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To: TEACHING-TOOLBOX@LISTSERV.JMU.EDU
Subject: Teaching Toolbox: How A 17th-Century French Play Made Me Reflect on Consumerism in American Higher Education
Date: Thursday, October 24, 2019 11:56:28 AM

How a 17th-Century French Play Made Me Reflect on Consumerism in American Higher Education by Peter J. Eubanks

The comical philosophy lesson in Act II, Scene 4, of Molière's 1670 *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* (*The Would-Be Gentleman*) is perhaps one of the most famous in all of French theater. In this scene, a wealthy merchant, Mr. Jourdain, has hired a philosophy tutor to instruct him in the wisdom of the ancients. It soon becomes clear, however, that Jourdain's interest in learning is only superficial, that he has hired this tutor largely because he hopes that it will give him the appearance of being a learned gentleman, not because he possesses any genuine interest in learning. As his tutor attempts to teach him, he quickly realizes that Mr. Jourdain wishes only to learn elementary spelling and phonetics, and since it is Mr. Jourdain who is paying for these lessons, it is also Mr. Jourdain who determines the curriculum.

Today, students, or their parents, often spend exorbitant amounts of money on their education and consequently expect some degree of customer satisfaction. Curricula, rigor, length, and difficulty of reading and other assignments are thus not always determined according to pedagogically sound principles. All too often, colleges and universities must conform to the wishes of their clientele, even if these interests are, in fact, at times inimical to the institution's mission (see [Palfreyman, 2013](#)).

Consider that, while campus tours almost always include mention of course offerings, the emphasis is nevertheless usually on the extra-curricular amenities the institution provides, the alluring lifestyle the university promises in its mad dash to recruit the best students and assure a steady consumer base. Students are often made to tour impressive, multi-million dollar athletic facilities, replete with the now-standard climbing walls, lazy rivers, and "dive-in" movie nights; to taste an increasingly diverse array of organic, upscale, and exotic foods in sparkly new dining halls; and to explore ever-luxuriating living arrangements. Indeed, it appears as though now even public colleges and universities are trying to create a campus that resembles, in Mark Edmundson's memorable phrase, a "[retirement spread for the young](#)" (1997).

Our students are thus led to believe, as they are introduced to ever-expanding campus luxuries, that somehow they have earned these amenities, that monster-size stadiums, spacious student centers, and campus tanning salons are the natural rewards of their high school labors. Such students find themselves at the unfortunate intersection of entitlement and meritocracy, a place where they are told, at least implicitly, that they somehow have merited these vast expenditures made on their behalf, often [by taxpayers](#).

"Yet a commercial relationship," writes former Yale professor William Deresiewicz in his book, [Excellent Sheep: The Miseducation of the American Elite and the Way to a Meaningful Life \(2014\)](#), "is exactly the opposite of a pedagogical one. You give your consumer what they want, but you don't have any interest in their long-term welfare. It is precisely because you do have an interest in your

students' long-term welfare that you don't give them what they want.... Professors should be mentors, not commodities or clerks. Education isn't something you consume; it's an experience that you have to give yourself over to" (p. 69).

Of course, as Theodore Roosevelt famously said, [it is not the critic who counts](#). Indeed, there is little purpose in offering a diagnosis without a treatment plan, so I would like to conclude by offering a cliffhanger: my next Teaching Toolbox will propose solutions to the consumerism we sometimes face in our classrooms and other university settings. Stay tuned!

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