
Regional

College students deserve good role models

In past columns I have discussed the issue of the deteriorating academic preparation of high school seniors, exemplified but continuous decline in the ACT and SAT scores over the past 10 years.

These tests are designed to measure the preparedness of high school students for college. But I am afraid that this trend is only the tip of the iceberg of how badly prepared many students are for college.

In order to succeed in college, students need a suitable attitude for it, including everything from good study habits to civil behavior in the classroom. Unfortunately, we are also witnessing a decline in these aptitudes. Faculties – including younger instructors – are complaining more and more that instead of being in the classroom to prepare the minds of their students, they have to spend more time and energy acting as behavioral police.

It is becoming commonplace to hear students asking their teachers after lectures whether they “need to know that,” as if the course material could be divided between “necessary” or “useless.”

That same message happens when a student who misses a class emails the professor to ask whether if he or she “missed anything important.”

Some students buy used textbooks that have already been highlighted so they don’t have to read and comprehend it. They simply look at what a past student considered the most critical passages. Sometimes they go as far as asking the professor to actually highlight for them on the textbook what they need to study. It is hard to imagine such

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mental laziness.

Then there is the attitude in the classroom, from being constantly late, to missing many classes without a good excuse, to falling asleep during the lecture, to spending their time looking into their electronic devices to check on their friends’ messages in social media. Some also play games. Some have even been caught watching pornography. Many don’t read the syllabus and ignore instructions given to them.

A number of studies have shown that cases of cheating keep increasing, not to mention straight-out lies. I have as a policy that any student missing a test needs to document the reason (e.g., illness, major family tragedy) to get a make-up test.

Once, a student who had missed his exam approached me and said that he had a good “reason” why he could not take the exam when originally scheduled. He told me that he could not take it because he had been “abducted by space aliens.” Death of grandmothers (rarely grandfathers) is a typical excuse, although this one has become less and less believable.

Once I heard of a student who used that excuse twice for the same grandmother. When confronted with the fact she said “but this time it’s for real.” Another student, when caught with an exam that was identical (including misspellings) to the one

of the student sitting in front of her, said that she did not mean it but that what had actually occurred was she had an “out-of-body experience.”

Although not all students exhibit this behavior, the increasing number of incidents like these should not be ignored. They are signaling a change in attitudes and values among the younger generations of citizens. But from where are these behaviors coming?

One could point fingers at high schools. In order to keep the funding they need, they have to show that students do better and better in standardized tests. This, in turn, leads teachers to become test preparers instead of role models of discipline and ethical behavior. But I think that the problem is deeper than that.

We are currently witnessing in society an increased permissiveness toward vulgarity and mediocrity at all levels, from the behavior of entertainment celebrities to political leaders who do not seem ashamed of discussing the size of their genitalia in a nationally televised presidential debate.

Although greater access to higher education is a noble goal, we need to start asking ourselves whether all those students with a high school diploma are both academically and culturally prepared for college.

But the solution to that question is not an easy one due to a number of factors that are creating pressure on higher education. One is the fact that given the decreasing financial support for state institutions, they are resorting to increasing the

number of students enrolled not only to expand their cash flow but also to justify their relevance in society. The problem is that not only are they admitting students who are most likely to fail, but also who will never graduate and will carry large student debt for years without a diploma to justify such an expense. As a result, some state agencies and politicians are starting to emphasize retention and graduation rates, which means increasing expenditures in support services aimed at mending the deficiencies of our high schools. In many cases these efforts are to no avail.

Worse even, there is an increasing pressure – directly and indirectly – on professors to “go easy” on issues of academic rigor and ethical standards of behavior in the classroom.

That pressure is particularly hard on junior professors who have yet to obtain tenure and who want to make sure that they look good in student evaluations.

What better way to do that than to give good grades to students even if they do not deserve them? After all, many students when coming to college feel shocked that they cannot earn straight “A’s” as they did in high schools, no matter how they perform.

I am afraid that unless we all start to provide better examples in our conduct this problem will not be solved.

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