Disengaged Students and the Decline of Academic Standards

Paul A. Trout

"'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?'"
—A student.

"'We took this course because we knew it was a Mickey Mouse course, and now this new guy is giving us assignments*!'"*
—Three coeds complaining to a department chair.

"You can lead me to college, but you can't make me think."
—A T-shirt sold at Duke University.

http://www.schoolsucks.com.
—A student website.

"Who gives a shit!"
—A student responding to a question asked by a professor.[1]

The Problem of Disengaged Students

It is bad enough that many students who enter college are underprepared, underskilled and generally dumbed down. What is worse is that more and more of them are entering college—according to UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute—"increasingly disengaged from the academic experience."[2] The institute's survey of freshmen found that they had spent less time studying or doing homework in high school than ever before, had talked less to teachers outside of class, were less active in student clubs or groups, and had spent less time as a guest in a teacher's home. And it found that a record number reported being frequently bored in class.

Of course there have always been students who hated studying and were bored in class. What has changed is that more and more of them feel this way. Judging from recent works examining this emergent problem, that number has reached some sort of critical mass at the primary, secondary, and now college levels.

In *Greater Expectations*, William Damon, the director of the Center for the Study of Human Development at Brown University, warns the nation about

---

Paul A. Trout is associate professor of English at Montana State University, Bozeman, MT 59717-0230.

"all the children who are sitting for hours in mental states that approach suspended animation," learning habits of "idleness, of getting by with the least possible effort, of cynicism about the very possibility of achievement," of "willed incompetence."[3] In *Why Our Kids Don't Study*, John D. Owen notes that American students put less time and effort into school work than students from any other industrialized country. In the typical United States high-school classroom, Owen writes, an unwritten "contract" enables the teacher to trade fewer demands and lower standards for a "minimum of conventional respect" and cordial relations. By the time students get to college, Owen remarks, they are expert at diverting instruction away from "concentrated academic exercises" towards "genial banter and conversation," and at limiting how hard they will work.[4]

In *Beyond the Classroom*, Laurence Steinberg and his team of researchers examine the social and cultural factors contributing to the slacker sensibility rampant in most high schools, which now warehouse "an extraordinarily high percentage" of students who are "alienated and disengaged."[5] According to Steinberg, high-school classrooms are filled with 'goof-offs' who "thumb their collective nose at their teachers, view school as a nuisance," and place it at the bottom of their list of priorities.[6] "Across the country, whether surrounded by suburban affluence or urban poverty, students' commitment to school is at an all-time low."[7]

Now that more than half of all high-school graduates go on to some form of higher education, the problem of disengaged students is provoking growing concern in colleges and universities. In a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the AOAC International (September 1996), Henry H. Bauer, professor of Chemistry and Science Studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, presented a wealth of anecdotes and hard data that point to the "deteriorating attitude on the part of [college] students."[8] In the summer of 1996, the problem ceased being one of the better kept secrets of higher education when Kurt Wiesenfeld, a physicist at Georgia Tech, complained in *Newsweek* about encountering more and more students who resent hard academic work and who regard a "chance to learn" as "less than worthless."[9] About the same time Peter Sacks carried the analysis of the problem much further in *Generation X Goes to College*, an excruciatingly frank confessional account of the abject compromises and bitter frustrations that now attend the teaching of students who not only disdain academic pursuits but who are actually "*proud* of their ignorance."[10]

Students who are "disengaged" (or "disaffected," "detached," "indifferent," "alienated," "resentful," and "hostile") tend to exhibit (to varying degrees) a number of related behaviors and attitudes: they do not read the assigned books, they avoid participating in class discussions, they expect high grades for mediocre work, they ask for fewer assignments, they resent attendance requirements, they complain about course workloads, they do not like "tough"

or demanding professors, they do not adequately prepare for class and tests, they skip opportunities to improve their class performance and grade, they are impatient with deliberative analysis, they regard intellectual pursuits as "boring," they resent the intrusion of course requirements on their time, they are apathetic or defeatist in the face of challenge, and they are largely indifferent to "anything resembling an intellectual life."[11] No wonder more and more students strike professors as "practically unteachable."[12]

It is impossible to determine with any precision how many students are "disengaged" from, or hostile to, the mission of higher education. The number will vary, obviously, with the school, department, and course. What does seem clear, however, is that the growing contingent of disengaged students is putting considerable strain on the traditional mentoring relationship. And no wonder. Disengaged students repudiate the very essence of education—*studiousness*, from the Latin *studium*, meaning "eagerness," "intense application," and *studere*, "to take pains."[13] In short, students who disengage from the educational process want to avoid the rigors and pains of learning. As a result, professors who try to make such students stand and deliver will be resisted and resented. The tension between students and faculty has so increased, according to Sacks, that it amounts to nothing less than an "unarticulated, undeclared culture war."[14]

There is emerging consensus that the widespread disengagement of America's students "is a problem with enormous implications and profound potential consequences." Not only is it more pervasive than other problems afflicting education, it is "potentially more harmful to the future well-being of American society."[15] Consider the practical, real-life consequences when programs in the sciences, engineering, medicine, and nursing are made more congenial to students who are easily bored, who dislike hard subjects and taxing workloads, and who want lower standards and guaranteed success. The problem is already so grave, according to Sacks, that it raises "fundamental questions whether the existing model of higher education even applies any longer to teaching this generation."[16]

The next section looks at the provenance of the problem and how it affects colleges and universities.

The Cause-and-Effect Feedback Loop

According to William Damon, student disengagement at the primary and secondary levels is caused by low expectations and standards. Classrooms have been so mindlessly stripped of "challenging intellectual material and rigorous standards" that students become bored, give up on school and find more engaging things to do.[17] The only way to re-engage students, Damon contends, is to raise standards at every level, to challenge students to strive for excellence.[18] In *Dumbing Down Our Kids* (1995), Charles Sykes attributes the

strip-mining of the academic landscape to the "success model" of education. According to this model, every student—regardless of talent, inclination, and attitude—must succeed. To achieve this spurious form of success, every academic subject is made accessible to every student, and all invidious distinctions of performance are jettisoned to preserve self-esteem.[19]

Thanks to this witch's brew of low expectations, dumbed-down standards, and perversely misapplied therapeutic and humanitarian practices and policies, students learn—on their way to college—that hard subjects will be made as easy as possible; that schmoozing about life roles or movies is more fun than analyzing *Macbeth* or learning calculus; that teachers will pass them on to the next grade despite substandard work; that homework will be sparingly assigned and seldom monitored; that if students have trouble with math, the mastery of computational skills will be declared counterproductive, that if they cannot read, the definition of literacy will be expanded, and, that if they fail tests, their scores will be readjusted. They learn, as well, that their educational goal should be "adequacy" and not "excellence," because "excellence," as one educational pundit maintained, requires too much sacrifice.[20] This "no-fault system that neither rewards accomplishments or penalizes failures," amounts to an "anti-school" that systematically unfits students for the proper rigors, demands, and *pleasures* associated with higher education.[21] It discourages academic *engagement* and encourages academic *disengagement*. No wonder so many students, by the time they reach college, regard education with contempt.

Admittedly, vast social and cultural forces also conspire to make students less motivated and less engaged in the business of learning than ever before. These forces include family dysfunction and divorce, inadequate or permissive parenting, peer pressure to regard education derisively, youth-culture activities that militate against serious and sustained intellectual engagement, an ambient popular culture that glorifies dumbness and ridicules intelligence, and a widespread delegitimization of reading and the book.

But grade schools and high schools only exacerbate the problem when they lower demands and standards in the hope of keeping students engaged: "the less schools demand, the more students spend their time earning pocket money and socializing with their friends; the more they engage in these activities, the more their interest in school wanes" and the less schools are able to demand.[22] When high schools send off disengaged students to enroll in colleges, and when colleges accept them, the problem spreads through the entire educational system. Of course, colleges are already implicated in this cause-and-effect feedback loop, since they have trained and certified the earnest pedagogues who imposed the stultifying "success" model on primary and secondary schools in the first place. The issue now facing higher education is whether to continue to participate in this vicious cycle.

The participation begins, of course, with low entrance requirements.[23] Low entrance requirements implicitly reinforce the low expectations and standards

of primary and secondary education. If colleges and universities are willing to accept high-school graduates with poor study habits and bad attitudes, rather than compel them to adapt to the rigorous demands of colleges and universities, then high schools have no incentive to demand more of their college-bound students. Moreover, while it is not always possible to distinguish between applicants who are eager learners and those who are disengaged, low standards virtually guarantee that the problem now undermining secondary education will undermine higher education as well.

Once colleges and universities accept cohorts of disengaged high-school graduates, they are obliged to manage the problem in much the same way as high schools did: fewer demanding courses, lighter workloads, easier assignments and tests, and more high grades (to satisfy students, improve course evaluations, and hide the decline of standards from the public). Indeed, higher education has essentially replicated the same failed success model adopted by secondary education to accommodate slackers in the first place. In higher education, the success model goes by the name of learner-centered or consumer education.

In the marketplace, consumerism implies that the desires of the customer reign supreme ("consumer sovereignty") and that the customer should be easily satisfied (how hard should a consumer have to work at buying something?). When this consumer-sovereignty model is applied to higher education, however, it not only distorts the teacher/student mentoring relationship but renders meaningless such traditional notions as hard work, responsibility, and standards of excellence.[24] Students who think of themselves as customers study only when it is convenient (like shopping), expect satisfaction regardless of effort, want knowledge served up in "easily digestible, bitesized chunks" and assume that academic success, including graduation, is guaranteed.[25] Failure—or consumer dissatisfaction—"is ruled out upon payment of one's tuition."[26] As a result, when students do not get what they want—praise, bonus points, an A, easier regulations, dumbed-down courses, a diploma—they see themselves as victims of the system. 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!'"[27] A student wrote to Sacks, "If I don't get a decent grade because of your critical attitude, I will be speaking to your superiors.'"[28] Another 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.'"[29] 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 about a breach of contract![30]

It falls to administrators—the retailers of the consumer model—to keep down the number of 'consumer' complaints. They do this in part by making sure that academic standards are not *high enough* to cause students discomfort or endanger their academic 'success.' If this sounds unjust, all one has to do is

read the complaints in Bauer about administrators who chastise professors for "hounding" students about their poor writing,[31] who warn professors about having standards that are "too" high, who force professors to administer a second exam when "too many" students flunk the first, who surreptitiously raise final grades on course transcripts, who remove professors from class when students complain about the work required or the grades given out, and who remind professors that the business of the university is, as one administrator put it, to "sell degrees."[32] When students or parents do complain, administrators usually take their side. The operating assumption is that "the customer, namely, the student is always right in disputes with a faculty member."[33] Obviously, faculty members who must daily confront students unwilling to work can no longer look to most administrators for moral support.[34]

Without support from the administration and under constant pressure from students, more and more professors slowly give in to the entitlement mindset. The watering-down occurs, of course, under the most high-minded pretexts. Some professors, for example, refuse to apply codes of conduct to students "overwhelmed" by college,[35] some relax standards to accommodate "different "learning styles,"[36] some redefine slackers as "learning disabled" and then exempt them from requirements,[37] some lavish praise on poorly performing students to shore up self-esteem, some earn the 'support' and gratitude of students by assigning fewer books and papers, some give students the exam questions days before the test to improve scores, some permit students to retake tests or rewrite papers until they get the grade they want,[38] some try to inspire and engage students by giving high grades for mediocre work. The list goes on.

The truth is that much of this compliant behavior is motivated less by conviction than by fear. 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. Teachers who are not yet tenured or who are on one-year renewable contracts are especially vulnerable. Students understand the power administrators have given them and use it to get what they want—easier courses and higher grades. I overheard a student telling peers to take courses from adjuncts because they give out lots of A's to get high evaluations and keep their jobs one more year. But even tenured professors all too often succumb to the economic and psychological incentives of student evaluations. Thus, course evaluations contribute significantly to grade inflation and a dumbed-down curriculum.[39]

Numerical forms are especially pernicious. For one thing, they often ask students to rate professors on such vague, subjective, or inappropriate matters as "stimulation of interest," "knowledge of the subject matter," "concern for students," "the instructor's genuine interest in teaching," "impartiality on grades and examinations," and so on. Students who feel aggrieved by a heavy

workload or low grades can simply direct their spite into any and all of these categories without anyone being the wiser. Second, the overall score can be lowered significantly when even a relatively few disengaged students maliciously give "zeros" within a four- or five-point scale. Such a spiteful act can injure not only the morale of the professor but his or her career as well, since administrators often focus on the numbers when doing faculty performance reviews. Administrators will not relinquish these forms without a fight, for they are the most effective device administrators have to force faculty to comply with the consumer model, to make them "bend over backward...to appease unmotivated, acutely passive students."[40]

The whole situation is depressing. At all levels, educators (and parents) have failed to socialize many young people to understand and experience the personal and social benefits and pleasures of learning. We have not successfully conveyed to them that it is more fulfilling to be skilled than unskilled, to know than not to know, to inquire than to be self-satisfied, to strive than to be apathetic, to create than to be fallow. We have failed to socialize many of them into taking responsibility for their own intellectual development, or even to care about it. It is unlikely that the vicious cycle producing disengaged students will end any time soon, for that would require overhauling primary, secondary, and university education simultaneously, as well as reforming the social and cultural institutions that shape the education system.[41] In short, the problem is only going to get worse.

There are, however, modest actions that faculty members can take on the local level to alleviate the problem of teaching disengaged students. In the next section I suggest a few of them.

Remedial Actions

Some actions are best undertaken by individuals and some by groups. My list begins with remedial actions any professor can take.

I) Study and Teach the Problem. 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.[42] I agree. Fully to understand how and why students become disengaged, professors should ask students themselves to confront and analyze what has been done to them. Such examinations could occur in freshman-experience seminars, in philosophy, sociology, psychology, education, and composition courses, and in campus colloquia. More information can be acquired by asking students to fill out surveys and questionnaires about their attitudes on education, teaching, studying, reading, and so on. Local

high school students should also be surveyed. Professors should collaborate with concerned high school teachers to examine and expose this systematic K–16 problem.

II) Raise Consciousness of the Problem. Once we better understand why students are disengaged, we should spread the word to colleagues and to the general public that hard-working, experienced professional educators are not the problem—disengaged students are. We should write op-ed pieces for local papers, publish letters and essays in professional journals, present papers at scholarly and educational conferences, contribute to website discussions, appear on local TV, speak at campus panels, talk to local groups, contact alumni, and network with educators at all levels. The general public must be made aware that college-bound children are learning perverse habits and attitudes that increasingly threaten the knowledge-imparting enterprise of higher education.

III) Raise Our Own Expectations, Grading Standards, and Course Workload. 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 them to follow. If each professor refused to dumb down his or her courses to accommodate disengaged students, the problem would be far less threatening.

IV) Establish Save-Our-Standards Committees. It is important that faculty members not only work individually but also collectively to remedy the problem of disengaged students. Faculty concerned about declining morale and standards should band together, as Peter Sacks and some of his colleagues did, to empower themselves and to guard against any further erosion of merit distinctions and academic rigor. These matters "are too important to be left to university administrators or student-life bureaucrats."[43]

The goals of SOS committees should be:

(1) to stop the use of student evaluations, especially numerical evaluations, in administrative decisions regarding retention, tenure, promotion and merit. Given today's disengaged students and the human frailties of their teachers, the continuing dumbing down of higher education will proceed apace as long as institutions continue to use student evaluations to determine faculty rewards. 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 they have had). Getting rid of numerical evaluation forms should be the first priority for SOS committees.

(2) to pressure administrators to create the best possible environment for learning and teaching. That would entail: public announcements and promotional material that makes clear to students, parents, and politicians that excellence and achievement—not comfort or efficiency—are the educational goals of the institution; the creation of policies and programs that recognize and support faculty who uphold high academic standards and scholarly ideals in the classroom; and the establishment of long-range plans that reallocate to academic endeavors resources now spent for nonacademic ventures, such as divisions of student affairs, public relations, and athletics (see Bauer).

(3) to campaign for higher admission standards. Higher admission standards at a majority of postsecondary institutions 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."[44] But the time has come "for colleges to...stop admitting students who are underprepared for the rigors of higher education,"[45] and this includes students who do not have the appropriate attitudes and values to contribute to—not just consume—a thriving and rigorous academic climate. Students can go elsewhere or re-apply after they have acquired the study habits and commitment respectable schools should be demanding.

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

Notes

1. The first quotation can be found in Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College* (Chicago: Open Court, 1996), 79; the second, third, and last in Henry H. Bauer, "The New

Generations: Students Who Don't Study," an unpublished paper delivered at the annual meeting of AOAC International (formerly known as the Association of Official Analytical Chemists), 10 September 1996, 13 and 9.

2. *The American Freshman: National Norms for Fall 1995*, ed. Linda J. Sax et al. (Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, 1995), 4.
3. William Damon, *Greater Expectations: Overcoming the Culture of Indulgence in Our Homes and Schools* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 35.
4. John D. Owen, *Why Our Kids Don't Study: An Economist's Perspective* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 49.
5. Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 63.
6. Ibid., 64.
7. Ibid., 13.
8. Bauer, 2.
9. Kurt Wiesenfeld, "Making the Grade," *Newsweek*, 17 June 1996, 16.
10. Sacks, 149.
11. Ibid., 78.
12. Ibid., xi.
13. I would like to thank Flora Sage of Clatsop Community College (Astoria, Oregon) for pointing this out to me.
14. Sacks, 75.
15. Steinberg, 28.
16. Sacks, xi.
17. Damon, 19.
18. Ibid., 23, 57–58, 79, 120, 203–04.
19. Charles J. Sykes, *Dumbing Down Our Kids: Why American Children Feel Good About Themselves But Can't Read, Write, or Add* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).
20. Charles Willie, professor of education at Harvard, quoted in Sykes, 65.
21. Bruno V. Manno, "The Swamp of College Remedial Education," *Academic Questions* (Summer 1996): 81.
22. Steinberg, 182 and 69.
23. Chester Finn has estimated that eighty percent of our 3,400 degree offering colleges and universities accept more than half of their applicants (see Owen, 39).
24. See Sacks, 161. The relationship between teacher and student is more like the relationship between doctor and patient. The patient seeks out the doctor for advice and remedies for an affliction. The doctor responds, but does not guarantee success even should the patient follow directions. It is up to the patient to follow the discipline outlined by the doctor, no matter how painful or demanding. And it is up to the patient to take daily care of his or her health. See Owen for other comparisons that stress the commitment and dedication of the client (4).
25. Sacks, 162.
26. Ibid.
27. Quoted by William H. Willimon and Thomas H. Naylor, in *Abandoned Generation: Rethinking Higher Education* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 22.
28. Sacks, 154.
29. Ibid., 169.
30. *Newsweek*, 27 December 1993, 58.
31. See also David Marc, *Bonfire of the Humanities: Television, Subliteracy, and Long-Term Memory Loss* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995), 34.
32. In Bauer, 21–22.
33. Sacks, 23.
34. Bauer, 20.
35. Cited by Daniel Kaufman, "Notes from Hell," *National Review*, 30 September 1996, 46.
36. Sacks, 56. He goes on to describe this accommodation as a "thoroughly recent development in higher education derived from recent trends in high school, junior high, and grade schools"; see Sykes on learning styles, 122–23.

37. Cited by Paul Gottfried, "Postmodernism and Academic Discontents," *Academic Questions* (Summer 1996): 65.
38. Sacks, 165.
39. Willimon, 21. See also "Course Requirements and Student Evaluations: Evidence of an Inverse Relationship," an unpublished paper by W.H. McBroom, Sociology, The University of Montana. The paper presents data that show that as course requirements were "set aside, evaluations of the content, instructor, and course became more positive." For evidence that students demand dumbed-down courses on faculty evaluation forms, see my essay "What Students Want: A Meditation on Course Evaluations," *The Montana Professor,* 6:3 (Fall 1996):12–19.
40. Sacks, 165; also, 78, 79, 167, 182, *passim.* Bauer presents data linking evaluation scores to grading (30).
41. Bauer, 25.
42. Bauer, 3.
43. Willimon, 125.
44. Manno, 81.
45. Paul M. Levitt, *Chronicle of Higher Education,* 4 May 1988, B5.