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# ON HIGHER EDUCATION: A SWAN SONG

*Roberta Simone*

I grew up in Cicero, an industrial town on the west side of Chicago, a town of immigrants who had been drawn from Eastern and Southern Europe to work in its steel mills. Many of their children, when grown, worked in the same factories, but some took advantage of the excellent clerical and technical programs provided by the high school to become secretaries, auto mechanics, printers, and so on. A few decided to go to college. College was possible for me because some high-minded citizens had, in the twenties, instituted a junior college in a wing of the third and fourth floors of the high school. Tuition for all local citizens was free, so, by living at home, working at outside jobs only summers and holidays (rather than part-time during the school year), and, with some scrimping, almost any high school graduate could attend. But not every student was successful there. Morton Junior College had high standards, modeled after those of the University of Illinois, to which it hoped to send its graduates with an Associate in Arts degree.

Although I was starting my fifth year in that building, on the very first day of my entry, I felt different, suddenly like a grown-up. I was called Miss Simone for the first time in my life; I had a Dean of Women, not a Dean of Girls; I was not confined to the building unless I had a nurse's pass. Equally significant, college was much more challenging than high school had been—so much to learn, so much assigned each day, such difficult material, so many requirements: e.g., science, rhetoric, history, fine arts. At first, I thought that I wasn't up to it, that I should go back to my summer office job at the Sears headquarters in Chicago. I stayed, because, despite feeling overwhelmed, I was also overjoyed. I considered it a great privilege to be able to go to college, and I found that the worlds that were being opened to me were worth what seemed to be hardships. I was not lured to college by the prospect of making more money; in fact, many of my peers thought I was foolish for giving up four years of earnings, when all kinds of jobs were plentiful in that post-war boom year, 1952. Of course, as a working class kid, I also had to think about earning a living, but I was willing to sacrifice money to have more than just a job, to have a profession that I enjoyed—I didn't know yet what it would be.

Our teachers had master's degrees in their fields, and most of them also had to teach some high school classes, because our college was quite small; but I suspect that I was in as much awe of them as any Harvard students were of their professors—because they were college teachers. They knew so much; they were giving me a chance to be an educated person. Though I respected all of my teachers, one of them stands out the most, as I write this. Miss Grace Walker was Head of the English Department as well as Dean of Women. She looked like George Washington: from her white hair and eagle nose, blue jacket and floppy colored scarf, right down (with the substitution of skirt for pantaloons) to velvety pumps with

silver clips. She was equally august. So imagine our delight when she read to us—at faculty/student occasions, like mother/daughter banquets and honors awards ceremonies—chapters from her humorous book about growing up in a small town in Michigan. She was a great story teller and, in her survey of English literature classes, drew parallels from Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats, and Browning to her own life, thereby suggesting that we could do the same someday, that nothing was quite so relevant and sustaining as great literature was. She was passionate about literature and about teaching, although she had been teaching at Morton for probably forty years, at the college for thirty. She was sixty-five and would have to take mandatory retirement at the end of the year.

What I marvel about her now is that she could continue to have such enthusiasm into her mid-sixties. Not very long ago, I felt so privileged to be a college professor and so enjoyed the profession that I thought I would stay indefinitely—mandatory retirement at sixty-five is no longer the law. Instead I am taking early retirement. I have lost my enthusiasm. Others who have been at Grand Valley for twenty-five years or so also seem to have lost it. They tell me about counting the years or months until retirement or the weeks or days until summer break. Are we "burned out" from having been here too long? Maybe, but I hear the same things from some faculty members in their forties and even thirties. I hear it not only from people in the humanities, but also from some in science and technology and even in the professional schools. I hear it not only from Grand Valley professors. Last summer in Seattle, I met a man who had given up a tenured position in Computer Science at the University of Michigan to take a job at Microsoft. Not for the increased salary, he said, but because he was tired of dealing with students who would not do the assignments and then argued about their grades. He was in his late thirties.

Most of us complain about our students: that they are not interested in learning, but only in getting certified for some job; that they put little effort into their work and then argue about grades; that they sleep in class or are absent too often; that they choose a class only on the basis of when it is offered; that the only question they ask in class is, "Will this be on the exam?" After class, they say, "I don't know what you want," which could be translated into, "tell me what to think; tell me what to say." Sometimes I have felt more like a jailer than a teacher: eyes on the clock, bookbags bundled up, bodies are poised on the edges of chairs as if prepared for a footrace. One could go on and on. Of course, we always end up by pointing out that these characteristics are not true of all of our students. And indeed that is so. Grand Valley has good students, very good students, some excellent students. And there have always been students such as we complain about. But today there are more of them than ever, a depressing number of them. This, despite what we hear from our administrators: that our freshman classes are better than ever, with higher grade point averages and SAT scores. Our administrators are proud of and trust in the numbers; but, of course, they do not have to look at glazed-over eyes in the classroom or read shallow and carelessly written papers.

How do we account for the disparity between higher numbers and lower quality? High school grade inflation is an obvious answer; attitude is another. Some say that many of these students are from the working class, the first in their families to go to college, and that, therefore, they don't know how to "be" in college. But I and many of my friends and colleagues were in that position once, and we quickly adjusted. More significant, I think, is that, for us, going to college was a privilege; now it seems to be an obligation. Many of the students in my current general education class state baldly that they are in college only because, without a college degree (and some even include a master's degree), they won't be able to get a good paying job; they would have to flip burgers at Mac Donald's for the rest of their lives—the only alternative they see. Students are customers who have been "sold" on the advantages of college. It's an investment: pay now, reap great financial rewards later. They have been bombarded with "ads," touting not the personal or social advantages of college, but the financial ones. Different colleges have competed for their business on pop music stations. A college degree has become a commodity to buy. Students pay their tuition and expect a degree, not an education; a certificate for a job, not an opportunity to learn. They "buy" credits and expect a good grade. Any class they have to "buy" that is not directly relevant to the job they plan to have is considered a waste of money and of time. These students will be very angry when they find that they were deceived by the advertisements, because a college degree will not buy them the job they want. A few teachers may tell them so, but they don't seem to hear that as well as they do the commercials.

If not outright angry, many students are resentful. Working twenty or more hours a week at outside jobs, they have little energy to go along with the lack of desire to learn. Given a choice of missing class or missing work, they pick the former: they need the money now. They do not want to read; they do not want to write; they do not want to discuss issues. They would be happy to be told what is going to be on exams and to memorize that. They see teachers not as mentors to respect but objects to manipulate, assignments as hurdles to get around, not over. Plagiarism, for example, is their right to get through a system that they don't like and feel they have been forced into: the student newspaper has even assisted them by advertising all kinds of papers that they can buy, and now getting one is even easier through the Internet. College is not a new and exciting world for them, as it was for me. Maybe it isn't even challenging: some of my students have told me that the first two years of college are just an extension of high school, a waste of time. They want to get on to their training for a job. I affirm the value of general education, but a soaked paper towel does not absorb more water. Perhaps if these students could wring out their present desires in a technical school, they would be receptive to general learning later on.

Universities contribute to this unhappy system by continuing to want to grow instead of urging the growth of two-year technical programs, which many of these discontented students, as well as society as a whole, would find more useful. I am a firm believer in equal opportunity to study in a college—as well as a grateful recipient of that opportunity—but I have seen the value of a college degree diminish because

it does not guarantee that one who holds it is either educated or competent in a field—or, indeed, even literate. A student who is educated and competent has the same degree as one who is not.

Universities also contribute to this unhappy system by reducing their standards and inflating their grades. Who knows what an A means anymore? Some teachers grade on a quantitative basis: e.g., if you do these five things, you'll get an A; if you do only four of them, you'll get a B, etc.,—without regard for quality. Some give A's for improvement and as encouragement. Some don't believe in grading at all, so give all A's unless a student has been absent a lot—in which case he gets a B. Nobody seems to regard the C as average anymore. "Why did I get such a terrible grade?" I hear from a student who's gotten a C+ on a paper. Individual professors, even small groups of them, find it difficult to maintain standards when one's A is not the same as another's; and students surmise that, if they don't get an A, something is wrong with the teacher or they are not personally liked. Who can blame them in such a confusing system? And who can blame an employer for distrusting a high grade-point average?

The way in which faculty members are evaluated by their students also contributes to grade inflation and the lowering of standards. If most (sometimes more than most) of the students are not pleased, as may be indicated on a sheet of numbers, teachers will not get contract renewal or tenure—or, at least, they fear that they will not. What does one do to please both students who are genuinely interested in learning and those who resist learning and care only about little effort and a good grade? In the quantitative evaluation system, one vote counts as much as another. It may take more time to read sentence statements than to scan a list of numbers, but, "If I would of been for wemon lib, I proberly would of got a A," (verbatim from the past) tells much more than does a check in the "very dissatisfied" box about whether or not a teacher grades fairly. Of course, if one gives many high grades, there will be fewer complaints. And in any well run business, the customers must be satisfied.

Really good students will inevitably learn on their own, whether their teachers appeal to them or not, but students who would rather not be in class need to be entertained, pampered, put up with, while good students wait for something of substance. The extra explaining, the watered-down reading and writing assignments, the need to tell them why learning is important—these activities work against challenging students who already know that learning is important. In small discussion groups—the current fad in "delivering education"—the students who have prepared their assignment end up telling the other students what it was all about. Opinions based purely on experience (and often lack of it) apparently count for as much as opinions based on facts or on what one was supposed to have read. Good students get shortchanged in this system, and teachers get tired and frustrated.

In the past one was at least able to get intellectual and emotional sustenance from one's colleagues. Not so long ago we had a real community in the English Department. We ate lunch together, gathered to hear someone talk about a scholarly project or to talk together about one of Shakespeare's plays, even played softball against our students. There's a very different atmosphere now. People are too busy,

they say, largely with committee and paper work. But I cannot remember a time when there was not committee and paper work. I think that there are two new villains. One is the competitive job market, because of an oversupply of Ph.D.'s, degrees which have also diminished in value: note the increasing demand for post-doc experience and research before one can get a teaching position. The other villain is the increased emphasis on narrow specialization.

Not just research but hard evidence of research in the form of publications and conference papers—and a considerable amount of it—is necessary not only to get a teaching position but to keep it. These activities isolate one from one's immediate colleagues. One talks to and writes for "colleagues" scattered across the country, for those are the ones who share the interest or even know much about the topic. The state provides funds for faculty members to travel around the country and even across the ocean to deliver papers, but campus colleagues don't get to hear those papers; perhaps they wouldn't cross campus to hear them anyway if they weren't in their field of interest. I wonder how many of our faculty now eat lunch in their offices while communicating with electronic colleagues through the Internet rather than across a table with their immediate colleagues.

Granted there are many more things to learn today than there were thirty years ago, and in literature there are more writers to read, including those who used to be discounted—like women, ethnic minorities, and post-colonials. But what has happened to interest in literature in general? Only five members of the English Department came last year to a Grand Valley sponsored lecture by a world famous Shakespeare scholar and critic, only six to hear a contemporary poet; and the English Department Lecture Series was abandoned because of poor attendance. Or to interest in the arts and humanities in general? The Arts and Humanities Lecture Series was also abandoned. Or to interest in knowledge in general? Communicating to campus colleagues via the *Grand Valley Review* or in all-campus lectures is considered "not to count" as evidence of professional achievement, because "specialists" have not "refereed" it. And as we evaluate our new department colleagues year after year (an exercise something like a gladiatorial contest, where a candidate waits in the wings for his turn to salute Caesar), we rely on those referees for our judgments of professional achievement, because we don't care or dare to read what our colleagues have written and have not been able to hear what they've delivered orally.

Some of my students complain about general education requirements: "Why do I have to take geology when I want to be an English Teacher?" "What good to me is reading Shakespeare when I'm majoring in Criminal Justice?" I give the standard answers, but, all the while, hypocrisy is looming over my head.

Maybe all of this is sounding like nostalgia for a golden age that never was. Well, there may not have been a golden age, but there was another time and a different system. I think of Miss Walker's joy in her profession into her sixty-fifth year, and I think of our own Harry Jellema, a distinguished professor at Calvin College, who, at age sixty-five in 1963, came to Grand Valley, not only to help institute a state college

for local citizens, but to teach philosophy to freshmen. And I think of current professors who want to retire early.

Of course, for many, the profession continues to be attractive, and multitudes of new candidates are waiting to compete for vacated positions. I wish them well, as I do the current faculty. Though this essay may seem like a jeremiad, I do believe that higher education is a noble profession. But I think that, before I leave, it is my amitalar duty (I hereby introduce a feminine equivalent of "avuncular," sorely needed in our more equal society) to express opinions that many of us are thinking and talking about. If in print, they may, at least, be out in the open, a matter for serious discussion and perhaps remedy. On the other hand, maybe the profession ought not to be made more attractive, or older folks might not be so willing to step aside for the "hungry generations" treading on their heels.