

An excerpt from
THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF STUDENTS
by THOMAS H. BENTON
in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*

NUMBER 7: PRIDE

I once asked a group of 20 students how many thought they were “better than their parents?” All of them raised their hands. I didn’t ask, but I assume they all believed they were better than their teachers too. They would rise higher, be more successful, and transcend the limitations of their elders. We read this belief in our students’ expressions: “What you know is not worth learning. **They’re just your opinions anyway.** I am young. I have infinite potential. You are old. And you’re just a college professor. But I will be rich and famous someday.” They have rarely been given a realistic assessment of their abilities and prospects. Out of this pride—nurtured by the purveyors of unearned self esteem, personal grievance, dumbed-down courses, and inflated grades (often in the guise of liberality)—the opportunity to earn an education is squandered by prideful students who can make a potential heaven seem like hell.

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A liberal-arts education, as I see it, is not about acquiring wealth and opportunities to further indulge one’s desires. Nor is it about cultivating in students an insular, idolatrous view of their nation, ethnic group, gender, or religion. It is also not about celebrating the so-called “great tradition” of authors, philosophers, and artists.

It is about the recognition, ultimately, of how little one really knows, or can know. A liberal-arts education, most of all fights unmerited pride by asking students to recognize the smallness of their ambitions in the context of human history, and more. Whether it is grounded in faith or not, a liberal-arts education should help students to combat the Seven Deadly Sins with the “Seven Contrary Virtues” of diligence, generosity, patience, chastity, moderation, contentment, and, most important of all, humility.

An excerpt from
THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS OF PROFESSORS
by THOMAS H. BENTON
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NUMBER 1: SLOTH

Like their students, professors claim to be so busy that they can't give proper attention to their teaching. Some professors begin classes late and dismiss them early; others rarely keep their posted office hours. Students used to complain about deadwood professors reading their lectures from yellowing notes. That's less common now than canned PowerPoint presentations, film screenings, and group discussions in which students—most of whom have not done the reading—attempt to do the work of the absentee professor.

All of those techniques use up class time with a minimum of effort and learning. In addition, professors can avoid the hard work of grading by requiring fewer assignments, making them "objective" (i.e., machine gradable), and—when written assignments and exams are mandated by the curriculum—inflating the grades. High grades require less written justification, result in fewer student complaints, and require no follow-up advising.

Of course, in many contexts, all of this grading can simply be shifted to teaching assistants and adjuncts who will likewise inflate grades for the same reasons. It's easy to blame the situation on administrators, but the corporate university crept into place because, over the last three decades, professors—out of apathy and a desire to pursue their own interests—have slowly abandoned the governance of their institutions to the values of the marketplace.

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We cultivate students' unmerited pride with high praise for mediocre work. And we tolerate all of the other sins by abdicating responsibility for the culture of our classrooms. Again and again, I have heard students say their classes are so easy that almost no effort is required, even for top grades. Residential student life, at many institutions, is mostly free time to explore and indulge one's vices. And we professors—too busy chasing our ambitions—avoid maintaining standards because they are time-consuming and costly to our teaching evaluations.

In some respects, the students are right: Professors *are* to blame.