A Student's Perspective

Amanda Mitchell

Grand Valley State University

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A Student's Perspective

Three years ago I began the new phase in my life as a university student with a mixture of apprehension and excitement. Perhaps rather naively, I saw college as a sort of intellectual utopia, with students and professors running relays together through scholastic challenges. As anyone affiliated with a university could guess, I was quickly disappointed. What met me in my freshman year was not an academic racetrack, but what seemed to be a long forgotten country road, disregarded and overgrown.

There are many reasons for the discrepancy I found between my expectations of college and its reality; some of them lie within the parameters of an idealistic youth's active imagination, but for the most part they lie in the changing dynamics of the undergraduate experience. Enrollment in post-secondary institutions has been consistently on the rise over the last few decades, and although this suggests an increased social value placed on higher education, it may actually indicate the opposite. Students and parents alike seem to view college as a necessary step to procuring a well-paying, stable job. Thus, it becomes not an academic pursuit, but a mere extension of the educational requirements, and, at most, a means to an end.

Very few students today view academia as a way of life, but instead see it as a temporary occupation, and like any other occupation, there is a quitting time. Anybody would be hard pressed to find a community of scholars forming anywhere on Grand Valley's campus, for no matter how hard organizations like the Honors College try, intellectual endeavors outside of the classroom are looked down on. It is expected in the social sphere to roll one's eyes at the mention of class work and to let out a sigh of relief at any chance to get out of class. At parties, for the most part, there are no scholarly discussions raging over the freshly tapped keg. No, school is a job, and work is not brought out on the weekends.

This view, although relatively new, threatens to undermine the fundamental principles of a university education. No longer are students actively seeking knowledge, but are passively waiting out credentials, giving the atmosphere around them an intellectually

Amanda Mitchell is a senior Honors student majoring in English and Creative Writing.
stagnant feel. Many by their junior or senior years have hopefully been kick-started into activity by the barrage of ideas thrown at them daily, but by that time it is potentially too late to add anything significant to the university environment.

Instead of contributing, then, to intellectual pursuits, students’ efforts are expended contributing to their social ascent. The very style and quality of life for students is on the rise. The poor college student, although avouched everywhere, is a rare find. Many students do have to hold jobs to put themselves through school; however, as one on enough scholarships to supposedly make working unnecessary, I have found that almost all of the students I encounter that have jobs, myself included, should not need them. This seems to speak more to the value system of current students more than their economic status. Looking around on campus, luxuries are everywhere. From cell phones to cars, to designer clothing, to video game consoles, students on this campus live lives immensely different from any traditional college student of the past. Students today come to class tailored with the hottest fashion trends. They must have cars to leave campus. They must have money to go out with friends—to go to restaurants, bars, and movies. No cheap flicks. No discount stores. No Goodwill. The typical student refuses to be denied the commodities of success, whether deserved or not.

Besides the obvious interference with studying, this lifestyle breeds a mental framework that only the children of the commercial age could accept so willingly: the commoditization of learning. When buying and selling become fundamental elements of daily life, some goods are expected with every exchange of money. Schools don’t work like that, however, and tuition has never been the price of a degree. Yet, students seem more and more to see it as exactly that, and feel owed not just the final degree, but an unchallenged path to it. At this point, they inevitably come into conflict with professors whose very job is to challenge their students—to make them worthy of being conferred a degree. No, we are not buying a degree, but are financing our own pursuit of knowledge. Students of today must realize this in order to truly be able to say that they have gotten their money’s worth.

For many of the professors who must deal firsthand with these commercial expectations, a growing listless indifference can be seen taking root. Although there are still those diehard instructors constantly demanding the best of their students, these are not the majority. The general feel of this campus is that a student can make it by with an “A” or a “B” in any discipline with little to no effort expended. Unfortunately, this means that many students are being given their unchallenged path. It’s easy to see the reasons for the apathy that these students can inspire in those wishing to offer them what they are supposed to want, but with such a response, the atmosphere of the university will not change, and the students will not be the only ones to blame for that.

The professors that stand out as the best of the profession are those that inspire their students to challenge themselves. This seems to be the deterrent to apathy for some faculty members: inspiring a few to the true pursuit. This, however, is not enough. These challenges need to be brought into the classroom; the more that students are frustrated and the more that they are forced to truly earn their grade, the more they will be able to extract from their education. Universities can not devolve into nothing more than trade schools. They must be able to produce individuals that truly see the potential for knowledge in everything around them. They must question, and be questioned. They must be made to think, and to make others think. We must all be able to say to ourselves and to each other: it’s not enough, and demand the very best.
Coming to the end of my stint as an undergraduate, I feel confident that I, along with those like me, have gotten as much as possible out of our education at Grand Valley. I continually sought out the challenges for myself, and brought them to professors to help me work through them, all the while welcoming the challenges that they brought to me. I have gone out of my way to attempt to take my work that one step further than was necessary for a simple “A,” even though I know that someone doing much less work very often received the same grade as I did. I pride myself on the fact that this does not deter me, that although I value the recognition of achievement that an “A” can stand for, I know I have instigated my own academic and personal growth through my endeavors. Despite this, however, I also know that I did very little to affect my classroom environments. I sat through the groups that did as little work as possible, and sat through the classes that demanded no more than attendance. I did not demand the best from anyone else, just on the off chance that if I didn’t want to go that extra step, I wouldn’t have to.

As someone who has spent her life taking on the next challenge, the excitement and satisfaction that I have found through education are things that I know multiply themselves when in the midst of fellow scholars. If this experience can be extended to the university at large, if the majority of students can once again find a genuine love of learning, then a new life could be infused into the academic community, and there is no telling how much farther we could go. Such a feat, however, is one that must be accomplished by students and professors alike. Together, we must fight through the stagnation, and begin to pave the road of academia with careful attention in order to speed the path of those to follow.