

College Daze

Charles Murray 08.07.08, 6:00 PM ET
Forbes Magazine dated September 01, 2008



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Instead of helping high school grads grow up, colleges prolong childhood.

College is not all it's cracked up to be. Dumbed-down courses, flaky majors and grade inflation have conspired to make the letters B.A. close to meaningless. But another problem with today's colleges is more insidious: They are no longer a good place for young people to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Today's colleges are structured to prolong adolescence, not to midwife maturity.

Once upon a time college was a halfway house for practicing how to be a grown-up. Students couldn't count on the dean of students to make allowances for adolescent misbehavior. If they wanted to avoid getting kicked out, they had to weigh the potential consequences of their actions, just as in adult life. The student-teacher relationship was more distant and less nurturing than in high school, and more like the employee-supervisor relationship awaiting them after graduation. Students had to accept that they no longer got hugs for trying hard. If they didn't get the job done, they were flunked with as little ceremony as they would be fired by an employer.

This apprenticeship in adulthood has been gutted.

The light workload alone can make college today a joke. The most recent data say that students self-report only about 14 hours per week spent studying (the true figure is presumably lower). The definition of "weekend" has sprawled to the point that, as a Duke administrator put it, "We've run out of classroom space between 10 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday."

The demanding professor is close to being extinct. Due dates for papers are commonly extended when the student just can't get it done by then. Many professors permit quizzes or even final exams to be made up if missed--missed not because of an emergency at home or a fever of 104, but just, sort of, like, missed. At many schools student evaluations of professors are now systematically collected and used as part of the tenure decision process. Warm and sympathetic is in. Strict and demanding is out.

Professors are under pressure to accommodate students even when it comes to right and wrong answers. Talk to any college teacher and you will hear bemused accounts of encounters with students who think that the teacher's criticisms of their work are "just your opinion," no more valid than the student's opinion, as well as stories of students who make serious trouble for teachers who refuse to adjust their grades.

Meanwhile, colleges today take pride in making life at college as warm and comfy as life with Mom and Dad. It used to be that the girls had housemothers to do bed checks and the guys might have a proctor living on the dorm corridor, and otherwise students were on their own. No longer. Colleges now have large bureaucracies of "res life staff" ("res" for residential) charged with responding to any scrape that our little darlings might suffer. Barrett Seaman, whose book *Binge* is the indispensable guide to this new college world, found that his alma mater, Hamilton (1,700 students), now has 26 full-time people to manage student issues that in the 1960s were handled by only 3. Hamilton is not exceptional.

And so this heretical thought for parents of high school students nearing graduation: If you want your child to grow up responsible and independent, sequester the college tuition money. Encourage your child to join the

military, work abroad as a volunteer for some worthy cause or just move to a different city, get a real job and support himself for a few years.

There's no intellectual loss in delaying college. On the contrary, your child will probably gain from the wait. Plato and Tolstoy were not writing for kids. The real danger lies in raising children who reach their 20s still thinking like children. The years after high school are for learning how to be a grown-up. Today's colleges are terrible places to do it.

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Source: <http://www.forbes.com/business/forbes/2008/0901/032.html>