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Entitled or Engaged?

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Last December, *The New Yorker* published an encouraging article titled “The Year of the Imaginary College Student.” In the essay, Hua Hsu contested the growing idea that colleges are no longer intellectual spaces because students are politically active. In other words, Hsu seemed say that students protesting antagonistic and exclusionary campus cultures shouldn’t be read as a decline in rigorous academic discourse.
Unfortunately, Hsu’s writing is a lone, bright spot in a year marked by essays lamenting the dismal state of today’s college students. Toward the end of 2015, both The Atlantic and The New York Times bemoaned the entitlement and softness of today’s generation.¹ And these are not new criticisms. In fact, as far back as 2007, The Wall Street Journal ran a piece in the same vein called “Blame it on Mr. Rogers: Why Today’s Adults Feel So Entitled.”²

And the commentary doesn’t stop there. Many famous names have spoken out against what is being called “PC College Culture.” Jerry Seinfeld says he won’t perform at colleges now because students throw around words like racist and sexist without even knowing what they mean.³ During an education town hall, President Obama used the word “coddling” to describe how universities treat college undergraduates (Ross). The way they talk about student activism makes it seem as if students want to be insulated from ideas they disagree with.

What is amazing about all of this is what everyone seems to be missing: college students are engaged. College students are having tough conversations, committing themselves to doing the work required to build their vision of the future, and demanding to be heard. They are leaders in a movement against the status quo.

Take, for example, the University of Missouri’s football team who went on strike to fight racism on their campus. Those students were strong in their convictions and stood by their principles. This used to be something to celebrate. At the time, some suggested Missouri’s football team should lose their scholarships for their strike. They believed the players should express gratitude for receiving an education, as if to say they weren’t also working for it (Visser).

Such social commentaries ignore the very real struggles of college students. Undergraduates are still pursuing an education, despite the crushing debt that far too often accompanies it. They are trying to make their own “American Dream” in a country that considers them overgrown children. Many are holding down multiple jobs while maintaining full time student status; some are raising children. Some are first generation college students. Others are from lower socioeconomic status. And all of this is on top of the balancing act that is classes, homework, projects, and papers.

Engaged. Leaders. Committed. Working. Principled. These are not words you often hear when people talk about today’s undergraduates.

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All generations respond to their social conditions through activism. This generation is interacting with what is in front of them right now.
When you consider all that millennials—and now Generation Z—are up against, the criticisms lodged against them seem incredibly unfair. Hsu goes on to write that today’s students are really no different than previous generations in terms of their political activism, which also includes concerns around the need for trigger warnings, the problem of microaggressions, and issues of racial inequality in higher education. To echo Hsu, all generations respond to their social conditions through activism. This generation is interacting with what is in front of them right now.

As Hsu explains, events like the protests over the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri have affected people’s ability to connect societal injustices to those they see in their own lives. Young adults, especially, are coming of age in a period of internet connectivity where they can instantaneously receive information on what is happening worldwide. Their exposure to politics often begins online. This is different from previous generations who may have relied on the State of the Union address, or a parent commenting on newspaper articles at the breakfast table. Today, students are active participants in the world—and this includes their education.

Take, for instance, the following scenario: many students express a feeling of disengagement in large lecture courses. This detachment leads them to question the applicability and usefulness of the material. At a time when young people are focused on changing the world, they want to know what they can do with information. Students also want an opportunity to collaborate with others through discussion, the sharing of ideas, and critical thinking activities. This type of collaboration, however, is impossible to achieve in a class that focuses on lecture style teaching with little room for direct participation. Young adults want to be active learners, even if they don’t describe it that way.

Students today are active: they are active in politics, on social media, and in technological advancements. They also want to be active in their learning. We need to tap into these young leaders who are engaged, passionate, committed, and who want to do the work. And we need to encourage this in the classroom by respecting them as young adults, rather than thinking of them as toddlers. We should support their desire to be involved, even if we disagree with their stance. We should invite them to bring that commitment into the classroom. We should stop with the jokes about “entitled kids these days” and, instead, appreciate their desire to be involved in social change.

NOTES


REFERENCES


MEDIA

Paul George, “Student Protest in Palo Alto,” Flickr, CC-BY-SA 2.0 (Title).

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Kate Collins is a student in the Department of Mathematics at the University of Kentucky. Her eight years of experience in early childhood education have made her very passionate about education. She works at the Center for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, where she provides research and media support for workshops and other faculty development initiatives.