

## **The Public Representation of the American College Campus**

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*The most important change happening to the academy is that the "hallowed" or "sacrosanct" idea of the campus is eroding. Professors and what they have stood for have been "desanctified." The next 10 years will see the fuller emergence of manifest class differences. The gap between winners and losers will be impossible to hide on the campus, and it will be increasingly impossible to immunize the campus from its surroundings.*

### **Here are two descriptions of college students:**

American college students today tend to think alike, feel alike and believe alike. . . . The great majority seem turned out of a common mold. . . . [The] dominant characteristic of students in the current generation is that they are *gloriously contented*. In a set of national interviews, 40 percent of young men could think of no way in which they wanted to be different from their dad. They looked forward to a professional career, especially one which was "steady." For most students, the exciting events on campus were football games, party raids, or trips to drive-ins. As one later remembered: We "spray-painted the fraternity insignia on an overpass. In 1954 they called that rebellion." There was no revolt, and a professor in Texas lamented that his students were "a generation without responses—apathetic, laconic, no great loves, no profound hates, and pitifully few enthusiasms." (Anderson, 1995, pp. 18-19)

Most of my students seem desperate to blend in, to look right, not to make a spectacle of themselves. . . . [They are] inhibited, except on ordained occasions, from showing emotion, stifled from trying to achieve anything original. [They are] made to feel that even the slightest departure from the reigning code will get [them] genially ostracized. This is a culture tensely committed to a laid-back norm. . . . What [my students] will not do . . . is indict the current system. They won't talk about how the exigencies of capitalism lead to a reserve army of the unemployed and nearly inevitable misery. That would be getting too loud, too brash. For the pervading view is the cool consumer perspective, where passion and strong admiration are forbidden. . . . University culture, like American culture writ large, is, to put it crudely, ever one devoted to consumption and entertainment, to the using and using up of goods and images. For someone growing up in America now, there are few available alternatives to the cool consumer worldview. (Edmundson, 1997, pp. 40-42)

The first description is of college students in the 1950s; the second is of college students in the 1990s. Some 40 years, a generation, separate the two groups. But a great deal apparently unites them: conformity, professional ambitiousness, aversion to risk, and flattened emotional amplitude. The latter group can be distinguished from the former, however, by its more focused concern with consuming the things of the world.

The descriptions are disheartening, but are they fair? The first distills a number of surveys conducted by social scientists in the 1950s; the second is drawn from a *Harper's Magazine* essay published in the fall of 1997. Both writers allow that the portraits they draw could be altered, if slightly, by counterevidence: Every generation also produces its share of idealists, passionate intellectuals, emotional risk-takers, contrarians.

A recent survey of the first college graduating class of the new millennium provides even further evidence of their cultural disposition. Conducted by Lou Harris and Associates,<sup>1</sup> it found that the class, now in its freshman year, is conventional in its domestic interests: It looks forward to marriage (96% by age 26) with children (91%) and a life "where I am sure that someday I will get to where I want to be" (78%). The class expresses a desire to do work that helps others (65%). That desire could come from a religious orientation because nearly 9 out of 10 class members believe in God (89%), and 74% believe in life after death, a good measure of the seriousness of a religious commitment. Other traditional indices are also revealed: Among class members who have decided on a college major, business tops the list, followed by the natural sciences, engineering, psychology, and sociology. Medicine is the top career choice for the class. High on the list of things that are important to the first class of the new millennium are preserving the environment (63%), learning as a lifelong priority (84%), and staying physically fit (68%). Only 3% feel that "money buys happiness," and only 4% believe success depends on lucky breaks. Fighting for one's country, which in the past has been used to measure patriotism, is a high priority for only 31% in this class.

The bulk of the evidence, if one draws these several analyses and reports together, leads to this conjecture: Could the 1990s be the 1950s in a new form? If so, then given how the 1950s came to an end, can we imagine how the 1990s might end? In the earlier case, energies of every kind—political, social, sexual, pharmacological, domestic, and international—broke loose. Could something like the same thing happen again, particularly on college and university campuses? Again, I think it could, and I also think universities and the larger neighborhoods surrounding them (i.e., the rest of the country) should be prepared to anticipate the eruptions of these energies.

My argument is bolstered by the insights of Robert Reich (1998), secretary of labor in the first Clinton administration, now a Brandeis professor, and an astute observer of the national scene.

Another foreshadowing occurred in the placid Eisenhower era. The overall economy was doing nicely then as well, even though its benefits had not reached the rural poor, many of whom were black. Politics had grown inert. Ike golfed. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided that separate schools were not equal. In 1957, Eisenhower dispatched Federal troops to Little Rock's Central High School. But few could have predicted that within a few years the civil rights movement would have remolded American politics with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The next revival of American politics can be expected to follow a similar course. The current economic boom has bypassed too many; the gap between winners and losers has grown too wide. (p. 34)

Reich (1998) thus draws attention to fundamental economic disparities within the United States that, in time, will exert enough energy to cause a "revival" of politics. These disparities are evident on many college campuses; those places should not now be seen as havens of pure learning remote from the world of work, money, and need. One marker of their intimate involvement with that world is the present situation of what is called financial aid. What it is and how it works can tell us a lot about the nation's young and how they feel and think.

More than one half of the undergraduate students enrolled at the 25 richest campuses in the United States have, on average, qualified for financial aid, which in most cases means that they have proven eligible for an outright grant of money from the school (i.e., a tuition discount), a loan from that school or a secondary lending agency, and the right to engage in work-study (i.e., to work part-time on the campus to further defray tuition). And, on these same campuses, the students qualifying for financial aid leave the campus upon graduation with a loan of, on average, \$16,000. Very good college students, that is, have economic realities constantly thrust upon them. Those realities are brought to their attention in other ways too: by their recognition that some students—their classmates—come from families that absolutely do not qualify for financial aid. The student populations resident on those 25 richest campuses are skewed: If Emory University, where I work, can serve as an example, 25% of the families make more than \$200,000 a year, and 25% make less than \$60,000. The rich and the not-rich-at-all make up a campus. Classmates together, friends together, but debtors not at all together. And, as go the stratifications of American society, so go the stratifications of campus society.

To go to a Penn, a Yale, a Stanford, a Brown, or an Emory is, however, to have this interesting "two nations" (to quote Disraeli) phenomenon obscured from view. The typical college or university campus today appears to be a consumer pageant—for all. To look at the dorm rooms of students today is to be awed by their conquest of the world of consumer appliances. Such rooms can typically include phone, television, computer and printer, surge suppresser, refrigerator, microwave, CD player, coffeemaker, clock-radio, electric toothbrush, blow-dryer, toaster-oven, and in some cases, fax machine and pager. Each is like a

small command headquarters, a mini-bunker in the Great Educational Campaign of the late 1990s.

These affluent students do not bring cars with them, but sport utility vehicles: Nissan Pathfinders, Honda Passports, Ford Explorers, Isuzu Rodeos, Chevy Blazers, Land Rover Discoverys, Lincoln Navigators, Toyota 4Runners, and a fleet of Jeeps that would choke General Patton with envy. These sturdy vehicles are their motorized support system for picking up mail, scrambling for pizza, and getting to ATM machines.

This, then, is a college generation that *The New York Times* has rightly called the "No Complaints Generation." It is smart, ambitious, and apparently uncomplaining. Unlike the rebellious students of the 1960s who predated them by a generation, these students are not intoxicated with thoughts of rebellion. The shock of protest, they know, has been neutralized. The women, by and large, say they expect little or no discrimination once they wind up in the workplace. Most of them expect to go there instead of being exclusively housewives. Neither the men nor the women now know or care much about national politics; their main civic passions, if they have them, are local. They are concerned about the jobs they will have, the families they *do* wish to raise, and the particular communities into which they will move upon graduation.

So, to imagine the aftermath of the 1990s—to imagine what will happen next within the culture and its public representation—is not to think that the next decade will bring about another civil rights movement or another large-scale protest against a hugely expensive war in a distant country or another flower generation replete with love-ins. Rather, it is to imagine that one immensely important cultural landmark—the college campus—will be the site of an encounter, one that will probe, clarify, and then transform the relationship between two very different roles the university has assumed over time within our culture.

The first university role has been *interpretative*, to make entering students more keenly aware of the social, cultural, and political environment beyond the campus, over historical time; they are to learn the past and to see the present arising from that past. Learning is praised for its own sake; the curriculum is treated as the reification of all that is acknowledged to be worthy of understanding and embracing. It is precisely because certain things do not have immediate application that they are worth knowing.

The second role has been *promotional*, to turn the minds of those students toward those symbolic representations (artistic, patriotic, communal) deemed most respectable, refined, and valuable for them and, indirectly, for the society in which they ultimately will find themselves. Many private colleges, including the oldest—Harvard in 1636—began with this role in mind; religious missions drew the student from the college to the needful laity beyond the college.

The first role is informative; the second is inspirational. By virtue of the first, the student is prompted to learn the customs of the tribe; by virtue of the second, the student is prompted to learn the better life. These two roles have been held in

a productive tension for most of this century on many campuses. Students learn that which has come before them within the culture; students also learn that which has gained prestige and status within the culture and how, as a result, they are to behave in light of that prestige and status.

Today, however, the latter role has achieved preeminence on the campus. Students now have no trouble in knowing what the surrounding social structure expects of them; the source of status is no mystery at all. Preprofessional courses—business, premed, prelaw, prenursing, preentrepreneurial—abound on campuses everywhere. And students respond energetically to these stimuli by demanding that the campuses supply even more information, guidance, and support in helping them enter the job market and the higher paying professions. Job fairs, on-campus interviewers, referral services, and alumni networks all work to entwine the campus with the world beyond.

The inspirational role of the campus, however—the focus of the thinking of a Newman, an Arnold, a Hutchins—is now vulnerable to attack. No one on any campus has sufficient moral credibility to rise above the complexity of the multiservice pursuits of a modern university and to proclaim—in light of or in spite of that complexity—what *the better life* might be. The campus has become a full-time vendor of classroom learning, health care, athletic entertainment, food offerings, job training, remedial improvement, alumni solicitude, psychological counseling, and industrial and corporate relations. The second role of which I have spoken always presumed a politely adversarial, and presumably fruitful, separation of the campus from the world beyond. But that separation has lost much of its force, and the campus therefore no longer retains much of its spiritual or hieratic function. Becoming more like the commercial world surrounding it, its role as an inspirational entity is no more than a nostalgic vestige for some and only a tiresome impediment for others. Of course some professors still attempt to inspire and elevate, but many paying parents and indebted children want to know more about what the students will be able profitably to do in society after such elevation comes to its end. Of the university, both parent and child now ask the same questions they ask of any entity with which they have entered into a contractual relationship: What are the costs I must pay and the benefits to which I am entitled? That kind of question ignores any higher obligations a student might have to the social, political, and cultural environment beyond the campus; it is deaf to any matters that might prove, someday, transcendently valuable to that young person. As a result, both society and student are impoverished.

This new campus reality will define the encounter I have mentioned. To the degree that universities mirror the social realities surrounding them, to the degree that such realities are evident in the economic stratifications of on-campus social life, and to the degree that the university reinforces those realities by its appeasement of the consumer mentality of both parent and student, the likely future of the university as a cultural medium becomes a little clearer.

How, specifically, will that future come into view? One way to answer is to look at some of the most pressing realities campuses now face. To name the first: affirmative action and its destiny. Affirmative action, growing out of the 1960s and intended to create a means by which African Americans, other racial minorities, and women could establish a firmer toehold in the competition for employment and college admissions, is now in serious trouble. Many of the courts that have examined it have found it flawed and have reversed decisions favoring those "preferred" groups, voters in the most populous state—California—have called for its end, and the advocates of affirmative action are on the defensive. As a result of all these realities in this decade, certain leading universities (Princeton, Yale, Stanford, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology) have sought new ways to help certain racial groups without explicitly using race as a marker. That is, they have created a means to help the most fiscally disadvantaged student groups (which they know will include disadvantaged racial groups) by simply stating they will not require those students to take out the burdensome loans that other students have to carry. The result of this will be, of course, to help the disadvantaged racial groups (and others too), but the schools will avoid the jeopardy that affirmative action attracts. Whatever the wisdom/shrewdness of this move, it will bring home more vividly the fact of money to every student on every campus. Again, the "real world," in one of its most characteristic features, will pervade the atmosphere of the campus. What has been, for three decades, a form of differential treatment with respect to admissions that, like it or not, had the warrant of addressing one of the most profound social problems in the nation now is likely to appear as differential treatment based on wealth versus poverty. As controversial as affirmative action has been, what might very well replace it will carry less nobility of social intention.

A most pressing second reality is the increasing presence of part-time, non-tenure-track faculty on many campuses. Called "para-faculty" by some and "wage labor" by others, such teachers now make up some 40% of the American professoriate, and that percentage is growing. They migrate from job to job and have, for this and other reasons, little institutional loyalty. Their number is expanding because they save money for the schools for which they work; tenured professors, by contrast, are expensive, and such expense is carried on the ledger for decades. Students see a lot of these second-class teachers because they teach lots of introductory courses; their presence is a reminder to those students of what the coin of the realm on many campuses is: efficiency, reduced costs, outsourcing, and as a result, diminished community spirit. Those students should not be thought of as cynical if they see, once again, the world intruding on what once was postulated to be a distinctively other-worldly place.

A third reality increasingly important on some campuses is technology transfer. By this, on-campus research is funded or otherwise supported by off-campus commercial entities in the hope that the latter will benefit from the creations of the former. A strong argument for such enterprise is that it gives

researchers the aid they would have received from the federal government in an earlier time. Although federal support has grown more munificent over time, it is now sought by more and more institutions, and therefore each individual institution and each individual professor (or "principal investigator") is likely to do less well in the competition. Technology transfer also has an attraction that federally sponsored research does not have: the opportunity for the researcher to draw down lucrative advantages in corporate profits, stock options, and so on. Patent offices are expanding on some campuses as are proprietary claims on some technological innovations. Professors are sometimes corporate officers, and some corporations have significant interest in the activities of some academic departments and programs. Where California's Silicon Valley, Massachusetts' Route 128, and North Carolina's Research Triangle once led the way in showing how universities and new corporations could develop "fruitful relationships," now many other universities are establishing similar partnerships. The result, once again, is to lower impediments separating the academy from business. These separations were once the defining elements employed by universities to identify themselves within American culture. Another message is now being sent to students, faculty, and those beyond what were formerly called the "campus gates."

In these and other ways, the American academy is changing. All of these changes are driven by a logic against which it would be folly to complain. There are substantial problems with the growth and administration of affirmative action. There are reasons for colleges and universities to economize. There are great opportunities for the American professoriate to engage in technology transfer and corporate relations. But each defensible and logical specific change is but a part of a much greater cultural transformation.

Within that larger transformation, the change most important to the academy as a powerful medium by which values in our culture are expressed, modified, and reinforced is that the "hallowed" or "sacrosanct" idea of the campus is eroding. Where once professors and what they professed enjoyed both the prestige and the vulgar scorn of all those matters removed from the everyday nature of American life, they now are more and more a part of that life. They have been "desanctified." In this, they are not alone. Other professions that have enjoyed similar cultural privilege are also undergoing the same reductive process. The lawyer today is not only the butt of numerous jokes; he or she is likely to be seen as a hireling, as one more unit in a large legal corporation, and less likely as an upholder of the enduring dignity of the law. The physician today is likely viewed as an employee in an HMO and not as a bearer of the code of conduct set down by Hippocrates. Good reasons abound to explain these reductions in cultural power of certain professions or what used to be known as callings. Again, each such change can be understood, absorbed, and explained. But the greater cultural landscape now looks different and will feel very different as the next decade approaches.

In sum, that decade will likely see, amid the desanctification of the campus, the fuller emergence of manifest class differences. If Reich (1998) is correct in saying of the United States that "the current economic boom has bypassed too many; the gap between winners and losers has grown too wide," that gap and all it carries as a consequence—in financial aid, distribution of salaries, job opportunities, and indebtedness—will be impossible to hide on any campus, and it will be impossible to immunize the campus from its surroundings. The groves of academe will bear the traffic of the world.

### NOTE

1. Generation 2001: A Survey of the First College Graduating Class of the New Millennium was conducted by Louis Harris and Associates on behalf of Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company to explore the hopes and aspirations of today's college freshmen, the Generation 2001 students. The report can be accessed at <http://www.Northwesternmutual.com/2001/summary.html>.

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