abilities.

At the risk of being misunderstood, I should clarify a few points. First, it’s not news to me or anyone else in higher education that even the best schools have “gut” courses, the class a student can pass by exchanging oxygen for carbon dioxide for a set number of weeks. Perhaps it might be shocking for a professor to admit this, but there’s nothing wrong with easy or fun courses. I would even defend at least some of them as necessary. There *should* be classes where students can experiment with a subject, take something enjoyable, and get credit for learning something.

The problem comes when all the courses start to look like gut courses. They exist in the sciences, the humanities, and the social sciences, and their numbers, at least by my subjective judgment, are growing. No field is immune, and a look through the offerings of many programs around the country—as well as a compilation of the grades given in them—suggests that what were once isolated professorial vices are now common departmental habits.

I should also note that I am not making an argument here for slimming colleges down to a bunch of STEM departments with a smattering of English or history majors. I deplore those kinds of arguments, and I have long objected to what I see as an assault on the liberal arts. Too often, those who denigrate the liberal arts are in reality advocating for nothing less than turning colleges into trade schools. Art history majors always take the cheap shots here, even though many people don’t realize that a lot of art history majors go

on to some pretty lucrative careers. In any case, I don't want to live in a civilization where there are no art history majors or, for that matter, film studies, philosophy, or sociology majors.

The question is how many students in these majors are actually learning anything, or whether there need to be so many students taking these subjects at third-string institutions—especially if supported by taxpayer dollars. There is no way around the reality that students are too often wasting their money and obtaining the illusion of an education by gravitating toward courses or majors that either shouldn't exist or whose enrollments should be restricted to the small number of students who intend to pursue them seriously and with rigor. This, too, is one of the many things faculty are not supposed to say out loud, because to resentful parents and hopeful students, it sounds like baseless elitism.

It might be elitism, but it's not baseless. Many small schools were once called "teacher's colleges" and served that purpose well. Their history or English departments fulfilled the perfectly useful function of producing history and English teachers. Today, however, these tiny "universities" offer anthropology or the philosophy of science as though their students are slated for graduate study at Stanford or Chicago. These majors are sometimes built around the interests of the few faculty members who teach them, or offered as a way to fatten the catalog of a school that otherwise might not seem intellectually sturdy enough to prospective students.

There's nothing wrong with personal fulfillment or following your bliss—if you can afford it. If a small college has a history course that interests you, by all means, take it. It might be terrific. But students who choose majors with little thought about where their school stands, what academic resources it can offer in that program, or where it places graduates from those programs will risk leaving campus (whenever they finally finish) with less knowledge than they've been led to believe, a problem at the core of a lot of needless

arguments with people who are deeply mistaken about the quality of their own education.

When rebranded universities offer courses and degree programs as though they are roughly equivalent to their better-known counterparts, they are not only misleading prospective students but also undermining later learning. The quality gap between programs risks producing a sense of resentment: if you and I both have university degrees in history, why is your view about the Russian Revolution any better than mine? Why should it matter that your degree is from a top-ranked department, but mine is from a program so small it has a single teacher? If I studied film at a local state college, and you went to the film program at the University of Southern California, who are you to think you know more than I? We have the same degree, don't we?

These kinds of comparisons and arguments about the differences between colleges and their various degrees and programs get under the skin pretty quickly. The student who gained admission to a top school and finished a degree there resents the leveling that comes with an indifferent comparison to his or her fellow major from an unknown public "university." (If all schools are equally good, why are some harder to get into than others?) Meanwhile, the student who worked day and night to get the same degree bristles at the implication that his or her achievement means less without a pedigree. (If everything except the Ivy League is junk, why are all these other programs fully accredited?)

There's plenty of bad faith in these arguments, which are often little more than social one-upmanship. A lousy student who attended a good school is still a lousy student; a diligent student from a small institution is no less intelligent for the lack of a famous pedigree. The fact remains, however, that taking a course at a regional college with an overworked adjunct is usually a lot different than studying at a top university with an accomplished scholar. It might be true, but

saying so immediately generates huffy cries of snobbery, and everyone walks away angry.

We may not like any of these comparisons, but they matter in sorting out expertise and relative knowledge. It's true that great universities can graduate complete dunderheads. Would-be universities, however, try to punch above their intellectual weight for all the wrong reasons, including marketing, money, and faculty ego. In the end, they are doing a disservice to both their students and society. Studying the same thing might give people a common language for further discussion of a subject, but it does not automatically make them peers.

Colleges and universities also mislead their students about their own competence through grade inflation. Collapsing standards so that schoolwork doesn't interfere with the fun of going to college is one way to ensure a happy student body and relieve the faculty of the pressure of actually failing anyone. As *Bloomberg's* McARDLE wrote, this attempt to lessen the unpleasant impact of actually having to attend college on the customers should be no surprise when classroom seats are a commodity rather than a competitively earned privilege.

You see the results most visibly in the lazy rivers and rock-climbing walls and increasingly luxurious dorms that colleges use to compete for students, but such a shift does not limit itself to extraneous amenities. Professors marvel at the way students now shamelessly demand to be given good grades, regardless of their work ethic, but that's exactly what you would expect if the student views themselves as a consumer, and the product as a credential, rather than an education.

Or as a *Washington Post* writer Catherine Rampell describes it, college is now a deal in which "students pay more in tuition, and

expect more in return—better service, better facilities and better grades.”¹⁵ Less is demanded of students now than even a few decades ago. There is less homework, shorter trimester and quarter systems, and technological innovations that make going to college more fun but less rigorous. When college is a business, you can’t flunk the customers.

College isn’t always rock climbing and kayaking, but there can be no doubt that the trend is toward deemphasizing grades by inflating them. As a University of Chicago study found in 2011, “it does not take a great deal of effort to demonstrate satisfactory academic performance in today’s colleges and universities.”

Forty-five percent of students reported that in the prior semester they did not have a single course that required more than twenty pages of writing over the entire semester; 32 percent did not have even one class that assigned more than forty pages of reading per week. Unsurprisingly, many college students today decide to invest time in other activities in college.¹⁶

Some of those “other activities” are noble and enriching. Many others are the sorts of things parents would probably just as soon not know about.

When it comes to the death of expertise, the effect of lighter workloads and easier grades should be obvious: students graduate with a high GPA that doesn’t reflect a corresponding level of education or intellectual achievement. (Again, I am leaving aside certain kinds of degrees here, and talking about the bulk of majors taken in the United States today.) “I was a straight-A student at a university” does not mean what it did in 1960 or even 1980. A study of two hundred colleges and universities up through 2009 found that A was the most commonly given grade, an increase of nearly 30 percent since 1960 and over 10 percent just since 1988. Grades in the A and B

range together now account for more than 80 percent of all grades in all subjects, a trend that continues unabated.¹⁷

In other words, all the children are now above average. In 2012, for example, the most frequently given grade at Harvard was a straight A. At Yale, more than 60 percent of all grades are either A- or A. That can happen now and then in a particular class, but that's almost impossible across an entire university in any normal grade distribution, even among the brightest students.

Every institution, when confronted with these facts, blames every other institution around it. The problem, of course, is that no one university or program can take a stand against grade inflation without harming its own students: the first faculty to deflate their grades instantly make their students seem less capable than those from other institutions. This, as Rampell correctly noted, means that the default grade is no longer the "gentleman's C" of the 1950s, but a "gentleman's A," now bestowed more as an entitlement for course completion than as a reward for excellence.

Princeton, Wellesley, and Harvard, among others, established committees to look into the problem of grade inflation. Princeton adopted a policy that tried to limit the faculty's ability to give A grades in 2004, an experiment that was rolled back by the faculty itself less than a decade later. At Wellesley, humanities departments tried to cap the average grade at a B+ in their courses; those courses lost a fifth of their enrollments and the participating departments lost nearly a third of their majors.

Experienced educators have grappled with this problem for years. I am one of them, and like my colleagues, I have not found a solution. The two most important facts about grade inflation, however, are that it exists and that it suffuses students with unwarranted confidence in their abilities. Almost every institution of higher education is complicit in what is essentially collusion on grades, driven on one side by market pressures to make college fun, to make students attractive

to employers, and to help vulnerable professors escape the wrath of dissatisfied students, and on the other by irresponsible notions about the role of self-esteem in education.

RATE ME GENTLY

Another way colleges and universities enhance the notion that students are clients, and thus devalue respect for expertise, is to encourage the students to evaluate the educators standing in front of them as though they are peers. Student evaluations came out of the movement for more “relevance” and student involvement after the 1960s. They are still with us, and in an era where businesses, including education, are obsessed with “metrics,” they are used and abused more than ever.

I am actually a supporter of some limited use of student evaluations. I will immodestly say that mine have been pretty good since the day I began teaching—I have won awards for teaching at both the Naval War College and the Harvard Extension School—and so I have no personal axe to grind here. I’m also a former academic administrator who had to review the evaluations of other faculty as part of my duties overseeing a department. I’ve read thousands of these evaluations over the years, from students at all levels, and they’re a worthwhile exercise if they’re handled properly. Nonetheless, the whole idea is now out of control, with students rating professional men and women as though they’re reviewing a movie or commenting on a pair of shoes.

Evaluations usually fall into a gray area, where most teachers are competent and most students generally like the courses. Where evaluations are most useful is in spotting trends: a multiyear look at evaluations can identify both the best and the worst teachers, especially if the readers are adept at decoding how students write such reports.

("She's boring," for example, often means "she actually expected me to read the book she assigned instead of just entertaining me.") In my own classes, I use them to spot things in my courses that are working as well as what might be missing the mark, such as books or lectures that I should drop or keep, or to let me know if my own sense of whether I had an especially good or weak term was shared by the students.

Still, there's something wrong with a system that asks a student how much they liked their education. College isn't a restaurant. (I sometimes hear a Yelp review as I'm reading these evaluations: "The basic statistics course was served a bit cold, but it was substantial, while my partner chose a light introduction to world religions that had just a hint of spice.") Evaluating teachers creates a habit of mind in which the layperson becomes accustomed to judging the expert, despite being in an obvious position of having inferior knowledge of the subject material.

Student evaluations are also a hypersensitive indicator, influenced by the tiniest and most irrelevant things, from the comfort of the seats to the time of day the course is offered. A certain number of them have to be ignored. And some of them are just strange, to the point where professors will exchange stories of the worst or weirdest evaluations they've gotten. One of my colleagues once gave a detailed lecture on British naval history, for example, and a military student's only comment was that the teacher needed to press his shirt. A top historian I knew was regularly ridiculed on evaluations for being short. I was once told by an undergraduate that I was a great professor but that I needed to lose some weight. (That one was accurate.) Another student disliked me so much that he or she said on my evaluation that they would pray for me.

As entertaining as these evaluations are, they all encourage students to think of themselves as the arbiters of the talent of the teachers. And when education is about making sure clients are happy, a

college's reliance on evaluations forces weaker or less secure teachers to become dancing bears, striving to be loved or at least liked, so that more students will read the reviews and keep the class (and the professor's contract) alive for the next term. This creates and sustains a vicious circle of pandering and grade inflation.

Students should be involved in their education as more than observers or receptacles for information. Engagement and debate are the lifeblood of a university, and professors are not above criticism of either their ideas or their teaching ability. But the industrial model of education has reduced college to a commercial transaction, where students are taught to be picky consumers rather than critical thinkers. The ripple effect on expertise and the fuel this all provides to attacks on established knowledge defeat the very purpose of a university.

COLLEGE IS NOT A SAFE SPACE

Young men and women are not as irresponsible as we sometimes portray them in the media or the pop culture or in our mind's eye, for that matter. We laugh at college movie comedies and fondly remember our own irresponsible moments as students, and then we sternly lecture our children never to be like us. We applaud student activism if we like the cause, and we deplore it if we disagree. Adults always have a tendency to be sour critics of the generation that follows them.

None of this, however, excuses colleges for allowing their campuses to turn into circuses. It was probably inevitable that the anti-intellectualism of American life would invade college campuses, but that is no reason to surrender to it. And make no mistake: campuses in the United States are increasingly surrendering their intellectual authority not only to children, but also to activists who are directly attacking the traditions of free inquiry that scholarly communities are supposed to defend.

I have plenty of strong opinions on what I see as assaults on free inquiry, but I'm not going to air them here. There are dozens of books and articles out there about how colleges and universities have become havens of political correctness, where academic freedom is suffocated under draconian codes enforced by ideologues among the students and the faculty. I see no point in rehearsing those arguments here.

When it comes to the death of expertise, however, it is important to think about the way the current fads on campus, including "safe spaces" and speech codes, do in fact corrode the ability of colleges to produce people capable of critical thought. (And remember, "critical thinking" isn't the same thing as "relentless criticism.") In the same way that shopping for schools teaches young men and women to value a school for reasons other than an education, these accommodations to young activists encourage them to believe, once again, that the job of a college student is to enlighten the professors instead of the other way around.

There are so many examples of this it is almost unfair to point to any one policy or controversy at any particular university. The problem is endemic to American universities and has recurred, in waves of varying strength, since the early 1960s. What is different today, and especially worrisome when it comes to the creation of educated citizens, is how the protective, swaddling environment of the modern university infantilizes students and thus dissolves their ability to conduct a logical and informed argument. When feelings matter more than rationality or facts, education is a doomed enterprise. Emotion is an unassailable defense against expertise, a moat of anger and resentment in which reason and knowledge quickly drown. And when students learn that emotion trumps everything else, it is a lesson they will take with them for the rest of their lives.

Colleges are supposed to be the calm environment in which educated men and women determine what's true and what's false, and

where they learn to follow a model of scholarly inquiry no matter where it takes them. Instead, many colleges have become hostages to students who demand that their feelings override every other consideration. They no doubt believe in their right to make this demand because their lives, up until then, have been lived that way, in a therapeutic culture that leaves no thought unexpressed and no feeling invalidated.

Still, student activism is a normal part of college life. Adolescents are *supposed* to be passionate; it's part of being a teen or a twenty-something. I'm still old-fashioned enough that I expect educated men and women to be leaders among the voters by virtue of a better education, and so I applaud tomorrow's voters exercising their political reasoning in debate and discussion.

Unfortunately, the new student activism is regressing back to the old student activism of a half century ago: intolerance, dogmatism, and even threats and violence. Ironically (or perhaps tragically), students are mobilizing extreme language and demands over increasingly small things. While Baby Boomers might well claim that they were busting up the campus for peace in 1967, there's some truth to the notion that young men about to be drafted and sent to an Asian jungle were understandably emotional about the subject. Members of minority groups who were not fully citizens in the eyes of the law until the early 1960s justifiably felt they were out of less spectacular options than protest, even if nothing excuses the violence that ensued.

Today, by contrast, students explode over imagined slights that are not even remotely in the same category as fighting for civil rights or being sent to war. Students now build majestic Everests from the smallest molehills, and they descend into hysteria over pranks and hoaxes. In the midst of it all, the students are learning that emotion and volume can always defeat reason and substance, thus building about themselves fortresses that no future teacher, expert, or intellectual will ever be able to breach.

At Yale in 2015, for example, a house master's wife had the temerity to tell minority students to ignore Halloween costumes they thought offensive. This provoked a campuswide temper tantrum that included professors being shouted down by screaming students. "In your position as master," one student howled in a professor's face, "it is your job to create a place of comfort and home for the students. . . . Do you understand that?!"

Quietly, the professor said, "No, I don't agree with that," and the student unloaded on him:

"Then why the [expletive] did you accept the position?! Who the [expletive] hired you?! You should step down! If that is what you think about being a master you should step down! *It is not about creating an intellectual space! It is not! Do you understand that? It's about creating a home here.* You are not doing that!"¹⁸
[emphasis added]

Yale, instead of disciplining students in violation of their own norms of academic discourse, apologized to the tantrum throwers. The house master eventually resigned from his residential post, while staying on as a faculty member. His wife, however, resigned her faculty position and left college teaching entirely.

To faculty everywhere, the lesson was obvious: the campus of a top university is not a place for intellectual exploration. It is a luxury home, rented for four to six years, nine months at a time, by children of the elite who may shout at faculty as if they're berating clumsy maids in a colonial mansion.

A month after the Yale fracas, protests at the University of Missouri flared up after a juvenile incident in which a swastika was drawn on a bathroom wall with feces. Exactly what Missouri's flagship public university was supposed to do, other than to wash the wall, was unclear, but the campus erupted anyway. "Do you know

what systemic oppression is?!” a student yelled at the flustered Mizzou president. “Google it!” she hollered. Student journalists were harassed and threatened, in one case by a faculty member with a courtesy appointment, ironically enough, in the journalism school. After a few more days of these theatrics, the university’s president resigned. (The chancellor and a professor who had refused to cancel classes after the protests both followed suit.)

Missouri, however, isn’t Yale. It does not have a nearly inelastic demand for its services. Applications and donations soon took a hit in the wake of the protests and resignations.¹⁹ Some months later, the adjunct journalism professor who had confronted a student was fired. When the smoke cleared, the university was left with fewer faculty, administrators, applicants, and donations, all because a group of students, enabled by an even smaller group of faculty, reversed the roles of teachers and learners at a major public university.

Interestingly, this is a subject that often unites liberal and conservative intellectuals. The British scholar Richard Dawkins, something of a scourge to conservatives because of his views on religion, was perplexed by the whole idea of “safe spaces,” the places American students demand as a respite from any form of political expression they might find “triggering.” Dawkins minced no words: “A university is not a ‘safe space,’” he said on Twitter. “If you need a safe space, leave, go home, hug your teddy and suck your thumb until ready for university.”

Likewise, after the Yale and Missouri events, an *Atlantic* writer, Conor Friedersdorf, noted that “what happens at Yale does not stay there” and that tomorrow’s elites were internalizing values not of free expression but of sheer intolerance. “One feels for these students,” Friedersdorf later wrote. (I do not, but Friedersdorf is more understanding than I am.) “But if an email about Halloween costumes has them skipping class and suffering breakdowns, either they need help from mental-health professionals or they’ve been grievously

ill-served by debilitating ideological notions they've acquired about what ought to cause them pain."²⁰

Meanwhile, a libertarian columnist and University of Tennessee law professor, Glenn Reynolds, suggested a more dramatic solution.

To be a voter, one must be able to participate in adult political discussions. It's necessary to be able to listen to opposing arguments and even—as I'm doing right here in this column—to change your mind in response to new evidence.

So maybe we should raise the voting age to 25, an age at which, one fervently hopes, some degree of maturity will have set in. It's bad enough to have to treat college students like children. But it's intolerable to be *governed* by spoiled children. People who can't discuss Halloween costumes rationally don't deserve to play a role in running a great nation.²¹

It's a safe bet that no one's going to amend the Constitution in response to Professor Reynolds's suggestion, but his comments, like those of other observers, point to the bizarre paradox in which college students are demanding to run the school while at the same time insisting that they be treated as children.

Again, I have no idea how to fix this, especially before students get to college. Like most professors—I hope—I hold my students to clear standards. I expect them to learn how to formulate their views and to argue them, calmly and logically. I grade them on their responses to the questions I ask on their exams and on the quality of their written work, not on their political views. I demand that they treat other students with respect and that they engage the ideas and beliefs of others in the classroom without emotionalism or personal attacks.

But when students leave my classroom, I am haunted by the realization that I cannot moderate their arguments forever. I cannot

THE DEATH OF EXPERTISE

prevent them from dismissing others, from rejecting facts, from denouncing well-intentioned advice, or from demanding that their feelings be accepted in place of the truth. If they've spent four years showing such disrespect for their professors and their institutions, they cannot be expected to respect their fellow citizens. And if college graduates can no longer be counted on to lead reasoned debate and discussion in American life, and to know the difference between knowledge and feeling, then we're indeed in the kind of deep trouble no expert can fix.

EBSCOhost®