

Declining by Degrees

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Abstract: A provocative view of the quality of education experienced by many of America's college students.

Essay:

Of all the students I met during nearly two years of working on our PBS documentary about higher education, I continue to be intrigued by a sophomore named Nate. After proudly proclaiming that he was maintaining a 3.4 GPA despite studying less than an hour a night, he wondered aloud, "It's not supposed to be this easy, is it? Shouldn't college be challenging?" Nate was one of the more enlightened students that we interviewed.

He talked about his "boring" classes, including an English class he described as "a brain dump." We sat in on that class. The teacher had assigned students to write parodies of *The Road Not Taken*, knowing that to do the assignment well, they would have to read and understand Frost's poem. She was meeting students at their level ... and trying to push them to go beyond it, attempting to move them out of their "intellectual comfort zone" and lead them in new directions. Tough job, because Nate—and undoubtedly most of his classmates—had obviously NOT read the assignment. Nate had succeeded in high school by figuring out what was going to be on his tests and doing as little as possible. And since that approach also got him into college and was now earning him a solid B average, he saw no reason to change. Ask Nate the purpose of college, and he would probably say something about "getting a good job." The learning part wasn't necessarily what he was paying good money for.

Although we found this English class stimulating, we could see how frustrating it became for the teacher because of the lack of student-directed engagement and motivation. In this

case, the students' expectations didn't match the professor's. Teaching becomes a difficult transaction when students expect to get the diploma that they pay for without caring whether they learn anything in the process. The situation is made more difficult because professors begin classroom teaching at a disadvantage. Few have any training in how to teach. We were very impressed by Tom Fleming, a senior lecturer at the University of Arizona, who took advantage of a faculty development course offered by his institution on teaching theory and effective practices. Using technology in a huge lecture hall, he deftly engaged students, allowing very few to merely get by.

College used to be a "sink or swim" environment, but today, either colleges are giving much-needed "swimming lessons"—investing in student success—or they're allowing students to "tread water"—giving decent grades for very little work. In the first case, students actually receive an education; in the second, they merely get a degree. It's all too easy for some students and faculty members to settle into a pattern of behavior that looks like an unspoken "non-aggression treaty," in which professors don't ask much of students and the students don't expect much from their professors (as long as they get A's and B's).

The good news is that many faculty members—those giving swimming lessons—work with energy and imagination to move their students beyond that simplistic "diploma=\$\$" formula. The relationship between Tom Fleming and his students falls into this category. Even more heartening is the fact that many students intuitively know that they're being denied an education and seek out campus experiences that give them what they need. But that 20 or so percent out there treading water are shortchanging themselves and future employers who think that a college degree indicates achievement as well as persistence. And those professors who find it more comfortable to demand little of their students are denied the satisfaction that good teaching affords.

The shift in the expectations of students and faculty members began around the time that America learned that college graduates made more money than high school graduates—as much as a million dollars more over their working lives. The mantra became, "If you want an education, then you pay for it." The old social contract—the idea that education of individuals is a public good and therefore should in part be publicly financed—is on life support and barely breathing. Instead, "Education Pays" is proclaimed on billboards around Kentucky, encouraging kids to go to college just to nail down that good job.

Kids arrive on campus determined to major in "business" and often remain impervious to the efforts of their professors to expose them to new ideas and new information. Our student financial aid system supports the "investment in me" approach by making less money available in the form of grants to needy students, and more in the form of loans to be paid back as a return on the individual's investment in themselves. The message our kids get is that they're not students; they're consumers. And if they're willing to settle for "purchasing" a degree that means nothing in terms of educational achievement, it's their right. It's their investment. In this environment, professors, colleges, and universities are forced into giving the customers what they want, not necessarily what they *should* want.

I admire students who squeeze as much as they can from the college experience, and I

salute the teachers who dedicate their energies to seeing students succeed. Too much is left to chance, however, and too many lives are blighted by our national indifference to what is *actually* happening on our campuses during the years between admission and graduation. What we found is not the equivalent of a few potholes on an otherwise passable highway. Serious attention must be paid at a national level. Other countries are not standing still. Those that have not surpassed us already in educational attainment levels are clearly visible in the rear-view mirror.



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