

From Students, a Misplaced Sense of Entitlement

By Elayne Clift

It was the semester from hell. In my 20 years as an adjunct faculty member, I had taught in the Ivy League and at community colleges, in Brattleboro and Bangkok, in undergraduate and graduate schools. Never had I seen such extraordinarily bad behavior in my students. It began the first night of the graduate class, spring semester 2010, when the students attacked the syllabus for being too demanding (although it was premised on previous syllabi for the same course at the same institution). The evening went steadily downhill. I'll spare you the gruesome details, but the next day I got a call from an administrator asking me to deal with the complaints that some students had registered about me and the course. The charges they'd made were ludicrous and easily explained, but I was stunned. The situation seemed to improve somewhat after I invited students to write down anonymous feedback, positive or negative, about anything they wished to share with me. A student collected the notes in an envelope. We set up class norms, agreeing that we would listen respectfully and give culturally sensitive feedback. I also suggested that anyone who found the course too onerous should drop it. Enrollment fell significantly. The bad behavior did not. Sometimes it was passive-aggressive, but much of it was just plain aggressive. It got so bad that a few students apologized to me on behalf of their colleagues. "I've never seen such disrespect for a teacher," they said. I could have hugged them for their kindness. Instead I thanked them, went home, and had a good cry. As the semester continued, I slipped further into despair. How could it be that graduate students delivered such appallingly poor papers and presentations? They'd gotten undergraduate degrees; why couldn't they write in sentences? Why were they devoid of originality, analytical ability, intellectual curiosity? Why were they accosting me with hostile e-mails when I pointed out unsubstantiated generalizations, hyperbolic assumptions, ungrounded polemics, sourcing omissions, and possible plagiarism? The sad thing is, I'm not alone. Every college teacher I know is bemoaning the same kind of thing. Whether it's rude behavior, lack of intellectual rigor, or both, we are all struggling with the same frightening decline in student performance and academic standards at institutions of higher learning. A sense of entitlement now pervades

the academy, excellence be damned. Increasingly, students seem not to realize what a college degree, especially a graduate degree, tells the world about one's abilities and competence. They have no clue what is expected of them at the higher levels of academic discourse and what will be expected of them in the workplace. Having passed through a deeply flawed education system in which no one is paying attention to critical thinking and writing skills, they just want to know what they have to do to make their teachers tick the box that says "pass." After all, that's what all their other teachers have done. (Let the next guy worry about it.) When teachers refuse to lower standards, those students seem to resort to a new code of conduct that includes acted-out rage, lack of respect, and blame. That behavior is fueled by the absence of clear standards from the administration, and of administrators who care about learning, not just financial ledgers.

Too often the balance sheet, educator apathy, and a fear of resolving difficult situations lead to irresponsible practices such as encouraging grade inflation and ignoring violations of academic integrity. Thus, both students and faculty members are set up for failure. I'm not sure how these problems should be tackled, but this much I do know: If they aren't dealt with at individual institutions as well as through universal reform, the familiar claim that American college students are "the best and the brightest" will become even more laughable.

I also know this: No student who speaks to me the way some did last year will be permitted to remain in my class. My syllabi are non-negotiable. Cellphones, side conversations, open computers, and other distractions, along with plagiarism, will not be tolerated. All papers will require complete sentences, clear writing, cogent arguments, and proper citation. It's a start, and my wary contribution to desperately needed education reform.

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