

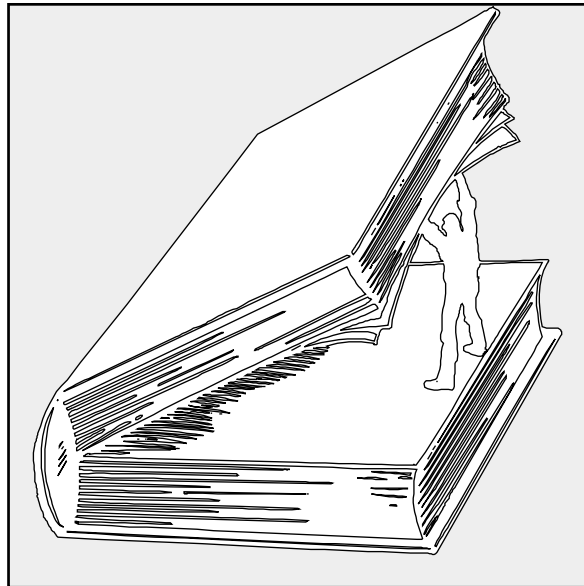
HERETICAL THOUGHTS ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION

THOMAS C. REEVES

A billboard just south of Milwaukee features the photograph of a smiling woman who boasts that she has sent nineteen poor people to college. This is an advertisement for social benevolence, of course, but the thought occurred to me, a veteran of forty years of college teaching, that the effort, however well intentioned, might well have been misguided, a poor investment of time and money.

The color of those college students, I hasten to add, has nothing to do with my reservations. I spent thirty-one years as a history professor at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, working largely with blue collar, first generation college students, and have a solid grasp of the realities facing those who experience higher education without financial support and intellectual preparation. Indeed, I came from such a background myself. Color is surely a factor in the story, but I consider its weight to be minimal.

Going to college has become a national fad, a rite of passage, millions hope, into the world of hefty salaries and McMansions. The trek to academia has now spread in a big way to the working class, whose members often see



sending their kids to college as a sign of respectability, like vacationing in Branson, Missouri, owning an SUV, and having a weed-free lawn with a gazing globe. Minorities too are getting into the act, being wooed and financially rewarded by campus administrators to meet institutional racial quotas and goals.¹ But is this crush for diplomas necessarily a good

thing? Is it always a prudent investment, for the individual and for society, to be sending junior off to the dorm?

Let us consider our nineteen new college students, beginning with a highly relevant question: How many of them have the intellectual ability, the desire, and the academic preparation to be serious and successful students? Most Wisconsin high school students planning to go to college take the ACT admission test. Nationally, ACT scores have been flat for several years. Only 25 percent of the 1.2 million students who took the test in 2002 as high school seniors scored high enough on the science part of the ACT to suggest that they would pass their first college science course

Thomas C. Reeves is a retired history professor from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside and a senior fellow at the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

with a grade of C or above. About four in ten scored well enough to suggest that they could earn at least a C in a college-level math course.²

Evidence of the generally low level of educational attainment is plentiful. On tenth grade math tests in Wisconsin recently, 76 percent of white students attained proficiency or better, compared with 40 percent of Hispanics, and 23 percent of blacks.³ In Michigan, Colorado, Texas, and New York academic tests have been altered or thrown out because of low scores. The SAT college admission examinations have been watered down in recent years to elevate scores.

ACT chief executive Richard T. Ferguson urges better high school preparation. The truth is that the great majority of high schools continue to require little in exchange for their diplomas. For example, the 2001 National Assessment for Education Progress survey discovered that a majority of high school seniors thought Germany, Japan, or Italy was an ally of the United States during the Second World War.⁴ In New York, in the spring of 2003, about 70 percent of the students who took the state's mathematics test received failing grades.⁵ Hundreds of thousands enter the campus gates without a clue about the intellectual challenges that are, or at least should be, awaiting them.

The impact on college and university campuses of legions of unprepared freshmen is never positive. Millions of dollars must be spent annually in remedial education. And the rate of failure is still extraordinarily high. ACT officials estimate that one in four fail or drop out after one year, a figure that reflects the rate at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside and the University of Wisconsin-Madison.⁶ The financial costs, let alone the emotional toll on the young people involved, is scandalous. For decades I watched the anguish and anger of students who discovered that the college classroom was not the place for them, because of lack of interest or ability or preparation, or all three.

Even more important is the impact of intellectually unprepared and unmotivated people on the educational process itself. The well-documented proliferation of stuff and nonsense for academic credit in large part stems from low admissions standards. The looniest sort of classes are now offered without a whisper of dissent from a faculty and administration eager to have as many students on campus as possible in order to maximize the institution's prestige and insure financial increases from sources that pay by the head. (The University of Wisconsin System makes head count a vital factor in distributing allocations, thus making the smaller and weaker institutions ever weaker and increasingly eager to accept virtually anyone who applies. Comparatively small U.W.-Parkside, alone of the System schools on Tier 4 — the bottom — of the *U.S. News and World Report* academic rankings, accepts 91% of applicants.)⁷

College catalogues are usually thick volumes, offering something for everyone and requiring little of anyone. Why take a lab science, a foreign language, or (for real diversity) the history of foreign countries if these courses aren't required? Why take classes with written examinations and term papers when most classes do not?

Grade inflation is notorious at all levels. One Harvard professor, Harvey Mansfield, took to giving students two grades: the high Harvard grade that all the students expect, and the grade, usually lower, that the student actually earned. Several educators have suggested listing the average grade a professor gives next to a student's grade, to put the latter in proper perspective. The proposal, of course, has been firmly resisted by professors. The truth is that as standards plummet throughout academia, grades soar. That almost no one cares about the denigration of academic standards in higher education is also scandalous.

Recently, University of Wisconsin System President Katharine Lyall and Richard Carpenter, president of the Wisconsin Technical College System, proposed a plan to ease the transfer of credits between their sys-

tems. Note the language Lyall used to justify the proposal:

It's important to understand that today's students move dynamically in both directions between our systems. And the movement is not always a straight line. . . . This is a good thing; it is a sign of educational efficiency and dynamic client opportunities.

Shorn of its jargon, the statement reflects the deterioration of the standards that once prevailed at Madison and elsewhere in the state, distinguishing academic pursuits from job training. The two system heads stressed that the transfer plan would produce more students with bachelor's degrees. Legislators were said to be favorable.⁸ Where is the courageous state official or educator who will dig beneath the blather about "excellence" and examine what precisely is going on? Why should there be more degrees if they mean increasingly little?⁹

Another example of what happens to a college or university when almost anyone is allegedly qualified to attend may be seen at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, an institution that has enrolled more than 20,000 undergraduates and is struggling to increase campus prestige. (It is currently on the third tier of the doctoral institutions in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, a long way from the first tier university in Madison.) Ten years ago the UWM bookstore looked like a large Barnes and Noble, only better. Scholarly books and journals of the highest quality dominated much of the first floor, and it was an intellectual delight to prowl through publications that symbolized the university's commitment to academic values. Today, the magazines look like what you find at the supermarket. The tiny collection of books on the first floor (the textbooks are

downstairs), published largely by UWM authors, is insignificant. The entire east half of the bookstore is now devoted to campus apparel. Other sections feature candy and gum, stuffed animals, trinkets, and soda and snacks. Outside the bookstore doors, one can routinely see long lines of students waiting for the delights of Taco Bell and Burger King. A Library display, not far away, recently featured donations of old comic books. To many, this must seem like being perpetually in the 13th grade.

At U.W.-Parkside, I watched sadly as the admission standards became almost nonexistent and the rigors in the classroom disintegrated. Anti-intellectualism is the Great Enemy of the educator, and with a classroom full of people who do not read, study, or think, academic standards inevitably suffer.¹⁰ The most well-intentioned professor cannot educate those who refuse to be educated. All too often, such students demand that they be passed through the system and awarded a diploma as they were in high school.¹¹

Back to our nineteen students. What colleges and universities did they attend? The billboard doesn't tell us. Did they go where leftist indoctrination is their daily food and drink? Probably. It is difficult to find alternatives these days. When the University of California Academic Assembly recently dropped its requirement for professors to be impartial and dispassionate, it was simply acknowledging the abandonment of efforts to be objective. A San Diego schoolteacher whose son complained about leftist bias in a class he took at the local UC campus, commented:

I'm very concerned about the changes. This gives much greater latitude to those professors who would use the classroom as a per-

Why should there be more degrees if they mean increasingly little?

sonal bully pulpit. UC students and the people of California deserve better.¹²

So do young people and taxpayers all over the country.

Can't students find conservative professors on campus? Very, very rarely. All too often they are excluded from employment when found and shunned when hired. The very people who talk the most about diversity demand leftist conformity. Colorado Republican leader John Andrews said recently, "I do agree with [conservative academic] David Horowitz when he says that the longest-lasting and most brutally effective blacklist in American history has been that which has excluded conservative thought and voices more and more from American campuses since the '60s."¹³

In America and all across the western world, intellectuals are enthralled with the abolition of moral and intellectual standards. In the courts and in the media, as well as the classroom, they are ramming this dogma down the throats of the vast majority. Are our nineteen students better off for being enveloped by the very poison that is slowly killing our civilization? Are we by definition doing them a favor by sending them to college? They may earn more during their lifetimes. But at what cost?

Shortages in skilled labor abound. Why not a billboard boasting that, say, a dozen of the nineteen young people have been sent to tech schools, have learned trades, and are currently in the work force leading productive lives and earning good wages? Is a machinist or a carpenter any less of a respectable American than someone who has spent six years dabbling in say, Mass Communications and Anthropology? In my judgment, we say so at our national peril.

I recently read about an auto mechanic whose high school counselor told him that he was ruining his life by opting for vocational training. The young man is now in great demand in the job market, works extremely hard, and makes over \$100,000 a year. He is a

happy and productive citizen. Did he ruin his life? Not in this old professor's book.

But am I not endorsing the very anti-intellectualism I decry? Not at all. Authentic, rigorous higher education is simply not designed for everybody. By pretending otherwise, we spend millions on counterfeit courses, cheat those who would have benefited from genuine learning, and frustrate legions of young people who drop out and flunk out. Nothing, of course, prevents those who opt for vocational training to investigate the world of books and ideas. Indeed, they may do so without being exposed to the leftist slant that colors much of the current academic experience.

As is often said, democracy depends upon an informed citizenry. But "informed" is not a synonym for half-educated or badly-educated. There is such a thing as self-education, of course, and after decades in the college classroom I've become convinced that it is the hope of the future.

Notes

1. According to a recent Gallup Poll, 69 percent of Americans say that college applicants "should be admitted solely on the basis of merit, even if that results in few minority students being admitted." Hispanics favor merit-only admissions programs by 59 to 36 percent. Blacks are closely divided, with 49 percent in favor of admissions that also consider an applicant's racial and ethnic background and 44 percent opposing it. See: <http://www.gallop.com/poll/releases/pr030624.asp>.
2. June Kronholz, "Flat College-Admission Scores Show Need for More Classwork," *Wall Street Journal*, August 20, 2003.
3. "What to Do about High-Stakes Testing," *Wisconsin Education Update*, August, 2003, p. 1.
4. See Rachel DiCarlo, "Oh, the Humanities!," *The Weekly Standard*, May 19, 2003, p. 21.
5. "What to Do about High-Stakes Testing," p. 1.
6. See Kronholz, *ibid*.
7. According to the latest *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, U.W. Milwaukee accepts 78% of all applicants, while Madison accepts 60%. At Madison, 99 percent of the freshmen come from the upper half of their high school class. At Milwaukee, the figure is 69%, and at Parkside, 59%.
8. Nahal Toosi, "UW, tech schools unveil transfer plan," *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, September 10, 2003.

9. *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (September 10, 2003) account notes that the proposal “makes it easier for tech school students in liberal arts programs and applied programs to transfer credit hours that meet general education requirements at UW schools.” Carpenter stated that state taxpayers wouldn’t have to pay twice for students to take the same course. Are the liberal arts courses at the tech school as vital and demanding as those offered at, say, U.W. Madison? No one is asking.
10. I described my own tribulations with students in an open-admissions environment in “The Classroom Game,” *Academic Questions* 14 (Spring, 2001), 21-30.
11. The habitual truancy rate in the Milwaukee Public School System during the 2000-01 school year, the last year when data were available, was 40 percent. In Racine it was 36.5 percent. Proposals are underway to more effectively prosecute truants. See Jeff Wilford, *Racine Journal Times*, September 10, 2003. Without attendance requirements in my college courses, I would have been forced to fail even more than I did. Coming to class on Fridays, for example, is not considered “cool.” Partying at Madison, the nation’s number two ranked party school, begins on Thursday afternoon.
12. See <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/la-me-freedom31jul31,1,3018079.story>.
13. Top GOP legislators at working on a plan to require Colorado colleges and universities to seek more conservatives in faculty hiring and more freedom of thought in the curriculum and among campus speakers. A survey by the *Rocky Mountain News* found Democrats outnumbering Republicans 6-to-1 in Political Science departments on large public colleges along the State’s Front Range. See Peggy Lowe, “GOP takes on ‘leftist’ education,” *Rocky Mountain News*, September 6, 2003. In Wisconsin, the moderate-to-conservative Wisconsin Association of Scholars started out with 108 members in 1988 and has not grown at all.