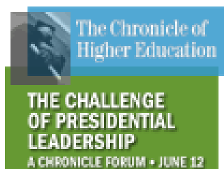

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POINT OF VIEW

Among Affluent Students, a Culture of Disengagement

By RICHARD FLACKS and SCOTT L. THOMAS

The periodic reports from the Harvard School of Public Health's College Alcohol Study, showing continuing high rates of binge drinking, make up just one component in a stream of complaints about today's student culture. "Disengagement" serves as a shorthand term for characterizing that culture.

Faculty members worry about such disengagement when they feel pressure to dumb down courses, when students simply refuse to read material for classes (some studies suggest the average student's study time is now less than 10 hours per week), when attendance at lectures drops and rude classroom behavior increases, and when students show up for office hours mainly to complain about their grades. Administrators worry about students' declining participation in organized campus activities and the increasing time students spend off campus working and socializing.

The prevailing assumption, shared by many educators and citizens, is that by making the student body more inclusive over the past few decades, we also have lowered its quality. If students are the first in their families to go to college, come from high schools that prepared them poorly for college, or need to work to support themselves, they will be less able to take advantage of what higher education has to offer -- and less engaged in learning. The argument is that the lower the average "cultural capital" of students, the more evident will be the symptoms of student disaffection.

Such beliefs underlie some recent shifts in academic policy. Many institutions around the country, including our own, have intensified their efforts to recruit "high achieving" high-school students, and colleges issue triumphant press releases whenever the mean SAT score of the entering freshman class increases. Some institutions are using scholarship aid that in the past helped meet students' financial needs to reward other students' academic merit instead, in the hope of attracting students who are more motivated and better prepared. An influential argument for abolishing affirmative action in college admissions has been that admitting more African-American and Latino students displaces white students who are better qualified and more engaged.

However, such assumptions and changes in policy are not based on systematic research about the ways in which students' backgrounds relate to their behavior once they enter college. In 1996, hoping to fill in this gap in empirical knowledge, we undertook a pilot study at the University of California at Santa Barbara. In the study, which is still in progress, we conduct surveys of large groups of students; we also interview individual students and analyze diaries that we ask them to keep of their activities. When we have presented our results at several conferences, faculty members and administrators from a wide variety of institutions have said that their experience matches what we have found.

At the outset of our study, we were struck by marked differences in the drinking behavior of white students compared to that of African-American and Latino students. White males reported that, on average, they drank heavily -- at least three drinks per sitting -- eight times a month; the comparable number for African-American and Latino males was 4.5 times a month, and for Asian-American males, 2.5 times. Virtually all the students who reported that they often drank heavily (more than eight times a month) were white males. On average, white women drank less heavily than white males but more heavily than black, Latino, and AsianAmerican males and females. The students' reports about their use of drugs showed a similar pattern.

Our results parallel national data, such as those from the Harvard study, which show white males to be two to three times more likely to be binge drinkers -- that is, to consume five or more drinks at a time -- than other students. Despite this dramatic difference, few educators and policy makers focus on the fact that alcohol abuse on campus is largely limited to white students.

At Santa Barbara, we found that differences in drinking and drug use among students were matched by students' reports on their social lives. In our survey, about half of the white males and about a third of the white females said that they frequently attend "large parties at private homes, including fraternities and sororities." In contrast, more than half of the African-American and Latino students of both sexes, and more than two-thirds of the Asian-American students of both sexes, said that they rarely went to such parties. Apparently, Santa Barbara's long-standing reputation as a "party school" stems from the practices of only white students. Efforts by the college administration to overcome that image don't, however, take into account the striking divisions in student culture.

Students at Santa Barbara often defend the institution's reputation by arguing that they "party hearty but study hard" -- denying a link between heavy use of alcohol and alienation from academic matters. Our data, however, suggest otherwise.

In general, drinking and partying are negatively related to several widely accepted indicators of academic engagement. For instance, we found that, compared to white males, African-American and Latino males were more likely to interact with faculty members outside class -- for example, discussing the progress of term papers. Further, African-American and Latino students of both sexes were more involved in cultural and community activities than white males were: They were more than twice as likely to report going to plays, concerts, films, or museums. They were three times as likely to say that they frequently participated in social-service groups. White females ranked between white males and minority students on those indicators.

Those differences led us to look more directly at the link between students' academic achievement and their cultural and financial backgrounds. We developed an index measuring the level of students'"adversity" -- how much difficulty they encountered in attending the university. Students with low "adversity" scores were relatively affluent, and their parents were college graduates. Those students did not hold down time-consuming jobs while in college, and they faced relatively small debts for educational loans. They could concentrate on their roles as students and, compared to their peers with higher "adversity," had much more free time.

How did they use this freedom? We found that students with low scores on our adversity index also had low scores on various measures of academic engagement and participation in cultural and volunteer activities. But they had, by far, the highest rates of partying and binge drinking. Those differences were as pronounced among the white students in our sample as they were for the sample as a whole. Thus, even white students with high adversity scores partied less and were more engaged in academic and campus activities than the most economically secure white students.

Students whose parents are highly educated and affluent are more likely to drink, use drugs, and party frequently, and are less likely to spend time studying, than are less-privileged students. Among the nearly 800 students we surveyed, white students did have higher grade-point averages than African-American, Asian-American, and Latino students. But the differences among the groups were not dramatic. More telling was the fact that among white students, those with the lowest "adversity" scores also had the lowest G.P.A.'s. If students in general are paying less attention to academic and cultural matters, it is not because more of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Of course many white, upper-middle-class students study diligently and participate in community service. But we have noted that students from relatively disadvantaged backgrounds -- students of color, those from working-class backgrounds, or those who are immigrants or the children of immigrants --

often set the pace in campus political, intellectual, and cultural affairs. At Santa Barbara, students of color hold disproportionate numbers of student-government offices, and events sponsored by the Multicultural Center are often on the cutting edge in music, dance, and film.

The crucial role of "outsiders" in the student culture of the 1990s has precedents, vividly described in Helen L. Horowitz's 1987 history of student culture, *Campus Life: Undergraduate Cultures from the End of the Eighteenth Century to the Present.* For instance, at the City College of New York in the 1920s and '30s, Jewish students, immigrants themselves or the children of immigrants, created one of the most intellectually and politically dynamic student cultures in the history of U.S. higher education. Another precedent is the role of the two million World War II veterans who attended college using the GI Bill. Many were not well-prepared educationally, but they impressed their professors with their hunger for learning. Although the veterans obviously were concerned about finding jobs after graduation, they were interested in more than just grades.

The culture of disengagement embraced by many of today's advantaged students seems rooted in a pervasive belief that the main purpose of going to college is economic -- combined with an equally pervasive pessimism about their chances for moving beyond their parents on the social ladder. Advantaged students assume that a college degree is absolutely necessary for survival, but they see little connection between the content of their academic work and their future opportunities. Many are less motivated to learn than they are to get adequate grades. They pursue fun rather than growth.

Students whose families have made sacrifices so that they can go to college, or who have struggled themselves to pursue an education, are as likely as more-affluent students to list economic reasons when asked why they are attending college. But our interviews suggest that they consider their struggle to be worthwhile and feel obligated to make good use of their opportunities. They want not simply to get a degree, but to expand their intellectual horizons -- to obtain the means to fulfill their potential as people and citizens, not just to improve their marketability.

If, in fact, it is hunger for learning that motivates undergraduates to be genuine students today, we need to change the current debate about who is entitled to be in college. Recruiting students on the basis of SAT scores neglects individuals' motivation for entering college and may even foster a student culture of disengagement. Recruiting and admitting intellectually hungry students may well contribute to a revitalization of the campus -- and of the wider culture as well.

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