

No books, please; we're students

Coming college students "are increasingly disengaged from the academic experience," according to the latest (1995) national survey of college freshmen put out each year by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute. This is a rather dainty way of saying that compared with freshmen a decade or so ago, current students are more easily bored and considerably less willing to work hard.

Only 35 percent of students said they spent six or more hours a week studying or doing homework during senior year in high school, down from 43.7 percent in 1987. And the 1995 survey shows the highest percentage ever of students reporting being frequently bored in class, 33.9 percent.

As always, this information should come with many asterisks attached: The college population is broader and less elite now, and many students have to juggle jobs and heavy family responsibilities. At the more selective colleges, short attention spans and a reluctance to read and study are less of a problem. But a lot of professors are echoing the negative general findings of the freshman survey.

"During the last decade, college students have changed for the worse," chemistry professor Henry Bauer of Virginia Tech said in a paper prepared for an academic meeting this week in Orlando. "An increasing proportion carry a chip on their shoulder and expect good grades without attending class or studying."

Bauer has kept charts for 10 years, showing that his students have done progressively worse on final exams compared with midsemester quizzes, even though they know that the same questions used on the quizzes will show up on the finals. He thinks this is "indisputable" evidence of student decline, including a simple unwillingness to bone up on the answers known to be coming on final exams.

"Inattentive, inarticulate." His paper is filled with similar comments from professors around the country. "The real problem is students who won't study," wrote a Penn State professor. A retired professor from Southern Connecticut State said: "I found my students progressively more ignorant, inattentive, inarticulate." "Unprecedented numbers of students rarely come to class," said a Virginia Tech teacher. "They have not read the material and have scant interest in learning it." Another professor said that many students only come to class when they have nothing better to do. At one of his classes, no students at all showed up.

So far the best depiction of these attitudes is in the new book, *Generation X Goes to College*, by "Peter Sacks," the pseudonym for a California journalist who taught writing

courses to mostly white, mostly middle-class groups at an unnamed suburban community college.

"Sacks" produces a devastating portrait of bored and unmotivated students unwilling to read or study but feeling entitled to high grades, partly because they saw themselves as consumers "buying" an education from teachers, whose job it was to deliver the product whether the students worked for it or not.

"Disengaged rudeness" was the common attitude. Students would sometimes chat loudly, sleep, talk on cell phones and even watch television during class, paying attention only when something amusing or entertaining occurred. The decline of the work ethic was institutionalized in grade inflation, "hand-holding" (the assumption that teachers would help solve students' personal problems) and watering down standards

"to accommodate a generation of students who had become increasingly disengaged from anything resembling an intellectual life."

Engulfed by an amusement culture from their first days of watching "Sesame Street," "Sacks" writes, the students wanted primarily to be entertained, and in a poll he took his students said that was the No. 1 quality they wanted in a teacher. The word "fun" turned up often in student evaluations of teachers, which exerted

powerful sway over a teacher's career. At one point, a faculty member suggested that "Sacks" take an acting course so he could improve his student evaluations.

The entertainment factor is popping up at many colleges these days—courses on "Star Trek," use of videos and movies, even a music video on the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes. Economics light for nonreaders.

But the book goes well beyond conventional arguments about slackers, entitlement and dumbing down. Students, he says, now have a postmodern sensibility—distrustful of reason, authority, facts, objectivity, all values not generated by the self. "As children of postmodernity, they seem implicitly to distrust anything that purports to be a source of knowledge and authority."

"Sacks" and some fellow teachers concluded they were "in the midst of a profound cultural upheaval that had completely changed students and the collegiate enterprise from just 10 years earlier." Oddly, he presents his boomer generation as the defender of traditional order against generation X, but the heavy campaigns against authority, objectivity and an adult-run university were boomer themes of the Sixties now rattling through the culture. But he's right about the depth of the upheaval. We can expect greater campus conflict and upheaval in the years ahead. ■

