

A Tough-Love Manifesto for Professors

By Thomas H. Benton

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"Thomas H. Benton," an assistant professor of English, offers his take on academic work and life.

Ask any older employer of recent graduates and you'll hear that most bachelor's degrees are inferior to the high-school diplomas of a generation ago, and, what's more, there is a gross sense of entitlement among today's students, even after they become employees. Somehow they think their employers exist to serve them.

"How much do you pay? Is this interview over, or what?"

One reason for that is obvious enough. Those job applicants just spent the last four years regarding highly educated adults as customer-service representatives. Why? An entire generation of professors has been weakened by the transformation of higher education into a part-time, no-benefit operation. The steady erosion of tenure and the use of student evaluations as a faculty-culling device are turning college teachers into spineless crowd pleasers.

"Please, please hire me! I'll do anything! I'll keep the students entertained and give them all high grades because everyone's special and who am I to judge anyway?"

The last two months I wrote about the relationship between the ["7 Deadly Sins of Students"](#) and the ["7 Deadly Sins of Professors."](#)

My argument is that a student culture of self-indulgence is enabled by the failure of professors to maintain expectations in the classroom. At many institutions, courses have been gutted to the point that students receive high grades for minimal effort, and the lowest grade many professors can risk assigning is a "B+." Even that will produce imperious complaints from students who think they are destined for greatness: "I worked really hard. Your class is not fair. Raise my grade or I'm taking it to the provost. Just wait till you get your evaluation!"

The consumer mentality of students results in their desiring less rigorous instruction because they are paying more for it. They use the cost of tuition -- which I acknowledge, is far too high -- as a justification for lowering standards. So they will pay again later when they discover that their degrees are a form of inflated currency and that employers will not treat them like little geniuses but expect them to actually work without complaining. Even if one accepts the instrumentalist view of education, we do our students no favors by letting them leave with so little knowledge and so much attitude.

Students, even if they are paying tuition, are not "customers" because, at most institutions, their tuition covers only a fraction of the total cost of their education, which is paid for by the state, donors, and accumulated institutional capital. The professors are also making a major contribution by working for far less than comparably educated professionals.

Nevertheless, students think they are customers because the majority of college teachers know they are "employees" who will be fired for displeasing those customers. The 2005-6 version of the American Association of University Professor's "Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession" shows that in the last generation or so the proportion of faculty members teaching part time has doubled. It was 23 percent in 1971; it was 46 percent in 2003. It's probably more than 50 percent now.

That percentage does not include all of the teaching assistants who log most of the student contact hours at large universities. It's probably safe to say that more than two-thirds of college teaching is now done by people who are routinely punished for maintaining standards. The professional survival of untenured faculty members depends on processing large numbers of students without making waves.

After at least 10 years of trying to balance idealism and reality, I am finally one of the faculty members in a position to fight the trend: I was [awarded tenure](#) this spring. And already I see that my perspective on the teacher-student relationship is shifting as a result of having job security.

So I am tinkering with a list of things that will structure my relations with students in the coming years. It's my "Tough-Love Manifesto," and I am thinking about putting it on my syllabi:

I. Students are not customers. Teachers are not employees.

II. Students and teachers have obligations to each other.

III. Here is what I expect from students:

- You will treat everyone in the class, including the professor, with the respect due to all human beings.
- You will attend every class, give your full attention to the material, and conduct yourself in an appropriate manner.
- You will agree to do the work outlined in the syllabus on time.
- You will acknowledge that previous academic preparation (e.g., writing skills) will affect your performance in this course.
- You will acknowledge that your perception of effort, by itself, is not enough to justify a distinguished grade.
- You will not plagiarize or otherwise steal the work of others.
- You will not make excuses for your failure to do what you ought.
- You will accept the consequences -- good and bad -- of your actions.

IV. Here is what students can expect from me:

- I will treat you with the respect due to all human beings.
- I will know your name and treat you as an individual.
- I will not discriminate against you on the basis of your identity or your well-informed viewpoints.
- I will manage the class in a professional manner. That may include educating you in appropriate behavior.
- I will prepare carefully for every class.
- I will begin and end class on time.
- I will teach only in areas of my professional expertise. If I do not know something, I will say so.
- I will conduct scholarly research and publication with the aim of making myself a more informed teacher.
- I will return your assignments quickly with detailed feedback.
- I will pursue the maximum punishment for plagiarism, cheating, and other violations of academic integrity.
- I will keep careful records of your attendance, performance, and progress.
- I will investigate every excuse for nonattendance of classes and noncompletion of assignments.
- I will make myself available to you for advising.
- I will maintain confidentiality concerning your performance.
- I will provide you with professional support and write recommendations for you if appropriate.
- I will be honest with you.
- Your grade will reflect the quality of your work and nothing else.
- I am interested in your feedback about the class, but I am more interested in what you learned than how you feel.

If you are going to be tough on students, you have to be much tougher on yourself. Your autonomy as a professor comes from having the strength to stand for something more than keeping your job for just one more

semester.

Begin with small steps. Cut and paste the Tough-Love Manifesto into your syllabi with, perhaps, some customized modifications. Now, repeat after me: "I have principles. I demand respect. I have high expectations. I am a professor." Say that 10 times a day, at least. Can you handle that?

In one semester, I predict, you will begin to feel your educational biceps growing. In two semesters you will have six-pack academic abs. But you have to stay on the program, even when the grade-grubbers and accidental plagiarists start to line up outside your office.

Students and professors have entered into a mutual pact of low expectations, and somebody has to be the first to re-arm. The popularity of programs like *American Idol* in the college-student demographic shows how hungry they are for honest criticism. On some level, they want the hard truth instead of the "everybody is a winner" nonsense. They will rise to high expectations if teachers are firm and resist sending mixed messages. And we teachers should want, most of all, to be respected rather than liked, even if that means having to grow some backbone and take some risks.

It is absolutely true that I can act with authority because I have tenure, though, of course, the scope of that authority is limited to the classroom. Most untenured faculty members who maintain high expectations are eventually unemployed faculty members. There is such a thing as duty to one's students regardless of consequences, but untenured professors also have obligations to their families not to lose their jobs.

College students seem more immature than ever before, and, as a consequence, more likely to bring disgrace upon themselves and their institutions. Tom Wolfe was not exaggerating in *I Am Charlotte Simmons*. You just have to watch the news to know how serious the problem of character has become at American universities. Maybe it's time to restore in loco parentis? I believe most parents would support that, even if it meant granting more authority and protection to the faculty members who would have to fill that role.

Parents, legislators, administrators -- are you reading this? If you want educated, disciplined graduates who are willing to work hard and become productive citizens -- who will not disgrace you -- then you have to reverse the de-professionalization of college faculty members. And that means saving tenure before it is downsized out of existence for the sake of bigger athletic facilities, fancier dining halls, and better campus landscaping.

This is not a partisan issue. Yes, tenure also protects a small percentage of highly visible, career-driven, ideological extremists. But they are disdained by the majority of moderate professors. Freedom of speech sometimes means letting the Klan demonstrate. And education with character means giving teachers the protection they need to uphold standards. Otherwise, you might as well send your children on a four-year cruise.

It's time to restore tough-love to higher education or just call the whole thing off.

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