

1

How Retention Replaced Education at America's Colleges

A generation ago, when parents sent their children to college, they knew what they were getting for their money. College was the magic doorway that opened up the American dream and those who passed through its gates could expect wealth, success, and a life full of meaningful engagement with the world. Students who survived the hard work and hours of serious study were welcomed into the ranks of society's leaders, both within their own communities and in national affairs. A bachelor's degree was the certificate that proved to the world that the bearer had mastered key skills, learned how to solve problems through critical thinking, and demonstrated the wisdom necessary to participate in the world of enlightened endeavors.

Because colleges accepted only the best and brightest students, just getting in the door was an accomplishment celebrated by parents and students alike as a milestone in their professional development. Those who gained admittance were already a part of the elite,

the leaders of tomorrow. The student who received a college acceptance letter had made the first cut for inclusion on the intellectual all-star team.

The mission of colleges was clear. They were ascetic refuges from the outside world, dedicated to knowledge and learning. They were communities of scholars where free thought was encouraged and young minds were nurtured and taught how to think. It was a place where highly trained experts passed on the knowledge and wisdom of the ages to a new generation. This mission had remained essentially unchanged since the Middle Ages and its roots could be traced back to ancient Greece.

Of course, there had always been students who got into trouble. Many students were, after all, adolescents and prone to all kinds of misbehavior, from swallowing goldfish and packing telephone booths to all-night parties in the fraternity house. There were, however, limits to higher education's tolerance for misbehavior. Professors and administrators knew that an important part of their jobs was to serve as the gatekeepers who weeded out the poor-performing and lazy students from the more serious majority. Students who consistently scored poorly on exams, failed to read assignments, or didn't bother to show up for class were eventually directed to the college's exit door. It wasn't just a punishment for substandard performance; it was a way to ensure that high standards were maintained so that the college degree would be awarded only to those who earned it. This, in turn, guaranteed that the degree itself retained its high value for those who did the hard work and demonstrated that they deserved it.

If you entered a college classroom a generation ago, you would have found a professor at the front of the room lecturing or leading a discussion about one of the important topics on the syllabus. Students participated or at least pretended to be interested in the topic. There were questions that led to discussions, which led to a deeper understanding. The vast majority of students understood that their role in higher education was to take the time to prepare for their

classes by reading the assigned texts and coming to class ready to participate in the discussion. Studying was what students did and it was why they were there.

To ensure that the entire process worked smoothly, there were accreditation organizations that oversaw each step in the college education process, ensuring that standards were kept high and that colleges lived up to their primary mission: education.

Employers understood that a job applicant who held a bachelor's degree was guaranteed to be of higher intellectual quality than a high school graduate. Certified college graduates possessed not only a wide array of basic knowledge but the abilities to learn quickly, to make logical decisions when presented with problems, and to discuss matters in a sophisticated and intelligent fashion.

Today, unfortunately, almost everything you just read about colleges is no longer true.

The inconvenient truth is that only the best colleges in America still consider "education" to be their primary mission. Instead, since the early 1990s, colleges have been reinventing themselves using a business model, transforming themselves into Diplomas Inc., run by a new breed of college administrator more interested in retaining customers than in educating students. As a result of this change in focus, hundreds of college campuses have been deliberately transformed into havens of adolescent hedonism, where student misbehavior has become the norm and college administrators allow it because they don't want their student customers to take their tuition money somewhere else. In an all-out effort to attract and retain as many student customers as possible, administrators have given students exactly what they said they wanted: more parties and less education. Dining halls have been enlarged and reinvented as gourmet food courts and campuses have been tricked out with hot tubs, climbing walls, workout centers, water parks, and wide-screen television sets. Dormitories have been torn down and replaced with luxury condominiums.

The hard work that used to be required has been eliminated because students said they didn't want to do it. Don't want to read

books? No problem! Reading them is no longer required. Grades too low? Forget it. We'll use a "grading curve" to transform your F magically into a B. Too busy to write a term paper? We'll waive the requirement for you! A new generation of students with a sense of entitlement demands Bs just for showing up and colleges, ever eager to keep their customers satisfied, are granting their demands.

Focused on increasing their revenue stream, today's party school colleges squeeze as many students as possible onto their campuses at the highest tuition they think they can get away with for the longest possible amount of time. To make their campuses more "student-friendly" and prevent their customers from dropping out or transferring to another campus, colleges have dumbed down their programs, sometimes to elementary school levels, and inflated grades so that nearly everyone gets an A or a B. Although there have always been student drinking parties, what has changed is that today the parties have become the main student activity at a majority of campuses, taking up far more time than attending classes or studying. Colleges used to be a place where students who were getting an education took some time off to drink; they are now places where students who came to party spend a few hours a week taking classes. A large percentage of party school students admit that they chose their college not because of its academic standing but because of its reputation as a party school, with minimal academic demands and maximum opportunities to enjoy themselves.

Party school administrators and faculty are aware of this decline in academic rigor but minimize its impact by calling themselves "non-elite" colleges and defend the decline in standards with the excuse that the unprepared and disengaged students that make up most of their student bodies probably would not have gone to college at all in previous generations. But is these students' college attendance really an improvement if schools dumb down their programs and inflate grades to make students happy? And is it really worth tens of thousands of dollars to attend a college that is really nothing more than an adolescent resort?

Flunking out, which used to be the primary consequence for disengaged students who slacked off, has been nearly eliminated by party school administrators who think failing a student is a non-sensical rejection of a paying customer with cash in hand. These administrators have deliberately changed the priorities and rules of higher education to make it nearly impossible for students to fail. Professors are encouraged to make their classes student-friendly, and that means no outside reading assignments, no difficult concepts, no boring discussions, and no tests. Instead, they are encouraged to show movies, bring in guest speakers, and develop classroom presentations that are more “entertaining.” Many of today’s party school classes take their cues from reality television, quiz shows, stand-up comedy, video games, and three-ring circuses. They are long on fun but short on learning, but neither administrators nor students complain because both are happy. Students get diplomas without doing any work and administrators get to cash their ever-larger tuition checks.

Although colleges would still prefer that students actually learn something during their time in college, it’s no longer required. Party schools have made education an optional activity. The small minority of students who are engaged in the education process and really want to learn something in college—about 10 percent according to the National Survey of Student Engagement—can still get an education as long as they avoid the temptations to misbehave that the majority of students constantly toss in their way. The majority of today’s party school students take advantage of the “slacker tracks” through the curriculum, which allow them to obtain a diploma without reading a book, writing a term paper, or having a serious discussion. Professors are rewarded by the administration for keeping student grades high and keeping failures to a minimum under the official party school policy of retaining students at all costs. Today, 90 percent of college grades are either an A or B, where A is for the students who complete their work on time and B is for the lower half of the class who couldn’t be bothered. All other grades are

essentially off-limits because they discourage students and might tempt them to drop out. The minority of students who study hard in school and get a good education are awarded the same grades and the same diplomas as the students who did as little work as possible. So where is the incentive to study hard if the high-performing students end up with the same grades and same diploma as the slackers? In this way, party schools actually discourage student engagement in the education process. There is absolutely no reward for hard work.¹

Party school policies also encourage students to stay in school longer than the four years that it is supposed to take to get a bachelor's degree. It now takes the average college student six years to complete a four-year program, adding a 50 percent surcharge to the advertised sticker price. Administrators make it easy for students to drop classes after they enroll, which means that students pay for a class without earning any academic credit. Colleges routinely fail to schedule classes that students require for graduation, forcing them to stick around for another semester or two. Students are permitted, even encouraged, to take less than a full load of classes. For students, that means more time to party; for administrators, who charge the same tuition no matter how many courses a student takes, it's an easy way to squeeze out a little bonus tuition money from their students.

With academic demands at a minimum, party school students have dozens of hours a week for what they call *socializing*, which is their code word for drinking themselves into oblivion. Studies show that nearly half of American college students abuse alcohol, but at party schools, binge drinkers make up a majority of the student body. Students whose self-abusive drinking habits were kept in check by parents and school officials when they were in high school arrive on campus at the beginning of freshman year to find that there is no longer any supervision at all. Arrests for public intoxication, public urination, assault, sexual abuse, and DUI begin the day the students move in and continue through the semester. Hundreds

of party school students drink themselves to death each year. By the end of the first year, a quarter of the freshman class has dropped out, not for academic reasons, but because they simply could not remain healthy while regularly staying up all night and consuming massive amounts of alcohol.²

Party school administrators are, of course, well aware of this abusive pattern, but they claim their hands are tied because the students are legally adults and therefore free to make their own choices about how they spend their time. The reality, however, is that colleges that take a strong stand against student drinking by expelling repeat offenders or making their campuses alcohol-free find that their applications drop off significantly. Students looking for a place to party for six years are not likely to choose a college with a reputation for being tough on underage drinking. There are plenty of party schools around that deliver a different message to students: sign up here and you can have the time of your life.

The reason so few parents and taxpayers are aware of this dramatic deterioration in the quality and rigor of higher education is that most colleges have adopted strict confidentiality policies that deliberately take parents and the public out of the loop. Parents are prevented from talking with teachers, looking at their children's grades, or finding out what disciplinary actions their children have been involved in. Faculty members are instructed never to talk with parents, even if they call on the telephone or show up at the door. Party school administrators are fully aware that if enough parents and taxpayers found out what they were really getting for their tuition and tax money, they would soon be called to account.

The transformation of American colleges from rigorous academic institutions into party schools began in the early 1990s, when high schools began turning out a higher percentage of poorly prepared students unable to cope with the demands of college classes. With reading, writing, and mathematics skills in the elementary school range, these students were not able to read college textbooks, write term papers, or understand a college lecture. This created a schism

within the academic community, with one side advocating dumbing down the curriculum to the incoming students' level to keep them in school and the other half demanding that rigorous standards be maintained, even if it meant a high percentage of students failed. This tended to break down along age lines, with the older professors defending academic standards and the younger ones advocating dumbing down the college.

It was at this crucial point that a new kind of administrator began taking over the reins of power at American colleges. These new administrators had more in common with Gordon Gekko than they did with Aristotle. They were armed with degrees in business administration rather than in education and had backgrounds or at least training in subjects like marketing, public relations, and management. These new administrators saw that the real problem with colleges was that they were not being run like what they really were—businesses.

To these new administrators, colleges were models of inefficiency because they refused to listen to the demands of their customers—the students—and were therefore always in danger of losing their market share to colleges that did a better job of customer relations. Money was being wasted on things students didn't care about—like libraries and seminars—and too little was being spent on things students said they really wanted—like hot tubs and wide-screen television sets. Colleges, they said, consistently made the wrong decisions for the wrong reasons. Why didn't colleges have balance sheets and profit and loss statements? Where were their plans for increasing their market share? Where were their customer surveys? Why weren't they targeting their markets better and giving their customers what they said they wanted, not what colleges thought they needed?

In the past, the prime mission of colleges was to ensure that students met high enough standards that they would *earn* a college degree. Now it was considered sufficient if the students *paid* for a college degree. The concept that students were supposed to learn something in college didn't fit into the business model.

At conferences all over the country, business coaches ran seminars for college administrators eager to adopt the new college-as-business model. This made the question of whether or not to dumb down the college moot. Colleges that refused to cater to the demands of their student customers would soon find themselves with a lot of empty classrooms. Colleges had to dumb down or die.

The takeover of American colleges by these new CEO-wannabe administrators with their eyes firmly focused on the bottom line completely changed the power structure of higher education. Faculty were among the big losers. In the past, teachers were more than just paid employees who punched the clock and collected their pay. Traditionally, professors shared in the administration of the college and had the power to oust a president who lost their confidence. Today, placated by jobs that require only a few hours of teaching per day, four months of paid vacation, and regular sabbaticals, most of the faculty have surrendered to the idea that academic standards must be lowered to accommodate students who sign up for the party and not for an education. That leaves faculty plenty of time to do what they really care about—their research.

The real problem with the new business model, however, comes from treating students like customers. A generation ago, students were thought of as powerless blank slates, the intellectual trainees who were required to meet the college's standards or wash out and be shown the door. Those who met the standards were granted a diploma that certified they had mastered the wisdom of the ages. Under the business model, however, students were rewarded with a diploma not for what they learned but because they paid their tuition bills on time. Under the business model, colleges moved dangerously close to becoming diploma marts where students did little more than purchase their certificates. A surprising number of my students voiced this exact attitude in discussions with me in my office. "I'm paying a lot of money to go here," they would say, "and I deserve a better grade than this!" For these entitled student customers, the old idea that you were supposed to *earn* a grade and

a diploma by studying was an entirely foreign concept. For them, it was strictly a cash-for-certificate transaction and learning was not part of the deal.

Treating students like customers altered the campus power structure in other ways. A primary goal of the new party school administrators was to keep their student customers happy at all costs so they would continue to pay their sky-high tuition bills and not take their business to another college. Flunking students, no matter how poor their grades or behavior, became a bad business practice. Students who refused to read textbooks, who didn't show up for class very often, who failed tests and didn't participate in class, were allowed to get away with it over and over again. Students who drank themselves into unconsciousness, sold drugs, and even committed arson, rape, and assault were let off easy by college judicial boards so they could be retained as paying customers.

There was, in fact, only one mortal sin that could not be forgiven, one offense that would, without fail, cancel their invitation to the five-year party. That was failure to pay their tuition bills on time. Some of my best students told me they were about to be expelled because they had run out of money and didn't want to take out any more student loans. One student told me his name had been taken off the graduation list until he paid for a parking ticket. For these deadbeat students, there was no mercy. The administrators who had been so lenient and understanding about all kinds of other offenses became angry bill collectors, debt collectors who threatened termination if students failed to cough up the cash.

While the old school college administrators evaluated themselves on how successful their students became after graduation, party school administrators have become obsessed with a single number on the student's record: the bottom line. How much income does this student generate for us? They multiply the number of students at the college by the annual tuition rate times the number of years it takes them to graduate. This bottom line number could be improved by crowding in more students, raising the tuition rate, or

keeping students in the system for more years. It should come as no surprise then that party school administrators have concentrated on raising all three of those numbers.

This may seem strange because most colleges are non-profit organizations and therefore unable to generate a true profit, but money is still power, no matter how you acquire it. Colleges with excess funds could give their administrators big pay raises, hire more administrators to lighten the load with many hands, and pay for non-stop construction projects designed to attract even more students. It was the winner-take-all strategy taught at business schools. More students—that is, more customers—meant more profit, which would enable the college to build more dormitories and dining halls to accommodate even more customers in a never-ending spiral of expansion. At the same time, excess revenue allowed party schools to add the kinds of expensive frills—like water parks and climbing walls, in some places—that they knew students were looking for.

Party schools call this competition to attract students the “arms race,” where they rush to add the latest student-friendly frills to smash the competition in the same way that rival software companies seek the “killer app” that brings customers clamoring to their doors. Today, college promotional booklets referred to as “view books” are full of photos of students partying, students playing sports, students eating and playing in their dorm rooms. They resemble in many ways the brochures for luxury resorts or cruises. What’s missing from them are photos of students in class, students reading books, or students studying. To even a casual observer of these materials, it’s clear that the main attraction of a college education is no longer education. It’s a five- or six-year cruise on the S.S. Party Barge and party schools do their best to deliver what they are advertising.

At the other end of the college process, party schools have flooded the job market with tens of thousands of semi-literate, unemployable graduates who aren’t able to follow simple instructions. Even before the current recession, studies showed there were millions of graduates who weren’t able to find suitable work and

were forced to take positions as temporary office workers, clerks, pizza deliverers, and cab drivers. To make matters worse, these unemployable party school alumni were strapped with tens of thousands of dollars in college loans with payments averaging \$400 a month. Many of these party school alumni now view their party school education as a kind of scam, promising them high-paying jobs but leaving them drowning in debt.

Meanwhile, party school administrators, following in the footsteps of the industry tycoons they seek to emulate, have increasingly been discovered with their hands in the cookie jar. College administrators have taken kickbacks from student loan companies for directing student business their way and sold the names and addresses of students to credit card companies to be targeted for marketing. Administrators were also found to have cozy relationships with the rich and powerful. “Clout lists” permitted the children of the well-connected to bypass the regular admission procedures. Administrators allowed students with the right political connections to obtain degrees without completing the course work. One study found that salaries for college administrators rose by a third in five years, and that doesn’t include the generous perks that colleges provide for them, including \$2 million homes, private jets, and golden parachute retirement packages.

All of this comes as no surprise to the academics who read professional journals such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which has been publishing articles for more than a decade about dumbed-down classes, low academic standards, inflated grades, illiterate college graduates, the oversupply of graduates, and the antics of college administrators who wanted to emulate the lifestyle of Donald Trump. The mainstream news media doesn’t exactly ignore the problems either. *Forbes* magazine, the *New York Times*, *BusinessWeek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and the *Christian Science Monitor* have all run articles in recent years about what *Forbes* called “country club campuses.”³ There is no shortage of stories about skyrocketing tuition increases, the crippling debt and lack of jobs the party

school graduates face, high crime rates on college campuses, and drunken parties involving hundreds of students that break out after major sporting events. There are also detailed profiles when a student dies of alcohol poisoning. What the national news media fails to report, however, is how all of these seemingly different kinds of college problem stories are really parts of one big story: colleges have been redesigned for partying rather than studying. And parents and taxpayers, the people who pick up the tab for the five-year party, never question the value of higher education, even when the price increases at three times the inflation rate.

In the following chapters, I'll explain how so many American colleges turned themselves into party schools and describe what goes on there from the point of view of an insider. I'll take you behind the scenes to show you how little education takes place in party school classrooms, how infrequently students study, and how their demand for dumbed-down classes and high grades has led to colleges where education has become optional. I'll also take you on a tour of college campuses showing you the dangerous levels of crime, including assault, rape, and arson, and how perpetrators are leniently prosecuted in the colleges' own secret court system. I'll explain how the dominant cult of alcohol consumption creates the last place in America where public intoxication is not only accepted but treated as normal behavior. I'll describe the steps that college public relations offices take to hide what really goes on there from the public, the press, and parents.

Finally, I'll show you how the low achievement levels of graduates and the high cost of party school tuition have financially damaged tens of thousands of party school graduates who are unable to find the highly paid jobs they were promised and are forced to make student loan payments of \$400 a month for decades. In the final chapter, I'll outline the steps that parents and legislators can take to cancel the party school system. It's essential that we restore the rigor that American colleges need to train the leaders of tomorrow to compete with economic challenges from Asia in the coming decades.