

## PERSPECTIVES

# College Students Today...

*Jennifer L. Bloom*

College students today are regularly accused of being under-prepared and under-motivated, yet they are also under intense pressure to pick a major, graduate in four years, and be prepared to work in fields that do not yet exist. They are under scrutiny from presidential candidates, legislators, the media, and the public at large. *Forbes* columnist George Leef (2013) postulated that college students from 50 years ago were more successful than today's students because they were self-directed and motivated. He placed the blame on, "Old admission and academic standards have given way to a 'college is for everyone' mentality: government subsidizes almost anyone who wants to give college a try, and almost everyone does because of the constantly broadcast idea that getting a degree is a 'great investment.'" Has the golden age of college students passed? Are today's college students less motivated and self-directed than those from 50 years ago?

Soon after reading Leef's (2013) article, I accidentally stumbled upon a second article written by another author who reflected on time he had recently spent on over a dozen college campuses and echoed similar concerns about college students. This second author complained that, "The distance between the interested and the disinterested, between the intellectually curious and the routine, between the concerned and the detached, has seldom been greater." He lamented that student learning appeared to be on the decline, at least amongst a certain disinterested subgroup of students. In addition, this second author commented, "There seems substantial agreement among faculty members that most of the students today take a mechanistic view of college. The purpose seems to be to get out of school as uneventfully and expeditiously as possible, rather than to get out of it the most that is possible."

Further, the second author posited, "Not that the quality of the work itself is necessarily poorer than it used to be. It is just that good grades are considered in a purely utilitarian context; they can lead to graduation and good jobs... Serious discussions tend toward the starkly practical: how can a student line himself up for the highest possible salary and the job with the best prospects?" A narrow focus on securing a high-paying job wasn't the only concern he had about college students. "Even social life on the campus seems on the decline. Present-day high school seems to anticipate so much of the old extracurricular excitement of college students that the students seem spent by the time they arrive... Even in the business of drinking, students come to college well initiated. Here, however, there seems to be no perceptible diminution of enthusiasm for increasing one's personal

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capacity during college years.” According to the second author, faculty members are so discouraged by the situation that they are considering leaving academia: “The picture as a whole seems sufficiently discouraging to some faculty members to cause them to think seriously about leaving education altogether. The fun and sense of intellectual adventure in working with young minds have lost much of their sparkle.”

Surely this worrisome set of circumstances on today’s college campuses stands in sharp contrast to college campuses 50+ years ago that were filled with students eager to learn. The early 1960s represents a simpler time, a better college experience, a better college student, right? Interestingly, the two articles quoted above were actually penned 53 years apart – the first article was written in 2013 and the second article was penned by Norman Cousins in 1960 under the title, “A Stroll on the American Campus” in the *Saturday Review*. The bottom line is that concerns about college students have been around since the founding of Harvard. Generation after generation is concerned about “the young people of today.” When I was in college my fellow Generation X college classmates and I overheard faculty and administrators comment on how lazy we were, and I still hear similar concerns about the Millennials and Gen Z students whispered in the hallways of higher education today. Is it not time to move beyond these generational stereotypes and recast our mindset from one that views students as problems to an appreciative mindset that embraces their amazing potential to succeed? Might it be more important to focus less on students’ deficits and more on what we can do to improve our approach to orienting, teaching, advising, leading, and mentoring them?

Appreciative Advising (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008), a theory-to-practice framework for guiding academic advising and other interactions with students, is one such approach that seeks to optimize every interaction we have with students. Three articles were published in the *Journal of College Orientation & Transition* in 2011 that highlighted how the Appreciative Advising theory-to-practice framework could be adapted to improve New Student Orientation training for orientation leaders (Buyarski, Bloom, Murray, & Hutson, 2011; Hutson & He, 2011; Propst Cuevas et al., 2011), programming for parents, and the identifying of students’ strengths through use of the Appreciative Advising Inventory. A key piece to the framework is the appreciative mindset that beckons us to look for the best in each student instead of the worst (Bloom, Hutson, & He, 2008). The six phases of Appreciative Advising (disarm, discover, dream, design, deliver, and don’t settle) are focused on giving faculty and staff a framework for building strong relationships with students in order to empower them to achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials.

Let us not forget the Pygmalion Effect that reminds us about the power of our preconceived notions about students – if we are looking for and expecting the worst in our students, we will undoubtedly find it. I vote for adopting an appreciative mindset focused on looking for and expecting the best in our students. We certainly need for our students to be at their best to help solve the complex problems and challenges facing our world today. To quote Billy Joel’s *Keeping the*

*Faith* lyrics: "The good old days weren't always good, and tomorrow isn't as bad as it seems..."

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