Student Apathy and Disengagement in American Higher Education: Growing Problem or Campus Myth?

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Give them food and they will come. Across American university and college campuses, including that of Franklin & Marshall, this seems to be the general attitude of event organizers—offer food as an incentive to increase student attendance or few will show up. Incentives are similarly required for regular class attendance and active participation in discussion. Generally, engaged behaviors have to be reflected in students’ grades. Over and over, I have heard both professors and student leaders blame student apathy for this apparent lack of interest in campus engagement and self-motivated intellectual pursuits. Throughout this paper, I will refer to this idea of apathy and disengagement both in and out of the classroom as student apathy and disengagement, because I see these two locations as related realms of learning and self-growth. I will first seek to define student apathy. Then I will explore the possible causes of its development over time. Finally, I will consider whether the growth of student apathy and disengagement among college students is consequential for human society as a whole.

Despite the wide and frequent application of the word “apathetic” to describe college students, a debate has been developing since the mid-1990s over whether or not student apathy—if it exists at all—is actually growing. For the purposes of this paper, I will define student apathy as the display, to varying degrees, of one or more of many seemingly related attitudes and behaviors. Apathetic or disengaged attitudes are those of indifference, resentfulness, hostility, or a general lacking of enthusiasm towards engagement in and out of the classroom. These attitudes are often visible in student culture and student behaviors, which include, but are not limited to: lack of adequate preparation for class; avoidance of participation in classroom discussions; avoidance of or complaint about rigorous courses and heavy course loads; absenteeism; unwillingness to attend non-mandatory lectures or events; unwillingness to take an active role in student organizations, especially those that involve political or community activism; and, as Paul Trout (1997), a former English professor suggests, general indifference to “anything resembling an intellectual life” (pp. 47-8; Harward, 2008).

Trout (1997) maintains that student disengagement was “one of the better kept secrets of higher education” until 1996, when Newsweek published Georgia Tech physicist Kurt Wiesenfield’s complaints about “encountering more and more students who resent hard academic work and who regard a ‘chance to learn’ as ‘less than worthless’” (p. 47). Since that time, multiple survey-based studies have presented evidence that American university and college students are spending less time studying and are less actively involved in student groups than ever before, possibly indicating a rise in student apathy. “American students,” according to Trout (1997), “put less time and effort into school work than students from any other industrialized country” (p. 47). Hassel and Lourey (2005), an assistant professor of English, and a general education instructor, respectively, found that two-thirds of the students they surveyed in 1997 spent “far less” than the faculty-recommended two to three hours studying for each hour of class, although over three-quarters believed themselves to be above-average students (p. 3). Babcock and Marks (2010), researchers from the University of California, further reinforced the notion that students are slacking off, documenting a decline in full-time students’ academic time investment at American colleges and universities from 1961 to 2003. Their study indicates that this disconcerting trend cut across student and school demographics, including major, gender, race, and school size and type, although the decline in study time appeared less severe for students at liberal arts colleges (O’Brien, 2010; Babcock and Marks, 2010). Many Franklin & Marshall students would probably contest the idea that we study too little. Perhaps advancements
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in technology are in part responsible for the appearance that student apathy is growing if hours spent studying is the main benchmark by which it is measured. These advances may allow today’s students to study and complete homework more efficiently compared to students of earlier decades, rather than the lower time investment being the result of falling course intensity (Babcock and Marks, 2010). Yet, this claim is contested by a New York Times article from this past fall. It suggests that students, while tech savvy, are apathetic about using their skills for school work. Questioned about failing to check her E-mail for assignment updates, one student replied, “E-mail has never really been a fun thing to use. It’s always like, ‘This is something you have to do.’ School is a boring thing. E-mail is a boring thing. It goes together” (Rubin, 2013). Maybe students simply have less time to study because they work longer hours or are involved in more extracurricular activities. These points question the validity of using time investment in studying to quantify student apathy levels. Despite disputes over whether or not a historical decline in study time has actually occurred, O’Brien (2010) points out that surveys carried out since 2000 show that college students are “alarmingly candid that they are simply not studying very much at all.” As these examples show, most evidence is incomplete and anecdotal. Nevertheless, survey results and stories indicate a rise in other apathetic attitudes towards learning and disengaged behaviors among college students.

Scholarly literature and other discourse reveal that students perceive the purpose of education to be a mere exchange of enrollment for passing grades, and ultimately a degree to obtain a job. In this discourse, two general attitudes towards coursework and grading emerge, both suggesting apathy towards learning. The first is an attitude of entitlement. Students expect good grades despite their subpar work quality and disengaged behavior in the classroom. The second attitude flatly rejects the value of classroom and on-campus learning, going as far as to ridicule high-performing and academically engaged students. According to some professors, an increasing number of students expect high grades for simply making an effort to do the required work (Hassel and Lourey, 2005; Potts, 2005). Many of these students believe that class attendance should not be mandatory if they test well. This belief is based on the assumption that anything learned in a class can be tested or otherwise measured (Hassel and Lourey, 2005; Potts, 2005). The equating of good grades to learning and currency metaphors are common in student explanations for why classroom attendance is unnecessary (Hassel and Lourey, 2005; Potts, 2005). Hassel and Lourey (2005) argue that to these students, “classroom education is an exchange of knowledge for a grade, a transaction between them and the professor, not a process that unfolds over the course of a semester or year, not intellectual growth or personal development” (p. 5). The feeling that any work, regardless of quality, deserves positive assessment is one of several attitudes and behaviors that reflect a growing sense of entitlement among students (Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar, 2009; Potts, 2005). These students also act as though they are special. The rules do not apply to them, they make unreasonable requests, and generally exhibit rudeness (Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar, 2009). In addition to subpar student performance, evidence also implies a shift in student views on the value and purpose of college life and learning.

The attitude that academic engagement does not translate into the skills necessary to succeed in life is evident in some discourse. This attitude is exemplified in an article circulating on Facebook at the end of last semester. The title? “Why the Ones Who Have Bad Grades Are Often the Ones Who Are Most Successful.” Notable quotes include: “In college, it’s all about
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grades. In the real world, it’s about experience, balls and drive...Real life is how well you can bullshit* your way through it, and that’s not something taught in a classroom,” and “to all those tight-ass intellectuals out there, it’s time to get the facts straight. For all those years that you spent cooped up in the library, poring over facts and stats, soliloquies and Greek mythology, the average scoring kids—the ones partying and getting C’s in college—are the ones obtaining the skills that do matter: life experiences” (Martin, 2013). The author’s bitter tone notwithstanding, Facebook-using students’ “likes,” comments, and “shares” indicate that many agree with her main points that high grades and the pursuit of academic knowledge (beyond what is essential to scrape by at least) are unnecessary for success in the real world. Arguably, for some students, active engagement in classroom discussions and student organizations does lend equally valuable life experiences without the crutch of social lubricant. The point remains, however, that some students dismiss the value of academic engagement as a way to gain skills for future success.

Despite evidence suggesting apathetic student attitudes toward the purpose of college engagement and learning, it must be noted that the views of some commentators may be colored by their own experiences and that not all—perhaps not even a majority—of students share these attitudes. Wiesenfield, the professor who complained about growing student apathy in 1996, for example, completed his undergraduate degree at MIT, where courses are known for their rigor and the students are notorious “over-achievers.” Additionally, some students still claim to seek an education rather than a degree. To these students, the classroom and campus remain forums for the exchange of ideas. On Franklin & Marshall’s campus most students work hard and many of them still willingly and thoughtfully engage in and out of the classroom. Hassel and Lourey (2005) make a point of saying that the existence of a “significant contingent of students with strong work ethics, intellectual curiosity, and a desire to work hard” cannot be denied, but neither can the general trend towards more apathetic student behavior and the documented shift in student attitudes towards higher education (p. 2).

If, however, student apathy and disengagement are in fact becoming more prevalent, as the evidence put forth by these professors and researchers suggests, what are the possible causes of this trajectory? Several of the scholars engaged in this discussion argue that the rise in student apathy and disengagement is the result of two recently adopted models of education as well as other social and cultural changes. The problem may begin before college due to the widespread adoption of a “success model” in K-12 education. In this model, all students, regardless of ability or effort, in both affluent suburban and poor urban schools, must succeed to protect their self-esteem (Trout, 1997, p. 49). According to Trout (1997), this “strip-mining of the academic landscape” leads teachers to lower their standards and expectations, increasing levels of boredom and fostering academic disengagement among unchallenged students (p. 49). Teachers, he argues [referring to Trout], further chip away at their standards in an attempt to barter for greater respect and student engagement, creating a vicious cycle as students develop a “slacker sensibility” (Trout, 1997, p. 47). Students learn to distract classroom instruction from challenging intellectual exercises to unrelated topics, enabling them to complete less work. Thus, this model discourages academic engagement by “systematically unfit[ing] students for the proper rigors, demands and pleasures associated with higher education” (Trout, 1997, p. 49, italics added). As greater numbers of high school graduates, including those with poor study habits and bad attitudes, pursue higher education, and colleges and universities willingly accept them, the rise in student disengagement infiltrates the college level. Admissions offices have difficulty distinguishing
engaged and disengaged applicants, providing little incentive for high schools to challenge students (Trout, 1997). At the college and university level, researchers implicate the emergence of a similarly problematic “consumer model” of higher education.

In the consumer model, college administration becomes the retailer of degrees and students become the consumers. Scholars, who argue that student disengagement is rising as a result of this model, suggest that it emerged for two central reasons: the growth of American consumer culture and the decline of state and federal funding for higher education. Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar (2009) note that “students [now] grow up in a media-saturated world in which seemingly everything has become commodified” (pp. 198-9). Simultaneously, tuition is rising due to a loss of funding. Colleges and universities—in an attempt to survive in a competitive market place—consequently market to students as “consumers” of an “experience.” The impact of American consumer culture is also evident in the idea that, “consumption has become the source of meaning for individuals—especially youth—in [American] society, and the means through which they create an identity and self-image” (Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar, 2009, p. 198). The value that students attach to college rankings serves as an example of this idea. The name on the degree and the degree itself have taken priority over engaging in the educational process and intellectual development. As a result of this commodification of education, scholars argue that students have developed a “consumer mentality” (Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar, 2009, p. 199; Labaree, 1997; Potts, 2005). They begin to view their college educations like any other economic exchange; they are the customers, their professors are service providers, and their grades and degrees are the deserved product of the exchange.

As a consequence of the consumer model, academic rigor is reduced as administrations cater to the entitlement mindset of students—they expect academic success with minimal effort and want “knowledge served up in ‘easily digestible, bitesized chunks’” (Trout, 1997, p. 50). Trout (1997) maintains that professors, their actions perhaps influenced by the importance of student evaluation forms in promotion and tenure decisions, actually mask the issue of student apathy by redefining “slackers” as students who are “overwhelmed” by college, have “different learning styles,” or are “learning disabled” and relax their requirements and standards accordingly (p. 51). The relaxing of academic standards, especially at elite institutions, is evident in empirical, national-level studies of the number of students earning increasingly higher grades since the 1960s at the same time that average standardized test scores have dropped, an indication that students are actually less prepared for the rigor of higher education (Hassel and Lourey, 2005; Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagennar, 2009). Hassel and Lourey (2005) suggest that student apathy derives from frustration, a symptom of lack of conditioning to high academic standards, rather than “inherent ignorance or low academic standards,” and Trout (1997) agrees (p. 3). He says:

At all levels, educators (and parents) have failed to socialize many young people to understand and experience the personal and social benefits and pleasures of learning. We have not successfully conveyed to them that it is more fulfilling to be skilled than unskilled, to know than not to know, to inquire than to be self-satisfied, to strive than to be apathetic, to create than to be fallow. We have failed to socialize many of them into taking responsibility for their own intellectual development, or even to care about it (p. 52).
Students may feel more comfortable engaging in entitled and apathetic behaviors because current economic conditions mean that attainment of a college education no longer guarantees career success. The value of a college education has been accordingly devalued to the value of the degree itself (Labaree, 1997). All students need is the degree, not the transformative intellectual experiences that college was traditionally believed to provide. These behaviors and attitudes, nevertheless, negatively impact the classroom’s “intellectual climate” for those students who still desire an education (Lippman, Bulanda, and Wagennar, 200). This perspective contributes to the rise of student apathy by altering what students consider to be the purpose of education. In addition to the adoption of the success and consumer models, cultural and social changes have been implicated the rise of student apathy.

The social and cultural forces that may have negatively impacted student motivation and engagement include, but are not limited to: changes in family life, generational shifts, and technological advances. Family structure and parenting methods changed during the periods studied, two factors that may be at play in the apparent growth of student apathy (Rosen, 2005; Trout, 1997). Trout (1997) also points to “peer pressure to regard education derisively, youth-culture activities that militate against serious and sustained intellectual engagement, and an ambient popular culture that glorifies dumbness and ridicules intelligence, and a widespread delegitimization of reading and the book”—a few themes evident in the “Bad Grades” article (p. 49). Some academics, arguing that a significant generational shift began with Americans born in the late 1970s, point to possible generational effects (Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagennar, 2009; Stein, 2013; Twenge and Campbell, 2010). According to Stein (2013) in his New York Times article about the millennial generation’s narcissism, parents began attempting to instill self-esteem in their children in the 1970s. Narcissism and entitlement, a cause of apathy, are the unintended consequences, although Stein (2013) argues narcissistic attitudes are not unique to the millennial generation. This notably conflicts with the evidence that time investment in studying began declining in the 1960s if entitled attitudes are a cause of apathy. In line with the success model of education, however, students of the 1970s generation and later have “grown up in a culture obsessed with self-esteem, and have been told constantly by their parents, teachers, and the media that they are ‘special’ and can achieve anything that they desire” (Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagemannar, 2009). The influence of this self-esteem obsession may be related to the entitlement-related behaviors I mentioned earlier.

Additionally scholars frequently associate technological improvements with the rise in student apathy and disengagement. Students’ ability to type any subject into a search engine and have a wealth of information at their fingertips may have also altered student perceptions of both the role of higher education and professors. Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagemannar (2009) note that students’ “familiarity with and reliance on new technologies shape the nature of their social relationships, study habits, and norms of interpersonal communication and decorum” and “heighten [their] sense of immediacy” (p. 198). In addition to computers and phones adding new distractions to classrooms, media access may also influence student attitudes and behaviors. Hassel and Lourey (2005) cite that “media…have gained as much authority as universities and that they ‘compete with the rationality and disciplinary standards upon which much of higher education is based. The collapse of boundaries between the inside and outside of the academy delegitimates the belief in professors as experts, particularly as ultimate authorities on the subjects they teach’” (p. 4). If respect for professors has declined, a rise in rude behaviors is
understandable. Students may also have a heightened sense of their own authority because of their ability to engage with ideas on personal blogs, Facebook, and other social media sites (Twenge and Campbell, 2010). Alternatively, greater access to information, such as knowledge of global-scale social and environmental issues, may also contribute to student apathy towards active engagement in campus organizations, especially activist ones, by inducing a sense of hopelessness and helplessness in students. Although the adoption of new education models and various well-documented social and cultural changes appear to have influenced a rise in apathetic attitudes and disengaged behavior, I will pause here to reiterate that many students remain engaged in and out of the classroom. Academics, student leaders, and others discussing the problem of student apathy and disengagement express concern about the negative impact that this potentially growing problem is having on campus communities and society.

Generally, those who worry about the rise of student apathy and disengagement on college and university campuses share the view that apathetic and disengaged students fail to develop into intellectually and civically engaged individuals. They believe that this failure is negatively impacting the health of American society. The belief that the purpose of higher education is to develop an engaged and effective citizenry lies at the center of worries over growing student apathy and disengagement. Creating such a citizenry, one that actively seeks knowledge and truth, is a core value of the traditional liberal arts education. Harward (2008) illustrates this common belief clearly, stating that disengagement reveals “higher education’s failure to attend to the most fundamental of our responsibilities: the development of the whole person...all college students should reach deepened levels of learning and understanding, as well as develop a strong sense of self-direction, and self-realization or well-being, and a greater sense of civic identity and responsibility.” Although most institutions still remain officially convicted to students’ personal and civic development, he suggests “disintegration of the purpose and core outcomes of college” as the source of disengaged attitudes and behaviors (Harward, 2008). Many scholars share these views, but Hassel and Lourey (2005) admit that “higher education as we know it has become more skills-based as our graduates justifiably demand that their degree make them employable” (p. 3). In our rapidly changing world, does “slacker sensibility” translate more easily to the workplace than the values and skills a college education was traditionally intended to instill? Students need jobs, and despite their apathy and disengagement, they still apparently learn valuable social skills. That said, should we care if many students, including intelligent Franklin & Marshall students, lack the eagerness to learn for the mere sake of their own intellectual and civic development?

The other problem with growing numbers of apathetic and disengaged students is the effect of their attitudes and behaviors on the experiences of engaged students. Some students realize that the critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication abilities developed in college make them more employable as society requires citizens with greater skills in those areas. These students recognize that development of these skills requires active engagement in campus discourse. Nevertheless, other student attitudes towards attendance in class, lectures, and other events suggest a lack of understanding about the value and purpose of higher education. Absent, unprepared, and distracted students fail to engage in discussions in and out of the classroom. This negatively impacts the learning experience of engaged students by reducing the frequency, quality, and value of discussion. William Cronon asserts that “liberally educated individuals ‘nurture and empower the people around them’” and that “they ‘understand that they
belong to a community whose prosperity and well-being are crucial to their own, and they help that community flourish by making the success of others possible” (Cronon, 1998, in Hassel and Lourey, 2005, p. 5). Overwhelmingly, scholars argue that a learning community requires student presence, physically as well as mentally, and that this community is necessary to develop engaged, effective citizens. Is our system of higher education and the prevailing student attitudes and behaviors within it truly failing American society or is the problem of rising student apathy and disengagement simply a myth?

As much as I hear professors, staff, and students around campus refer to the student body as “apathetic,” few of us, if any, have probably given deep thought to what that really means or why we care. How much we care evidently depends on what we perceive to be the role of higher education in society. As someone who believes in the traditional liberal arts definition of the purpose of higher education, I still believe that student apathy exists. Whether or not it is growing is clearly a bigger and more difficult question to answer. Regardless, the question that we really have to ask ourselves is why does student apathy matter, growing or not? To begin to answer that question, it is critical that we consider what we believe to be the purpose and value of a college education.
Works Cited


