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The Dumbing Down of America's Colleges

Finally, a prestigious group of college professors has come right out and said that the emperor (*i.e.*, the Imperial University) has no clothes. Many have long suspected that college education has been dramatically dumbed down (like the public schools), but few have had the courage to say so.

The National Association of Scholars (NAS), the nation's leading higher-education reform organization, has just published a devastating 65-page report on its investigation of the courses offered and required at 50 top undergraduate colleges and universities. The NAS used *U.S. News & World Report's* annual listing of "America's Best Colleges" (including both private and public). All figures cited below refer to those 50 elite institutions in the particular years chosen for comparison, 1914, 1939, 1964, and 1993.

The NAS concludes that students no longer learn the common core of knowledge once taken for granted as essential to a liberal-arts education. The universities have simply purged from the curriculum many of the required courses that formerly taught students the historical, cultural, political and scientific basics of our society.

The number of mandatory courses has been dramatically reduced from an average of 9.9 in 1914, to 7.3 in 1939, to 6.9 in 1964, and to 2.5 in 1993. The formerly universal requirement that students take a basic survey course in several important areas has virtually vanished.

Universities now offer very few courses that require prerequisites, which means that very few college courses now require any advance knowledge or preparation. In 1914, universities offered an average of only 23 courses per institution that did not require a prerequisite course; in 1964 the figure had risen to 127; today, the number is 582.

Only 12 percent of universities now require a thesis or comprehensive examination to get a bachelor's degree. As late as 1964, more than half of universities did.

The college year has been shortened by about one-fourth (leaving more time for spring break and other frivolities, but, of course, without any reduction in tuition price or professors' salaries). In 1914, college classes were in session an average of 204 days a year; by 1939 the number had dropped to 195; in 1964, to 191; and today students and

teachers are expected to show up in class only 156 days per academic year.

Maybe the reason why young people can't write good English is that so few colleges teach writing any more. In 1914, nearly all universities had required courses in English composition; by 1964 the figure was 86 percent; today, it's only 36 percent.

Ditto for math. In 1914, 82 percent of the universities had traditional mathematics requirements; by 1964 only 36 percent did; now, only 12 percent do. In 1914, 1939 and 1964, more than 70 percent of the institutions required at least one course in the natural sciences; that figure has now fallen to only 34 percent.

Maybe the reason why the federal guidelines on the teaching of American history turned out to be such a travesty was that most college graduates haven't studied any history. In 1914, 90 percent of our elite colleges required history; in 1939 and 1964 more than 50 percent did; but now only one of the 50 schools has a required history course.

Literature courses were required at 75 percent of the institutions in 1914, and at 50 percent in 1939 and 1964. Today, not one of the "best" institutions has a literature requirement.

Meanwhile, the total number of courses offered at undergraduate institutions has increased by a factor of five since 1914, and has doubled since 1964, but that doesn't mean more opportunities to become an educated citizen. The majority of these additional courses are on narrow and idiosyncratic subjects of interest to the professors but almost worthless to the students. The total includes such trendy and trivial courses as Stanford's "Gender and Science" (which purports to study science free from outdated male assumptions), and Georgetown's "Unspeakable Lives: Gay and Lesbian Narratives."

Here are some examples of courses given at Yale University for which students can receive college credit: "Gender and the Politics of Resistance: Feminism, Capitalism and the Third World." "Gender and Technology." "Feminist Perspectives on Literature." "Lesbian and Gay Theater Performance." "The Literature

of AIDS.” “Contemporary Lesbian and Gay Arts and Culture.” “Constructing Lesbian Identities.” Such courses are just propaganda and entertainment masquerading as education.

The result is that our best colleges and universities no longer turn out graduates who have an elementary knowledge of our civilization and its heritage. They do not learn the basic facts of our country’s history, political and economic systems, philosophic traditions, and literary and artistic legacies.

Quite apart from the fraud of charging an exorbitant \$100,000 for a devalued diploma is the fact that we are in danger of losing the national cohesion of a known and shared heritage which has sustained and nourished our unique institutions of freedom within a limited, constitutional government.

The *New York Times* quoted a critic of this NAS report as arguing that “the real agenda of higher education today is the concern with problem solving, critical thinking, communicating and learning how to value.” But how are students going to engage in all those thoughtful processes when their knowledge is so pathetically limited and their composition and communication skills are almost non-existent?

In addition, there is the dumbing down inherent in giving courses that are not college courses at all, but are designed to teach students what they didn’t learn in high school. Sometimes these courses are called “remedial,” but the institutions prefer euphemisms such as “second tier” and “sub-freshman.” Such courses were unheard of prior to 1939, and only three institutions offered them in 1964. Today such non-college-level courses are offered in 70 percent of the elite universities, and most of them award college credit.

California state legislators recently discovered the high cost to the taxpayers of the remedial education courses given at the state universities. Last year, 60 percent of new students needed remedial help. California legislators assert that students have been the victims of consumer fraud perpetrated on them by the high schools that gave them high grades. The legislators want to send the invoice for the cost of the remedial courses to the high schools that deceived their students by giving them a 3.8 or higher grade-point average.

The 1996 Governors Education Summit at Palisades, New York, spent two days discussing “standards” for what students should learn in public schools. Longtime American Federation of Teachers president Al Shanker gave this concept a reality check. He said that when, as a teacher, he assigned homework to his class, the pupils invariably responded in chorus, “Does it count on our grade?” He pointed out the fact of human nature that standards aren’t going to make any difference if, no matter what students learn or don’t learn, they can still get admitted to nearly all U.S. colleges and universities.

The standards question in the public schools could be resolved if colleges and universities would abolish their

remedial courses and admit only students capable of doing college work. But they won’t because of the easy flow of taxpayers’ money, which makes it so profitable for colleges and universities to admit all the students they can and then send the bill to the taxpayers.

Secrets About College Education

The high cost of a college education is not just the sticker price of a year’s tuition; it’s the increase in the number of years it takes to get a diploma. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, only 31 percent of college students graduate in four years or less, while 69 percent take five, six or even more years to graduate.

In a front-page article, the *New York Times* (Sept. 14, 1994) reported that a typical student takes only three courses a semester instead of five. We’re talking about college students of traditional age, not the re-entry men and women who take college courses later in life. The *Times* article included a picture of four roommates at California State at Long Beach who have been in college a total of 30 years. That’s an average of 7.5 years each. Since the roommates were three females and one male, we can speculate that college was just so much fun that there just wasn’t any incentive to hurry up and finish.

There would be a public outcry about consumer fraud if the students had to pay for the product. The problem is that somebody else is usually paying, either the taxpayers or the parents. The easy availability of taxpayers’ money to admit and keep students in college makes it possible for them to waste their education dollar on worthless courses. Cost is not a factor in lengthening your college schedule if you can send the bills to someone else.

The price of a year at a state university is about \$7,500. A student who takes six years to get a bachelor’s degree pays \$15,000 more than it costs the student who graduates in four years, but the degree isn’t worth a penny more.

For the past decade, students have been urged to go to college in order “to find themselves,” that is, enroll in a variety of easy courses until they find a subject they like. However, a student who isn’t literate and mature enough, on his own, to read the course catalogue, devise a plan of study, and select the courses to achieve that goal, has no business going to college at all.

Four years is long enough for a student of traditional age to spend in college, and I believe that three years is a better length. It took me only three years to get my bachelor’s degree, and two of my children earned their bachelor’s degrees from Princeton University in only three years each. At present rates, that means each of those Princeton degrees cost at least \$25,000 less than what others paid. A college degree isn’t worth any more whether you take three years or eight years, but the cost differential is enormous.

The out-of-pocket tuition price is only part of the cost. The more destructive part of the cost is that so many young people between the ages of 18 and 25 waste so many of their prime productive hours and years. Cruising along as an undergraduate for extra years results in an artificial and

unnatural deferral of maturity and of taking responsibility for your own life. I worked a 48-hour-a-week night-shift job while carrying a full college schedule, so it's difficult for me to understand what today's college students do with all those extra hours. In any event, it's wrong to make the taxpayers subsidize them.

I am hopeful that the day will soon come when students can stay home and take superb college courses by video from the nation's top scholars and authorities. This would greatly improve the quality of college lectures and teaching, first, because a professor being videotaped would prepare and try harder, and secondly, because videos would present real professors instead of Teaching Assistants (T.A.s) masquerading as professors. One entrepreneur is already selling a series of 70 45-minute lectures called "The Great Minds of the Western Intellectual Tradition," featuring respected scholars from prestigious Ivy League universities.

The rapid advances of the electronic age are already starting to make it possible for such courses to be interactive between professors and students. That's more than most students get in college now.

THE DECLINE OF COLLEGE REQUIREMENTS				
	Percentage of Institutions with Course Requirements			
	1914	1939	1964	1993
English Composition	98%	96%	86%	36%
Rhetoric	33	18	10	0
Foreign Language	98	90	96	64
History	90	50	50	1
Literature	75	54	52	0
Philosophy	76	44	46	4
Religion	34	30	36	0
Natural Science	86	72	90	34
Mathematics	82	36	36	12

National Association of Scholars, *The Dissolution of General Education: 1914-1993*, 575 Ewing Street, Princeton, NJ 08540, (609) 683-7878.

Books about What's Going on at Colleges

Anderson, Martin, **Impostors in the Temple**, Simon & Schuster, 1992. Dr. Anderson, a former Columbia University professor and now a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, calls many of our nation's academic intellectuals "impostors in the temple" — that is, people who pretend to teach and pretend to do original, important work, but actually do neither. He says that "the death of integrity in the heart of higher education is the root cause of the educational troubles which afflict us today." He helps us to understand how it all happened at Stanford, one of the nation's most prestigious universities. He describes how Stanford bilked the federal taxpayers out of millions of dollars and played a big role in the Political Correctness movement.

Roche, George, **The Fall of the Ivory Tower**, Regnery, 1994. The president of Hillsdale College, Dr. Roche demonstrates how the easy availability of federal money channeled to colleges and universities has corrupted our entire educational system. The flow of taxpayers' money has resulted in a large percentage of students being admitted to college who have no business being there at all because they are academically or emotionally unprepared. The high rate of defaults on student loans is a national scandal.

Sowell, Thomas, **Inside American Education**, Free Press, 1993. One of America's most distinguished scholars, a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Sowell gives us a realistic look at the decline, the deception and the false dogmas of the U.S. educational system, which he charges is morally and intellectually bankrupt. He exposes the ideological indoctrination and double standards about behavior and race practiced at the leading universities. They have presumed to be the conscience of society, while shamelessly exploiting college athletes, overcharging the government, organizing price-fixing cartels, and abandoning the teaching of undergraduates to student assistants while the tenured faculty pursue personal prestige.

The 50 colleges and universities used in the National Association of Scholars study are:

Amherst College, Barnard College, Bates College, Bowdoin College, Brown University, Bryn Mawr College, California Institute of Technology, Carleton College, Colby College, Colgate University, College of William & Mary, Columbia University, Cornell University, Dartmouth College, Davidson College, Duke University, Georgetown University, Grinnell College, Hamilton College, Harvard University, Haverford College, Johns Hopkins University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Middlebury College, Mount Holyoke College, Northwestern University, Oberlin College, Pomona College,

Princeton University, Rice University, Smith College, Stanford University, Swarthmore College, Trinity College of Hartford, CT, University of California at Berkeley, University of California at Los Angeles, University of Chicago, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, University of Notre Dame, University of Pennsylvania, University of Virginia, Vanderbilt University, Vassar College, Washington and Lee University, Washington University in St. Louis, Wellesley College, Wesleyan College, Williams College, and Yale University.

Sykes, Charles, **ProfScam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education**, St. Martin's Press, 1989. This book is a devastating indictment of U.S. universities, which Sykes calls vast citadels of waste, ruled with an iron hand by an oligarchy of arrogant, tenured professors who are overpaid and underworked. He names specific universities, professors, dates and places, and asserts that a university education is a scam which cheats students, parents, and taxpayers. He says the universities offer more and more courses of less and less importance, including a plethora of junk courses referred to by students as "guts" (slang for a course that can be passed with no more preparation than gut instinct). He cites as examples Anthropology of Play, Socio-Psychological Aspects of Clothing, Music Video 454, Sport and Political Ideology, Recreation and Leisure, Pocket Billiards, and Rock 'n' Roll Is Here To Stay.

Sykes, Charles, **The Hollow Men — Politics and Corruption in Higher Education**, Regnery Gateway, 1990. Sykes explains the politicization of the college courses. He tells how race, gender and class have been enshrined as the looking glasses through which all subject matter must be seen if one is to survive in academia. Colleges have gone overboard with institutionalized affirmative action, sensitivity training, and anti-free speech codes. The second half of the book is devoted to a case study of Dartmouth College, which became a prime example of the intolerance of those who preach "diversity."

Kimball, Roger, **Tenured Radicals**, Harper & Row, 1990. Kimball discusses the radical politics of many in academia, but he puts his main focus on the absurdity of what passes for scholarship on the campuses. He writes about the unintelligible jargon, or "ProfSpeak," which passes for erudition in the academic world. He describes the "deconstructionist" movement, which he calls a scam perpetrated by academics in order to create more possibilities for papers, symposiums, specialized classes, and university teaching positions.

Smith, Page, **Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America**, Viking Penguin, 1990. Smith is a liberal academician, but many of his conclusions about higher education are similar to what can be found in Charles Sykes' *ProfScam* and Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*. Smith criticizes worthless research, the tenure system, and the tendency of professors to disdain teaching. His main focus is on "the spiritual aridity of the American university."

Nash, Ronald H., **The Closing of the American Heart — What's Really Wrong with America's Schools**, Probe Books, 1990. Unlike most of the other books, this one is written from a religious perspective. Dr. Nash believes that the collapse of moral and religious

standards over the past 25 years has contributed to the collapse of the nation's educational standards. He charges that moral illiteracy is reflected and taught in academia through relativism, positivism, and humanism. He says that the refusal to recognize the necessity of ethical absolutes and moral values has cut our culture loose from its moorings.

D'Souza, Dinesh, **Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus**, Free Press, 1991. This is the original book that explained Political Correctness (P.C.) on college campuses. D'Souza shows how P.C. produces closed-mindedness and intolerance, which is to say an "illiberal education." He explains how Political Correctness opposes the teaching of Western Civilization. The P.C. advocates demand that professors give prime attention to race and gender issues, and abolish the classics of Western civilization.

Nobel, David A. **Understanding the Times**, Summit Press, 1991. This is the tool to inform prospective college students about the various intellectual battlefields they will face and equip them to defend their point of view. This text contrasts three world views of Western civilization: Biblical Christianity, Secular Humanism, and Marxist/Leninist, exploring each with regard to theology, philosophy, ethics, biology, psychology, sociology, law, politics, economics, and history. This book demonstrates the coherence and truthfulness of the Biblical Christian worldview.

Atlas, James, **The Book Wars**, Whittle Books, 1990. If you missed the longer tomes, this book of only 90 pages provides a good overview of academia in non-academic language. Atlas describes his shock in seeing the current curriculum at Harvard, his alma mater. He says it's no wonder that today's students haven't mastered a core of classics because their professors have a positive hatred for the Great Books and view America's entire past as an era of unmitigated oppression.

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