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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: Pushing Back Against Consumer-Driven Higher Education
Date: Thursday, February 13, 2020 11:25:22 AM

Pushing Back Against Consumer-Driven Higher Education

by Peter J. Eubanks

In my previous [Teaching Toolbox](#), I argued that a consumer-driven dynamic in American higher education today is doing damage to our students' ability to learn and to have transformative educational experiences. As it would be overly misanthropic of me simply to illustrate a problem without proposing any solutions, I would like to devote today's Toolbox to exploring ways in which we might push back against the consumerism that seems to pervade so many aspects of college life. I propose five areas to contemplate:

1. Consider that student-centered learning—or “learner-centered teaching,” as it is referred to in [more recent work](#)—does not mean consumer-centered learning. While we as instructors should be attentive to the needs of our students, that does not mean that we have to be responsive to every student's whim or declared need. We can be sensitive and compassionate while [maintaining appropriate boundaries and standards](#).
2. Understand that student evaluations sometimes reveal more about students than about their instructors. While there is much useful information to be gleaned from student evaluations to help improve teaching, these evaluations also can help to identify consumerist attitudes and how to address them. For example, research indicates that women instructors are more likely to be judged harshly on student evaluations for their [clothing choices](#) or for being perceived as [not sufficiently nurturing](#), in comparison to men. In these cases, student evaluations function more as an indication of student expectations about services to be provided than about the quality of the instruction they are receiving. While we should always be attentive to our students' learning needs, we can learn to exercise wisdom as we discern between comments that express real learning needs and comments that merely reflect consumer-driven attitudes.
3. Be clear about your own expectations. From your first interaction with students, make clear what you expect of them in terms of behaviors, deadlines, projects, etc. A clear syllabus—which many universities now consider [a kind of de facto legal contract](#)—can go a long way in helping to define the instructor's expectations. When the instructor's intentions and expectations are clear, there is less room for students to see their class experience as one where they themselves determine course objectives or outcomes, as though they were selecting toppings in a sandwich line. This transparency on the instructor's part [can do wonders](#) in creating a vibrant learning environment. Be sure to explain to your students what you will do to help them to meet your expectations. Students will feel encouraged knowing that you are willing to support them.
4. Explain to your students that it is part of your job to prepare them for the “real world.” I am not always comfortable drawing distinctions between the academic world we inhabit and

the so-called “real” world, but it can be very helpful to remind students that we are engaged in preparing them for success in their post-graduate pursuits. Graduate programs and employers will not look favorably upon students or employees who approach their responsibilities as goods to consume rather than opportunities for growth, and we can help our students to understand this reality through the examples we set in our classrooms and in other university settings. For example, being firm about assignment deadlines, academic standards, quality of work completed, professional behavior in class, and so forth can prepare students for the demands of the world of work and give them meaningful practice in the art of [“adulting.”](#) Of course, we instructors must model such professional behaviors too: we must come to class well-prepared and on-time, return graded assignments within a reasonable time frame, hold meaningful office hours, and so forth. We cannot hold our students to certain expectations without our own firm commitment to meeting appropriate expectations ourselves.

5. Help your students to understand that while their academic credentials and efforts have done much to provide them with the opportunity for a college education, it is also important to understand the layers of privilege that have afforded them the chance to devote four (or more) years to full-time university study. So many worthy and willing people, young and old, would jump at the chance to receive a university education, but simply do not have the means (financial, emotional, or otherwise) to do so. Allowing our students to see how fortunate all of us are to be engaged in higher education may go a long way to reducing any sense of entitlement on the part of both students and instructors.

Finally, simply assigning students to read Act 2, Scene 4, of Moliere’s 1670 play, *The Would-Be Gentleman*, no matter what field you are teaching, can lead to fruitful discussions about the pitfalls of consumer-driven education, helping students to engage in meaningful [meta-cognition](#) as they consider their own attitudes and expectations surrounding their college experience.

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