

The Corporate University and the Future of Critical Learning

A college professor gives all of his students an A+ and incurs the wrath of the Corporate University. How about no grades?

Christopher J. Schneider

On February 6, the *Toronto Globe and Mail* reported on the unsuccessful attempt by University of Ottawa Professor Denis Rancourt to eliminate the need for a grading system in his courses by awarding all of his students an A+.

The physics professor wasn't the first to do this in academia, and like similar attempts, some dating back to the 1960s, was an effort to shift the focus and aim of the university back toward learning.

Two days later, the story appeared in *The New York Times* as "The Two Languages of Academic Freedom," an opinion piece by Stanley Fish. The professor of law at Florida International University and Times columnist denounced academics that turn, "serial irresponsibility into a form of heroism under the banner of academic freedom."

The University of Ottawa's castigation of Professor Rancourt's critical (anarchist) pedagogy, trespassing arrest, and eventual dismissal, demonstrates the corporate university's interest in maintaining a system that thrives on "grade hysteria." Sadly, students (consumers) continue to remain hyper-obsessed with grades in hopes of decent job placement, all in the interest of increasing profit margins for everyone involved.

Professor Rancourt and others seem to have the right idea, however, why not take it one step further and eliminate degree conferral altogether? Implementing these ideas will no doubt require creative, innovative, and risky measures, but it seems worth the effort if we really value the integrity of learning.

It should come as little surprise to most that learning, as it were, has become a secondary feature of a university education. Surging students and tuition costs, coupled with dwindling tenured faculty positions, have enabled the university to generate enormous profits never before realized. University decision-making has been largely reduced to strategically calculated business transactions in order to increase profit margins (see Frank Donoghue's (2008) *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*).

Much of this is maintained through a university mandated grading system. The over-credentialization of society, mostly through corporate sponsorship (and ownership) of the university, is to blame. For example, in some cases, employment that did not require a university degree just a few short years ago, now requires one. Let us briefly consider police work.

Until recently, policing, much like the military, required a brief, albeit intense, training program. Now, despite any systemic structural changes in policing, a university degree, in addition to the aforementioned training, has become a necessary and normative requirement in most, if not all, police departments.

In preparation for a career in criminal justice, potential police cadets (depending on whether or not they successfully earn a college degree), enroll in a university and major in Criminal Justice. The university, in this way, operates merely as a two- or four-year pedagogical extension of the police academy.

Many colleges and universities (this is most apparent at the community college level), offer courses that serve only to mirror (reinforce) traditional conservative ideas of the police and correctional institutions. The lesson is

the same, namely, that the mandate of the police consists simply of crime reduction and that the criminal justice system is effective and necessary, even while credible empirical data continues to suggest otherwise.

In this instance, the content taught in college and in the police academy differs very little. Courses critical of the police are at best met with disapproval by university administration. For example, I recently taught an upper division course, one I had titled, "Critical Issues in Policing." However, unbeknownst to me, the title and course description were later changed (without my permission) to "Police and Society." The altered course description eliminated language that could be construed as critical, opting to selectively emphasize the functional role of police in society.

In part, the business of the university has always involved (re)producing privileged and protected information in an effort to maintain and replicate positions of social status and power. For example, most everything you need to know about medicine is now public information, however, one must be licensed to practice this knowledge. The strong hold of the elite class on the university has shifted and loosened somewhat in recent years with the proliferation of accredited degree granting colleges and universities across America. These universities grant access to those who might otherwise be denied opportunity to a postsecondary education. This shift, however, has not been without consequences.

Life expectations (i.e., job placement, income, etc.), for nearly everyone in the Western world have been cast into doubt by the induced anxieties of advanced capitalism, prompting what many otherwise consider "non-university caliber" students to attend the university. The fault here rests with the system, not necessarily with individuals who merely seek to make an honest and better living.

Despite the fact that public universities operate on tax dollars, students usually fund their degree entirely at their own expense often by taking out large loans, thus creating a steady and profitable return (sometimes for life) to the universities, banks, and the federal government, thereby creating a class of twenty-first century indentured servants.

In these ways, the corporate sponsorship of the university has exacerbated tensions associated with current and future living circumstances, and the result has been nothing short of what can only be described as sheer "grade hysteria." Conservative critics argue that this process has contributed to the watering down of university materials to better accommodate the recent influx of students, while they simultaneously ignore the rampant grade inflation that has been going on for years in the Ivy League system (remember G.W. Bush holds a degree from Yale).

These critics suggest that such students have contributed to an underachiever slacker culture where low aspirations are now a basic and desired feature of university life.

While not an entirely new argument, the widespread popularity of these ideas can be linked to E.D. Hirsch's highly controversial *Cultural Literacy* (1987), and more recently, *The Knowledge Deficit* (2006), both texts exhibiting a cause for alarm, namely, the preservation of an assumed rapidly declining cultural knowledge base.

Playing up the hype, neo-conservative Charles Murray, coauthor of the overtly racist *The Bell Curve* (1994), in *Real Education* (2008), argues that too many students are now attending college and that more attention should focus on test scores, as these apparently serve as the most adequate representation of intellectual ability, which is contrary to any evidence that suggests otherwise.

These ethnocentric and blatantly elitist arguments suggest that the assimilation of all people into a corporate, branded, sponsored, and rigid university system would serve the country well, i.e., better facilitate corporate and government social control through selective job placement, while criticizing and demonizing learning that resides outside the periphery of the educational status quo.

Aside from lecturing, reading has always been the assumed standard route of the transmission of intellectual information. While alarming to some (Hirschi, Murray, and others), students now appear to be reading less and communicate and exchange information in different (not better or worse) ways.

To address these concerns in a positive constructive manner, renowned race scholar, Harvard Professor Cornel West, recorded two hip-hop albums for his students to better (and more effectively) communicate important ideas that otherwise might remain undiscovered in textbooks.

West resigned from the university in 2001, due in part to the racist rhetoric employed by then Harvard President Lawrence Summers (currently chief economic advisor to Barack Obama), to describe the first of these two

albums. Author Marc Prensky has also criticized the currently outdated educational system where “digital natives” (students) are taught in large part by “digital immigrants” (teachers).

Empirical evidence continues to support the idea that teachers and students are no longer speaking the same language, an otherwise minor concern, especially when considering that grades now take precedence over classroom content. If grades were indeed abolished, how would we proceed?

The problem of adequately measuring student ability to master material becomes increasingly significant. A meaningful assessment of student progress might be best left to a mentor so that learning becomes a student-teacher relationship, where both people are mutually committed to learning and development.

Learning would no longer be about the sale of content (i.e. teacher disseminating the “goods” of knowledge in the form of a university degree); but, rather, becomes the craft of learning to think, thereby facilitating an environment of personal growth and an ongoing commitment to learning—a way of thinking intertwined with a way of living.

Such a commitment would eliminate the arbitrary need for grades and compulsory degree attainment, while attracting only those genuinely interested in upholding the integrity of learning.

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