Students as consumers: Undergraduate perceptions on higher education

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Abstract

Undergraduates’ motivations to earn a Bachelor's degree are increasingly tied to their fears about gaining meaningful employment after graduation. As a preventive measure to insure they will be employable, students push themselves to achieve scholastically to distinguish themselves from their peers. Student achievement favors consuming the material for a course in order to pass with the highest grade possible. Very little of what is memorized is retained, meaning students begin to lack confidence in their ability as an academic; overall, this enforces consumerist behaviors, such as memorization, in order to hide personal insecurities about one’s own intellectual abilities. This paper aims to explore how the role of the student within university has changed and whether the increase in consumer behavior has affected the student's ability to learn. In this study, 102 participants provided responses to a fifteen question survey about academic life. Emphasis was placed on each student’s perceptions of professors, learning, and the worth of higher education. Supported by the data collected, I will argue that, by treating education like a business, students are products whose worth is based on external achievement unsupported by an accessible knowledge base. To address the problems found in modern higher education, a number of pedagogical approaches are explored to not only confront the pressures surrounding the university, but to call for more practical methods of examination that support meaningful learning.

Keywords: Education, consumer culture, college

Introduction

In a changing economic landscape, the need for highly-trained, specialized workers has increased the demands for quality higher education within the United States. The beliefs surrounding the modern job market tie employability closely to a degree from a distinguished university; thus, the response of the university is to market their degrees as a promise of social mobility and professional career opportunities (Williams and Wilson 47). This response is necessary because the role of the university has shifted from an institution that produces knowledge for the benefit of the public to a private investment paid for by the individual. Geraint Johnes, an Economics professor at Lancaster University, explains “The main beneficiaries of higher education... are the students themselves. Whatever contribution education makes to their productivity is reflected (in the free labour market) in their subsequent remuneration. The beneficiary pays principle thus suggests that the burden of paying for education should be borne by the student...” (113). Attitudes around education suggest that since students benefit from a degree, they should be responsible for the price. Of course this suggestion is not absurd, but the cost of education continues to rise past what most young adults and their family can afford without some sort of financial assistance. For example, California State Universities have proposed increases to the cost of tuition for the 2018-2019 school year, and they assure students that most of the increase will be covered or offset by other financial assistance (calstate.edu). While the California State Universities are considered affordable collegiate options, students still need help paying for their education. Grants and other programs seeking to help individuals pay for their education have been cut, meaning funding for the university comes from government and industrial research opportunities, as well as the students themselves who pay tuition and other fees beneficial to the institution. To attract both research grants and students, public universities need to compete on a global level to distinguish themselves from other equally competitive schools (Slaughter and Leslie 17). This behavior is not new. Academic capitalism, defined as “institutional and professional market or market-like efforts to secure external money” (Slaughter and Leslie 8), describes the increased efforts to gain not only prestige for the university but steady funding from students, government and industrial connections. Academic capitalism is well defined
within education, as a result, this paper focuses on the impacts changes to higher education have on students. Specifically, if capitalistic behaviors and the competitive nature of education has affected the role and the behaviors of students in university.

Methods

Participants
102 undergraduate students enrolled either in a four-year university or a community college submitted responses to a fifteen question survey online. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 40, with 91.9% being between the ages of 18-24. A majority of students held Senior class standing (45%) with Sophomores (24%), Juniors (21%), and Freshmen (10%) following as such.

A fifteen question survey distributed through an open link on Qualtrics was composed of both multiple choice and open-ended written responses. The completion of the previous question was not a requirement to continue the survey resulting in the different numbers of complete responses to each question.

Measurements
Multiple choice questions are reported as the statistical results, while each written response to open-ended questions were compiled and their language classified by created categories. These categories reflect the words or groups of words found repeatedly in responses. Once the categories were identified, the words found in the responses could be counted once for each of the categories the language reflected. The categories are further explained in the results.

Results
Students, when asked to rank the importance of maintaining or improving their grade point average, selected: extremely important (48.4%), very important (30.3%), moderately important (19.1%), slightly important (2.0%), or not at all important (0.0%). The following question asked why maintaining or improving your current grade point average is or is not important. Ninety-eight collected responses were separated by language that represented intrinsic (internally motivated) or extrinsic (externally motivated) desires. From these two categories, commonly used words or phrases were identified and labeled as the following. Intrinsic desires most often represented a student’s: personal standard (14.2%), work ethic (3.0%), or desire to learn (2.0%). External motivations were referenced more frequently and categorized by GPA being important for: going or being accepted to a graduate school (32.6%), needing to be competitive (21.4%), a student’s future career (11.2%), financial aid (9.1%), or some kind of external representation of their identity (9.1%). The language found in the responses could represent intrinsic and extrinsic motivations; therefore, the language found in one response could be counted for each the potential categories it represented. Examples of the language used for each category is identified later in this paper.

Next, students were asked how they choose what courses to take to aid in the completion of their degree. Ninety-nine total participants responded that they took: the classes required to earn their degree (77.8%), classes that interested them (26.3%), and classes that teach useful career skills (6.0%).

The following four questions centered around student views on instructors. In a multiple choice list of different ways one might choose his or her instructor, students selected that they chose their professors by: using ratemyprofessor.com (31.4%), speaking with friends (28.3%), asking their peers (22.1%), consulting advisors or other faculty (8.9%), surveying or reading the instructors courses and work (4.4%), while most write-in answers reflected feelings of having no choice (4.9%). From ninety-nine responses, 22.2% participants agreed that they purposefully avoided difficult professors, but 65.7% of students selected that their avoidance of hard instructors depended on the type of course, and only 12.1% of students denied that they avoided difficult professors. Ninety-seven student responses defined expectations of a bad professor as: instructors are unsupportive or uncaring (34.0%), poor communication of expectations and assignments requirements (30.9%), unreasonable expectations (17.5%), lectures that are uninteresting (13.4%), professors who are unorganized (12.4%), and coursework that is too difficult (10.3%). 98 students defined their expectations for a good professor as: caring and supporting of students (52.0%), expectations that are clear (31.6%), material or a classroom environment that is engaging (31.6%), and available outside of class (13.3%).

Finally, the last five questions asked students about academic life. Ninety-six participants identified the qualities of successful students as: having a strong work ethic (47.9%), self-motivated (41.7%), organized (27.1%), and attentive (25.0%). Students then identified how they learn the material for their courses. Ninety-seven responses listed learning techniques categorized as: reading (47.4%), taking notes (38.1%), social/group learning (30.0%), attending class (27.8%), memorization of material (17.5%), and completing homework or example problems (11.3%). Following this, participants selected an option depending on if they felt being a student was stressful: definitely yes (76.3%), probably yes (17.5%), might or might not be (3.1%), probably not (2.1%), or definitely not (1.0%). Ninety-
six students then answered if academic stress affected their education and explained how this stress impacted them: 75% affirmed stress affected their education, 17.7% denied stress had any impact, and 7.3% were undecided about the impact of stress. Within these responses, 36.4% mentioned emotional distress such as crying, 33.3% write that it impedes learning, but 9.3% participants write they use stress to motivate themselves. Lastly, students were asked to select if they agree or disagree with the question, “Do you agree that the values associated with a degree (professional development, potential salary, knowledge gained) are worth the costs (tuition, time to complete)?” Ninety-seven Participants selected: strongly agree (19.6%), agree (30.9%), somewhat agree (27.8%), neither agree nor disagree (6.2%), somewhat disagree (6.2%), disagree (6.2%), or strongly disagree (3.1).

**Students’ roles within modern education**

A student’s relationship with higher education has been redefined from an individual seeking knowledge to a “hardnosed utilitarian approach... where the student’s first and foremost priority is to get a job in an increasingly ruthless employment market” (Cowden 42). Receiving a college degree has been equated to an entrance ticket to the next phase of a young adult’s life, a middle step between untrained teenager and employable adult. A Bachelor's degree is often marketed as the best option for students leaving high school. For example, according to College Board, “In 2008, median earnings of college graduates were $55,700, which was $21,900 more than the median earnings of high school graduates who hadn't attended college” (Fuller). Students generally believe that college is worth the cost and time commitment because it will help them in the future. Of course, the data represents the benefits typical received by degree holders, but only those who find employment. While graduates have been able to enter the job market, they often end up being “underemployed,” working in positions unrelated to their degree or finding only part-time work (Abel et al). Undergraduates are aware that there is competition when entering the job market, so students feel compelled to earn their Bachelor's degree in order to help secure their futures.

If the degree is the end goal and students fear not gaining meaningful employment, quality or meaningful education is not the student’s main concern while in school. The approach students are taking within their education can be defined as student consumerism. As the title suggests, student consumerism is “attitudes towards education as a commodity versus a transformative intellectual experience” (Alvarez 65). Undergraduates practicing consumerist behaviors treat higher education as a bought service meant to train them in the skills needed to be marketable in the current job market. Academic capitalism allows institutions to market themselves, and student consumerism aligns well within academic marketing. Students want a degree in order to get a job, universities need students to pay tuition and other fees to stay open, in many ways both work together in order to satisfy their respective needs.

In the competitive job market, people need to stand out and set themselves apart from other potential hires. It is understood that, “Postindustrial economies depend on personnel trained in colleges and universities and highly reward many, but they do not absorb all the graduates these institutions produce, posing problems for higher education’s claim to provide social mobility and adequate returns on students’ investment in learning” (Slaughter and Leslie 31). Students know they will be competing against their peers after graduation, but they cannot avoid undergraduate studies without being at a disadvantage while entering into the job market. Fears about the future push them towards achieving now as a preemptive protection. As a result of these demands on the student, academia is no longer about intellectual pursuit. A degree is an obstacle to master in order to be seen as a competent potential employee. Competition to be distinguished and the fear about finding employment feeds into the consumerist behaviors as that is a way for students to have direct control over their education.

The idea of transitional period between child and adult is not new. A group of French student protesters, calling themselves Internationale Situationniste, created a pamphlet in 1966 about the problems they saw within their role as students in university. Their central argument was best written as, “Being a student is a form of initiation [into market society]” during which students live “a double life, poised between his present status and his future role. The two are absolutely separate, and the journey from one to the other is a mechanical event in the future. Meanwhile, he basks in a schizophrenic consciousness, withdrawing into his initiation group to hide from that future” (Internationale Situationniste). Undergraduates feel the pressures to enter into the job market, but cannot do much to ensure they will have meaningful employment after receiving a degree. This withdrawal into embracing their role of student reflects the need to take an active role in preparing themselves to be competitive in order to set themselves apart from their peers.

An example of this need to compete is seen in a student’s desire to maintain or improve their grade point average (GPA). In the survey mentioned previously, ninety-eight students wrote answers to why or why not GPA is important. 32.6% of students felt they needed to have a high GPA in order to be accepted in either graduate school, a teaching credential program, or other post-baccalaureate program. Participants wrote similar things; for example “if I want to continue on to a
From a student’s perspective, the ability to get into graduate school or other programs is based on his or her grades, rather than their intellectual interests or other achievements. Next, in 21.4% of the collected responses, students referenced GPA needing to be competitive for reasons other than graduate school; participants explained: “I'm an honors student, so they have a GPA requirement,” “To fulfill my scholarship requirements,” and “Competitive major requires high grades.” Finally, 11.2% of participants mentioned needing to keep their GPA in order to help them get a job after graduation. These students wrote, “It is an important determinant of my future career prospect,” and “It’s good to have a competitive GPA to place on entry level jobs..... Jobs look at it to see how committed you are to task and how seriously you are committed to responsibilities.” Again, most students felt a competitive GPA was required to help secure their future endeavors. 9.1% of students admitted that they used their GPA as an external representation of their identity. Participants wrote, “It is important because I felt that if I don’t then why am I in college,” “Important because it represents who I am and my motivations towards achieving my goals,” and “It’s also important because I’ve grown up with the mindset that my GPA is how intelligent and productive I am so I equate my value with how high my GPA is and if I don’t get straight A’s then I hate myself a little more.” A small amount of students seem to have conflated their achievement in school with their personal identity.

Next as a customer of the university, students are given a voice reflecting back their experiences to the administration. This voice usually comes from evaluation forms that students are expected to fill out close to the completion of a course or a degree. These evaluations are meant “to provide critical feedback about their classes and lecturers...” but often they reflect the feelings towards the subject and lack that “critical” evaluation of the quality or ability of the instructor or the relevance of the course (Cowden 47). Students see their achievement or failure and attribute it, in part, to their professors. Unfortunately, as an instructor’s ability to teach is increasingly based within these evaluations, “Instead of being intellectually challenged and forced to be placed in a position of failure, the overwhelming approach is to give students the information they need to pass the class and bring them closer to their degree” (Williams and Wilson 76). For example, if students want clear lecture material that can be easily tested by some formal exam, then they will resist collaborative projects, open discussions, or any activity that lacks a definite right answer. When the student acts like a consumer within education, the instructor becomes a service provider supplying the information demanded of by students seeking to complete their intended degrees, because students feel more pressure to complete the course than they do to truly understand the material.

When reflecting on instructors, some examples of student definitions of bad professors are: “Unwilling to help students, monotone-type teaching, only reading off of PowerPoints, exams that had nothing to do with the material we had learned,” “Unorganized, doesn't have office hours on at least 2 days, does not reply to emails,” “A teacher who is incapable of teaching effectively-close minded to the students opinions and needs.” From these examples, one can see how students use language that reflect a consumer mindset. Undergraduates express wanting clarity, support, engaging lectures, and open communication from what they consider to be “good professors.” Some examples of student’s ideas about good professors are: “Helpful instructions, desire for students to achieve, clear and concise teaching,” “Easier, more fun,” and “Great lecturer, doesn’t lecture straight off slides, responds promptly to emails, reasonable assignments and exams.” Instructors should care about the material and who they teach, make the material engaging, and be available for their classes outside of lecture, but students themselves should have equal responsibility and accountability for their learning.

When asked how they learn, ninety-seven participants listed: reading, taking notes, social learning, attending class, memorization of material, and completing homework or example problems. Of the six types of learning, only social learning, learning that is done in a group setting, requires or involves active learning. Active learning requires the learner to be an engaged participant and take action while working with the material, but reading, notetaking, or sitting in a lecture does not require a student to be involved. In addition, when asked what makes a student successful, only 25% referenced being attentive in their own education; for example, one student wrote, “I feel that students that engage in the classroom, studies or becomes involved in their own way makes a pretty successful student.” 47.9% of responses mentioned “work-ethic” writing, “[students] study when needed, organized, focused, determined, they make school a priority,” or “Someone who does their work on time, studies for exams, does any assigned reading.” Students here did not express engaging with the material or doing anything past what is minimally expected from the professor (attending class and doing their assignments).

Overall, undergraduate participants did not express they engage with the material or instructors while pursuing a degree, but this may be explained by the lack of choice available to students. Students do not seem to have much of a choice when choosing what classes they get to take. From ninety-nine total participants, 77.8% wrote they took classes that were required for their degree followed by 26.3% adding they then take what
interests them. Students used language like, “Based on what it needed for my major and honors, and then what sounds fun or easier for the GE,” “I try to get my required classes, but I usually take the electives left that interest me,” and “I base it on what would work best to graduate within 4 years and what courses I need for my major and minor.” Undergraduates do not seem to be able to take a wide range of classes because of the requirements within their major, instead they jump from class to class in order to progress towards their degree.

The “road-map” version of education gives students a list of classes they need in order to get a degree, a redefined label for this progress is “Sat-Nav” education (Cowden 43). Like a GPS giving directions to a driver, students are told explicitly what classes and skills they need to have behind them in order to arrive at their destination. In this model, a degree is reduced to passing classes instead of proving oneself to be intellectually able. Sat-Nav practices enforce consumer behavior because there are easy benchmarks to pass in order to get closer to what is promised to students. As a result, students may be avoiding the challenge of a “hard” professor. From ninety-nine responses, only 12.1% of students denied avoiding difficult professors, while 22.2% agreed that they to avoid difficult instructors. The other 65.7% selected that it depended on the course.

Undergraduate students pursue an education in order to enhance their potential earnings and opportunities. The number of graduates has risen with the access to higher education, meaning there is higher competition within the job market to secure employment for the individual. The pressures around a student’s future, whether that be seeking a job or entering into a post-baccalaureate program, enforces consumerist behaviors such as memorizing material and demanding information rather than face intellectual challenges. Overall, the role of the students has changed due to external pressures as well a push from students whose evaluations shape how courses can be taught.

The impacts of consuming rather than learning

The role of the student has changed, as a result the perceptions and behaviors of the student has adapted to reflect problems with modern university. Undergraduate education is marketed to students as the best choice, both in terms of social mobility and personal investment. A degree represents being educated as well as employable. The drawbacks of such a view places emphasis on the object of a degree instead of the educational and personal experiences that should produce an educated, critically-thinking citizen. As a result, the perception of the general student population has been negatively affected and synonymous with “entitled.” Students themselves consume information in order to achieve high grades or academic honors, but disengage with the actual knowledge they try to internalize. Undergraduates have been labeled as entitled, further complicating their relationship with education, and their consumer behaviors have risked learning becoming rote or meaningless.

First, among faculty within university, discussion about student or academic entitlement centers on the current generation in college. The Millennial, often described as self-centered, entitled and in need of constant external validation, represents most of the population currently in university. Behaviors associated with millennials have infused themselves with the behaviors of the students. Entitlement within education resembles student consumerism well. For example, entitlement suggests that students feel they should receive a high grade for completing the minimal amount of work (Singleton-Jackson et al. 232). Mentioned above previously, students do not seem to be taking an active role in their own education. From student responses, it seems that a bad professor is unclear, does not have manageable expectations, or is unavailable when the student needs them. From an educator’s perspective, students may be demanding more from professors, yet not being substantially engaged within the classroom or with the material. Research suggests that as entitlement increases, “counterproductive behaviors,” such as the shift of personal responsibility onto external figures or faculty, impact student’s perception of effort in relation to achievement outcomes (Taylor et al. 18). Meaning, as students feel more strongly entitled to a service from their teacher, the more they correlate the effort to complete an assignment to receiving a high grade. With the focus no longer on learning, students express their financial investment in education and their attendance should reflect their classroom achievement (Singleton-Jackson et al. 232-233). As professors feel more demands to lecture and administer easily exams to respond to the need for validation from students learning becomes more rote and students are being viewed as more entitled.

While academic entitlement is a developing term, the effects and general ideas are still valid within student life. Researchers note an element of control expressed in entitled behavior (Singleton-Jackson et al. 233). This control centers around classes, parking, and other day-to-day experiences, but the need for control can be brought further. At the center of student consumerism, there seems to be a need to feel control over learning resulting from their impending future. Students compete within a classroom, between one another within a school, and know they will be competing after graduation, yet there are no guarantees that what they do now will help them later. One result from these feelings of uncertainty and consumerist behaviors could be the amount of stress felt by the undergraduate population. In the National College Health Assessment, a bi- yearly survey that
collects data from the current student population, the American College Health Association (ACHA) found that of the 47,821 students surveyed within the last year, 44.8% experienced “more than average” and 11.6% felt a “tremendous” amount of stress (16). Within the same summary, the ACHA reported that 54.7% of students within the last two weeks “felt overwhelmed by all [they] had to do” and within the last year 49.8% felt that academics had been “traumatic or very difficult to handle” (13-15). The results gathered by the ACHA compare with the data collected for this research. In the survey conducted for this project, 75% of participants affirmed that academic stress impacted their education.

Although there was a small portion of students (9.3%) from the data collected for this research who felt that academic stress motivated them to do better, most students felt that stress either limits their ability to learn or creates a situation where they did not care about learning. Some of the more detailed responses explain the effects of stress on the participant’s education, from the ninety-six responses three were selected to summarize student attitudes:

Response One: Participant #8

“Academic stress does affect my education because then I’m not caring about whether or not I’m actually keeping the information for long term use but rather I’m freaking out about keeping it in my brain just long enough for the exam and then don't have to worry about using the information ever again. I also don't have time to cultivate hobbies or my passions because if I do my hobbies then I feel guilty for not making myself a more competitive applicant for grad school or scholarships.”

Response Two: Participant #20

“Yes, it feels as if my entire career is banked in three test scores for a class. I worry that if I don’t do well I wasted my time and money, so I chose to learn the material without truly learning or applying it but just for the grade. Stress and fear of failure inhibit me from doing assignments feeling that it is pointless in the end, then when I have late work I get more anxious about my classes and future. Blaming myself for not being caught up.”

Response Three: Participant #89

“Yes. I think this can be positive or negative. It can motivate you to do your work and achieve your goals, but it can also cause you to sit at a desk at 3am and cry because you have so much stress you're not sure what to do or how to realistically achieve your goals.”

These responses show how some students feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they have, guilty about not doing enough to make sure their future is secure, and frustrated that their education becomes about tests rather than real world application of knowledge. Overall, these fears and anxieties lead undergraduates to lack self-confidence, which gives another reason for students to become consumers within a university rather than learners.

A concerning problem rising out of students lack of confidence in themselves is seen through the increasing desire to define oneself through achievement rather than personal beliefs, interests, and other intrinsic values that can be called on in times of stress. As an individualist society, a person’s worth is valued by what they have achieved for themselves, and while our society has diverted from socially collaborative work, the individual has had to take responsibility for defining one’s own identity in order to belong. This “identity is achieved through performance at school and through career... (James 34). Research suggests that a strong sense of identity acts “as a potential link moderator” between stress and other problems facing students (Burt and Paysnick 368). For the undergraduate population to call yourself an “academic” means to have already done something worthy of scholarly praise, but in most cases that worth is found in one’s grade point average. Since identity as a student becomes connected with ability to achieve academically, education diverts away from pursuing knowledge into consuming information to pass the course and create temporary reassurance that one is competitive as a student with potential to be a desirable candidate for either a job or graduate programs.

Conclusion

In addressing the need for a new pedagogical approach Henry Giroux wrote, “To study pedagogy should never be confused with being told what to do, but it does require new forms of graduate study which fully implicate university faculty in real struggles to define educational projects that are truly transformative. It requires, as we shall see, ultimately abandoning the naming of our students as clientele” (133). How to ensure students learn best should never be a “how-to guide,” as learning can never be reduced to simple steps. What many educational theorists, both currently and in the past, stress is the need to engage students with knowledge that reflects the word they will have to live in. Students as “clientele” will expect a service and will be considered an individual to please rather than a potential equal to challenge and educate.

Paulo Freire, in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, wrote in 1968 of a type of teaching that reduced the student to a “receptacle” the teacher must fill with his knowledge. He called this the "banking concept of education," as the teacher holds all the information and makes deposits into their pupils (Freire 58). Students taught under the banking method are seen as passive as any active
engagement would interrupt transmission of the material (Freire 59-60). For example, if a lecturer were to be relaying the plot of a novel, a student questioning the motivations of a certain character would be a distraction from the main goal of the lesson- how to summarize. Under Freire’s model it is the teacher who places himself in front of the students, but in the consumerist model the students are the ones who elevate the professor in order to receive explicit instruction that will not require more than passive engagement through the completion of formal assessments like exams or research papers. Approaches that encourage passivity become problematic because, as Freire writes, “Verbalistic lessons, reading requirements, the methods for evaluating ‘knowledge,’ the distance between the teacher and the taught, the criteria for promotion: everything in this is ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking” (63). The “ready-to-wear” is what consumer education strives for. Instead of learning being a challenge, educated individuals regurgitate information as a demonstration of his or her ability to pass a class. Education that is consumed promotes the transmission of material from one person to another, but it lacks critical thought.

Students who refuse to take an active role within the classroom will associate learning with the attitudes developed from their undergraduate courses. John Dewey, an educational theorist from the 1930s, expressed that students will experience “collateral learning” as a result of their time within a classroom or with a certain instructor (48). If applied to the situations experienced by undergraduates, the feeling of mental distress, the need to achieve within the classroom, and the fear of the future, students graduate associating learning with a powerlessness and need to consume information rather than develop a motivation to truly acquire critical knowledge about the world. When entering into a new job, these attitudes could impact how young adults approach learning the skills needed advance within their field. Even within everyday life, citizens in a democratic society should be knowledgeable about relevant social, economic, and political movements that may influence our collective future. If “learning” is the collection of facts without critical dissection of their meaning and associated with negative feelings of distress and necessity rather than intrinsic desire, then will graduates want to continue educating themselves past what is required?

Of course, as a student, I recognize not only my bias, but my lack of experience as an educator. In continuing this research and my own education on the changing landscape of higher education, the need to collect insights from instructors and administrations becomes apparent. In order to best help the entire system of postsecondary education, more dedicated insights from all parties involved needs to be explored. I have relied on research in search of solutions, but even then there are individuals calling to embrace the changing landscape of education by giving in to student demand.

Cristina Chow and Clement Leung, in Reshaping the University for Survival in the 21st Century: New Opportunities and Paradigms, argue that in order to create meaningful and efficient experiences for students who need to compete in a narrow job market the university need to embrace technology and teach students how to learn in an environment in a practical manner (84-88). The learning the authors argue for still focuses on teaching skills for finding information, embracing industry connections to teach students what employers want employees to have, and other ways that still involve students consuming knowledge.

Even so, Stephen Cowden and Gurnam Singh in their book Acts of Knowing: Critical Pedagogy in, Against and Beyond the University argue for a humanistic view of education (8). The authors want education to give individuals the tools that allow them to question the way the world comes to be, and how, with that knowledge, people can create change or invoke the ability to have agency in one’s life (7-8). Paulo Freire noted that education that fostered passivity and discouraged active engagement lead to a “fatalistic” view of the world around them, which can be comparable to the feelings of fear, overwhelming stress, and emotional distress reported by undergraduates. He writes, “If individuals are caught up in and are unable to separate themselves from these limit-situations, their theme in reference to these situations is fatalism, and the task implied by the theme is the lack of a task” (Freire 105). “Limit-situations” refers to any situation where internal forces or beliefs limit someone from expanding their own consciousness. As students, and citizens of a country, the ability to expand one’s mind to create a fuller idea of the world around oneself allows for creation of new knowledge. Consumption of information, as done in student consumerism, does not give students critical knowledge that can be transferred from classroom to world. Thus, a view that the world will always remain the same without any chance of change.

Within the classroom, opportunities to allow students to participate in the acquisition of knowledge should be stressed. Moving away from the lecture to exam format can lead to engagement that can be used to reflect student learning, while creating room for creative new expressions of that knowledge. For example, the TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages) program on Stanislaus State’s campus has students give lesson demonstrations in foreign languages to stimulate for monolingual peers the difficulties of learning a new language. Presenters are challenged to create an engaging activity for a class who has little to no knowledge of this spoken language, and
in order to be successful one has to put into place the methods and approaches learned within the class. Much of what is demonstrated exemplifies what these student would potentially present to their own classes, which gives the students a chance to implement the theoretical concepts learned in the classroom and an opportunity to practice the skills they need in order to be a professional teacher. Yet, even this feeds into the desire to teach students skills rather than challenge them to critically evaluate the knowledge they have.

As the world progresses, both in terms of growth within our understanding of learning but also in our social relationship to knowledge, curriculums should be updated and expanded to address the changing landscape of higher education and the diverse needs of students. Universities are still a place of academic pursuit, but the administration understands that students coming to them are in desperate need of a degree in order to jumpstart their professional career. A happy medium between what is needed to be learned in order to be a competent competitor within the current job and instilling a responsibility to be and remain educated in order to be engaged in the world must be struck. How best to find that balance needs to be looked at from a multitude of perspectives, and may require a different approach by each university in order to reflect the needs of the population. While students play a part in the business of education, the student should not be anything less than an individual seeking knowledge in order to improve his or herself.

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