

Ugly Consequences of Complaining about ‘Students These Days’

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I recently overheard a faculty member talking about students, and it wasn’t good. She sounded very much like a conference presenter whom Melanie Cooper describes in a *Journal of Chemical Education* editorial. The presenter’s talk had a strong “students these days” undercurrent.

Sometimes we do need to vent. It isn’t easy teaching students who don’t come to class prepared, seem to always want the easiest way, are prepared to cheat if necessary, don’t have good study skills, and aren’t interested in learning what we love to teach. Venting, especially to a trusted colleague, helps us put things in perspective. At some point, though, venting morphs into complaining, and what we say about students becomes what we think about them. And that’s when it starts getting dangerous, because it affects how we teach.

The faculty member I heard and the one Cooper writes about have devised a tough set of responses to poorly prepared, unmotivated, self-focused students: a tight control of and commitment to the content; assignments developed on the assumption that students will cheat if they have the chance; no opportunities for student-to-student collaboration; and a plethora of preventative policies. Cooper writes, “It is sad that the negative effects of such a regimented, implicitly hostile, and condescending curricular design on learning are ignored” (p. 423). She continues, “It is true that all students are not paragons of virtue; some students do very little work, and some do cheat, but to design instructional environments based on these outliers cannot be productive” (p. 423).

“Students didn’t used to be like this,” the faculty member I heard announced. Such statements make me think of my time in college. It was the 60s, and if there was a chance to protest the war, I considered that a much more important way to spend my time than attending class. Read my biology textbook? No way, I was talking Descartes with fellow protesters and couldn’t go to that meeting unprepared. That paper for sociology? My roommate, who’d gotten it from someone else, offered me hers. I took it and repurposed most of it. I’m sure those faculty who bemoan



the decline in student quality were virtuous college students, but not all of us were.

Cooper makes the case that students haven't changed as much as many faculty contend. Although U.S. students don't score particularly well in international comparisons of educational outcomes, Cooper maintains they've never compared well. She cites evidence that IQ and test scores are rising (slightly) for most student populations. And at selective institutions, students are better prepared than they were 20 years ago.

Data like these don't change the fact that those of us teaching at less selective institutions are dealing with a wider range of students than ever before, and many of those students aren't well prepared to handle college work. Here the complainers wax eloquent about who and what is to blame. It's a long list that almost never includes anything that happens in the complainers' courses. Cooper says "blame for failure needs to be allotted all the way around the educational system" (p. 423). Our conversations should be about the kinds of learning environments these students need to learn, grow, and succeed professionally. "We must teach the students we have, not the students we want (or the students we imagine we were back in the mists of time)," says Cooper (p. 424).

Faculty who complain endlessly about students don't read blogs like this, but I worry about how being around teachers who negatively view students affects those of us who care about them and are committed to their success. Too much negative talk about students becomes like secondhand smoke—hard not to inhale and dangerously unhealthy. We must move to spaces where the air is cleaner.

But I also think we have a responsibility to speak up for students. They don't all belong in what sounds like another basket of deplorables. And even those students without skills, knowledge, or motivation are still people—people for whom a committed teacher can make a world of difference. I was a work in progress when I attended college. I didn't show much promise. I'm forever grateful to those teachers who taught as if I did.

Reference: Cooper, M. L. (2012). Cherry picking: Why we must not let negativity dominance affect our interactions with students. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 89, 423–424.

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