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## "How Colleges Are Failing Our Students"

Charles J. Sykes, Author, *Profscam*

Editor's Preview: *In 1988, Charles Sykes' best-selling book, Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education, won critical praise from the New York Times, the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal, but it also provoked a heated debate among academics over his charges that they have failed to educate today's students and over his powerful indictment of the "large-scale modern university system." Mr. Sykes spoke on the Hillsdale campus in the November 1989 Center for Constructive Alternatives Seminar, "Educating for Livelihood." (Portions of his essay which originally appeared in Profscam are reprinted with the permission of Regnery Gateway.)*

The banner that hung across the stage read simply: "Thank You, Alan Brinkley! We'll Miss You." As the young professor ended his last lecture, more than 500 students who filled the seats and aisles of Harvard's Sanders Theater rose in a standing ovation. By all accounts, Brinkley was one of Harvard's most gifted teachers. At 37, he taught the largest course in Harvard's History Department and had won an American Book Award for his study of the Depression era. He further stood out from many of his Harvard colleagues because of his open-door policy and willingness to meet with students one-on-one, even though by some estimates, he taught one-third of all Harvard undergraduates in his various classes.

"Professor Brinkley was the first teacher who took an interest in me as a person," one student said afterward. "He advised me when I was choosing a concentration, helped me



with my term paper for his class . . ." One of his colleagues, Professor David H. Donald, himself a leading authority on 18th-century American history, called Brinkley "a splendid young scholar and a superb teacher."

In 1985, Harvard denied Alan Brinkley tenure and effectively fired him. A slim majority of the tenured faculty members in the History Department (13 of 23) had voted to recommend tenure, but the favorable recommendation was overturned by the dean of Arts and Sciences. Brinkley's case dramatically highlighted the fate of professors who emphasize teaching. It was particularly notable because of the contrast between Brinkley and his colleagues at the nation's most prestige-encrusted university. Harvard's history professors were notorious for the frequency of their absences from campus and the rarity with which many of them entered a classroom.

### Who's Looking Out for the Students?

But even if Alan Brinkley were the exception because of his teaching ability, the way his case was handled was hardly exceptional. Shortly before Brinkley's dismissal, another popular professor, Bradford A. Lee, an expert in modern history and, like Brinkley, a winner of the teaching prize, had also been dismissed. With Brinkley's departure, three of the last four recipients of Harvard's teaching award had been denied tenure.

Harvard is not the only school where the teaching award is a jinx. At Stanford, Yale and other schools, the pattern is the same and it goes beyond denying tenure: "There is little direction, little contact with professors, and so few courses offered each year," the Harvard student guide says, "that you'll swear they left half the course catalog on the floor of the registrar's office."

This is not much of an exaggeration. The course catalog denotes courses that are not being offered that year by putting them in brackets. So many Harvard history courses were bracketed one year that students printed up T-shirts reading simply: [History]. One recent year, almost all of the professors of American history were gone at the same time, gutting the curriculum and leaving undergraduates interested in American history at America's leading university to fend for themselves. "No one is looking out for the students," complained one major.

The academic culture is not merely indifferent to teaching, it is actively hostile to it. In the modern large university, no act of good teaching goes unpunished.



Many academics try to justify themselves by blaming their students who are, they insist, often poorly prepared and uninterested in the subject matter. University professors are often loud in their criticism of the public elementary and secondary schools. Frequently they attempt to shift the debate on the failures of higher education to the failures at the lower levels.

But when the Holmes Group issued its report on the reform of teacher education in 1986, it reversed field on the professors. Part of the reason for the widespread ineptness of

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America's schoolteachers, the Holmes Group concluded, lies in the universities themselves. "They strive to hire highly qualified academic specialists, who know their subjects well and do distinguished research," the Holmes Group said. "But few of these specialists know how to teach well, and many seem not to care. The undergraduate education that intending teachers—and everyone else—receives is full of the same bad teaching that litters American high schools."

### How Tenure Really Works

At the heart of the system are the academic departments and their power over the system of tenure. The process by which a young professor wins tenure—in effect, a lifetime job at a university—is widely misunderstood outside the academy itself. Although university administrators often have the final say, the tenure system is controlled by the professors themselves. Because a professor once granted tenure is virtually immovable for life and ties up a spot in the department's budget for decades, the decision to grant tenure is the most important made in academia.

Almost every school claims that tenure

**Charles J. Sykes** is the author of *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Regnery Gateway, 1988). From 1983-87, he served as editor in chief of the nation's top award-winning metropolitan journal, *Milwaukee Magazine*. His latest book, *The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education*, will be published this fall. He is currently working on *National Review's* "Guide to Selected Colleges."

candidates' teaching abilities are weighed along with their published scholarship. The evidence to the contrary, however, is overwhelming. "Chancellors and vice chancellors say teaching is important," one professor at the University of Illinois says, "but no one believes it." Only a tiny percentage of schools ever sends faculty observers into a junior professor's classroom to evaluate his teaching.

The treatment of teachers indicates academia's indifference to teaching, but it only hints at how deeply the contempt for it is ingrained within the academic culture. "It's the kiss of death," Associate Professor David Helfand, winner of one of Columbia University's General Studies Distinguished Teachers Awards, told *Newsweek on Campus*, "if you volunteer to teach two classes instead of one before tenure. They will say, 'This guy is a teacher.'"

### Attitudes Towards Teaching

The message is a common one in the university. Discussing one of his professors in *American Culture*, a University of Michigan senior says: "He didn't even want to deal with students, it seemed like. He would just give a lecture and say, 'No, just deal with my T.A.' He didn't want to deal with us when we weren't in class."

My own experience may serve to underscore his point. Several years ago, I sat in on a meeting of the chairs of the various departments of sociology at the annual convention of the American Sociology Association. Much of the meeting was spent discussing the various lures the chairmen used to attract top students for their graduate schools, including packaging grants with what they called "honorific distinctions" and even giving academic stars "signing bonuses" to get them to attend their schools. "The graduate applicants expect this, and you better give it to them," one chair warned. The discussion of grants and perks and honorific distinctions had gone on for the better part of an hour before Eric Wagner spoke up.

Wagner, the chairman of Ohio University's Sociology Department, had a simpler recommendation. His department had sent students to some of the top graduate schools, but they had come away unimpressed and in some cases disgusted by what they found. The professors in the elite departments, he said, "are so busy with their own research they don't have time to spend with our students." He told the group that students he sent to Stanford were so upset by the arrogance and apparent indifference of the professors there that "they wouldn't touch your fellowships."

His advice was simple: "Just pay attention to them," he pleaded. "That may be more important than just throwing money at them." The department chairs listened politely and went on to another subject.

### Trivialization of the Curriculum

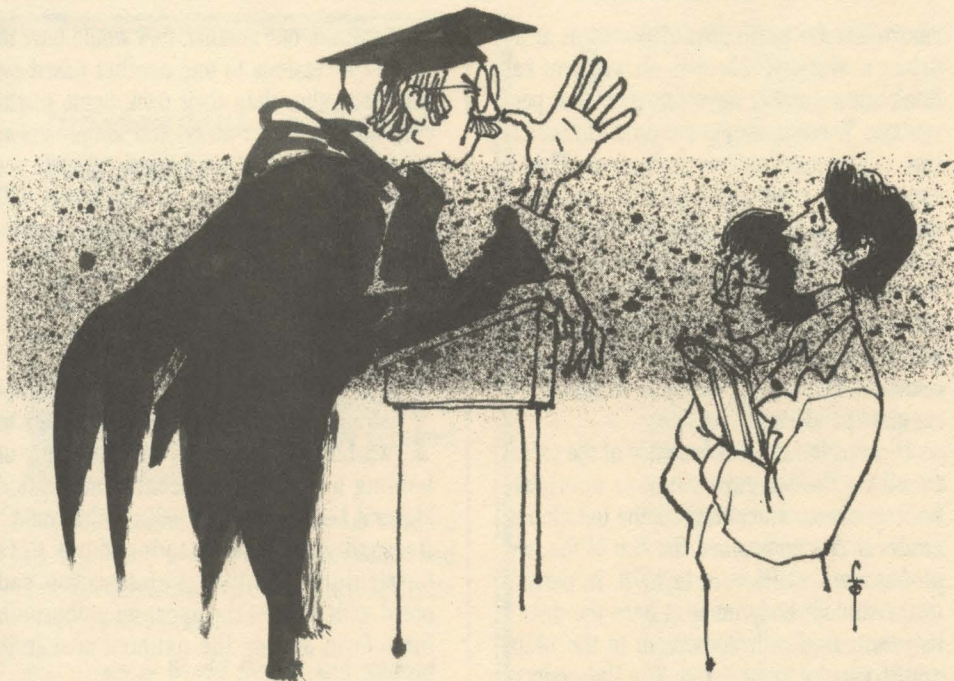
The university curriculum is the flip side of the academic culture's attitude toward teaching. "In an environment that is serious about the quality of teaching," the Association of American Colleges said in its 1985 report, *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, "the grand design of the curriculum will receive the attention it deserves." But the actual environment of the university is anything but serious about the quality of teaching. And its attention to the design of the curriculum is reflected in the intellectual confusion, nonexistent standards, junk courses, so-called "guts," and blow-offs that are (or should be) the shame of American education.

But the curriculum is not completely without its rationale. Indeed, it bears the unmistakable mark of the professorial touch. As absurd as it is, the curriculum keeps the universities wellstocked and the students reasonably pacified, while demanding as little as possible from either students or professors. No other explanation can account for the melange of incoherence that confronts students at the modern university.

Roaming freely through the trackless wastes of registration, a liberal arts sophomore at the University of Illinois bitterly laments his disappointment: "It seems like preregistration is a joke," he says. He had signed up for "Human Sexuality," but there were no available places. "I don't feel like taking bowling," he says. "I was looking forward to it. I guess there are a lot of undersexed people on this campus."

Not so at Middlebury College in Vermont, where students filled a class that discussed the issues of "popular culture, eroticism, esthetics, voyeurism, and misogyny" as they are reflected in the films of Brigitte Bardot. There are, in fact, few interests to which higher education does not cater. Auburn University offered a course in "Recreation Interpretive Services," which was described as "principles and techniques used to communicate natural, historical, and cultural features of outdoor recreation to park visitors." The school also listed in-depth courses in "Principles of Recreation," "Park and Recreation Maintenance," and "Recreation Leadership." At Kent State, students have been offered a smorgasbord of intellectual offerings, includ-





ing "Campus Leadership," a course that covers "the role of the camper and counselor," and "Records Management," in which students "set up, explain, and maintain alphabetic, geographic, numerical, and subject filing systems." For the scholarly inclined, there is "Socio-Psychological Aspects of Clothing"; for the less rigorous minded, "Basic Roller Skating," and for the adventurous, "Dance Roller Skating."

At the University of Illinois, students have been able to work toward their B.A. by taking "Pocket Billiards," or the "Anthropology of Play," which is described as "the study of play with emphasis on origin, diffusion, spontaneity, emergence, and diversity." The University

textbook was the *Rolling Stone Book of Rock Video*, and one class project was a field trip to Hollywood where the students acted as extras in rock videos—for credit. On slower days, they analyzed videotapes of Weird Al Yankovic singing "Dare to Be Stupid."

### **"Central to the Troubles . . ."**

**W**hen the Association of American Colleges issued its report on the state of the curriculum in 1985, its conclusions were not surprising. "[W]hat passes as a college curriculum," the report said, had degenerated into "almost anything goes."

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of Massachusetts at Amherst has listed courses for credit in "Slimnastics" and "Ultimate Frisbee."

Students at the University of Michigan who have taken "Sports Marketing and Management" have been given exams with such questions as: "Athletic administrators should be primarily concerned with two (2) groups: Name them." (Answer: players and coaches.) "True or false: At the Michigan Stadium a spectator can be readmitted to the game if he has a hand stamp visible." (Answer: False.)

And for students fortunate enough to gain admission to "Music Video 454," the only

But what distinguished the AAC report from its counterparts—and indeed from most analyses issued over the last 50 years—was the directness of its indictment. "Central to the troubles and to the solution are the professors . . .," the report charged.

Adept at looking out for themselves—department staffing, student enrollments, courses reflecting narrow scholarly interests, attendance at professional meetings—professors unquestionably offer in their courses exquisite examples of specialized learning. *But who looks after the shop? Who takes responsibility, not for the needs of*

*the history of English or biology department, but for the curriculum as a whole? Who thinks about the course of study as it is experienced by students? Who reviews and justifies and rationalizes the academic program for which a college awards the coveted credential: a bachelor's degree? [Emphasis added.]*

The answer, of course, was nobody.

Even the major, the AAC concluded, had become "little more than a gathering of courses taken in one department, lacking structure and depth . . ." The nature of the majors also "varies widely and irrationally" from one institution to another. The chair of the Committee for Economic Education of the American Economic Association confirmed that, confessing: "We know precious little about what the economics major is or does for students."

The problem of the university curriculum is no longer merely that there is no central body of shared knowledge at the heart of the university education—certain books that all educated men and women presumably would read. In the last several decades—a period that corresponds exactly to the professoriate's rise to unchallenged power—the bachelor's degree has been so completely stripped of meaning that employers cannot even be sure if its holder has minimum skills that were once taken for granted among college graduates. Somewhere in the professoriate's endless curricular shell game, the universities lost track of the need to teach critical thinking, writing skills, or even basic knowledge about the world.

### **III-Prepared Graduates**

**E**ven as academia's claims of success—and pleas for money—grew ever more insistent, stories about the ignorance of college students became nearly clichés. Typical is the story of the Harvard senior who thanked his history professor for explaining World War I, saying, "I've always wondered why people kept talking about a Second World War."

When a literature professor asked a class of 200 students at a Midwestern school how many of them had heard of Don Quixote, only two students raised their hands. How many, she asked, were familiar with the *The Man of La Mancha*? Not a single hand went up. When historian Diane Ravitch visited one urban Minnesota university, she found that not one of 30 students in a course on "ethnic relations" had ever heard of the Supreme Court's landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case.



The capacity of American higher education to turn out graduates utterly ignorant of international affairs and foreign languages continues to be the wonder of the world. Less than 15 percent of the seniors who were tested on their knowledge of world affairs in 1981 could answer even two-thirds of the questions correctly. Another survey found that 75 percent of college students had studied a foreign language at one time or another, but only seven percent thought they could understand a native speaker. Occasional surveys of college students' knowledge of geography have yielded horrific results.

What does a college degree mean in 1990? There once was a time when employers could be reasonably certain that the holders of a bachelor's degree from prestigious universities had a certain set of skills associated with educated men and women; that they could write a reasonably coherent business letter, that they could find Hong Kong on a map. That's unfortunately no longer the case.

### **The Numbers Game**

**T**he curriculum is a direct product of a fundamental paradox of life in academia. Even the most esoteric researcher scaling the highest peaks of scholastic sorcery ultimately relies on the undergraduates huddled in the foothills because they support his endeavors. This is particularly true in state universities where budget priorities are often closely tied to statistical measurements of enrollment. Because students are essentially hostages held by the universities to ensure society's continued good will (how long would universities survive if they dropped the pretense of educating undergraduates?), an elaborate numbers game colors the entire academic landscape.

The politics of this game, particularly when money is tight, virtually dictates the destruction of traditional standards of performance and intellectual integrity. "Guts"—undemanding, unchallenging courses of notoriously low standards—are a symbol of the process. But the gut is not an aberration in the modern university: It is the inevitable by-product of the professoriate's desire to expend as little time and energy on teaching combined with the imperative of keeping classrooms stocked with warm tuition-paying bodies. Nor is this limited merely to the lower end of the academic spectrum.

The numbers game also leads to the collapse of standards within the classroom itself. "If two-thirds of the students do not possess the skills necessary for professional success," wrote Professor David Berkman, a former

chairman of a journalism department at an urban university, "there is no way you can flunk out a number anywhere near that percentage. There is simply too much intimidation in the academic environment. This is especially true for junior—meaning untenured—faculty members who teach many of the lower division courses where the bulk of the weeding out should take place . . . . No junior instructor who wishes to gain tenure will flunk out 67 percent in an introductory course." The result, charges Berkman, is rampant pandering.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the extent to which the bargain came to dominate undergraduate education was the inflation of grades that accompanied the rise of the new professoriate. At Harvard in 1978, 78 percent of the student body made it onto the dean's list, compared with 20 percent in the 1920s and 26 percent in the 1930s. The University of Michigan's 1974-75 freshman class had the weakest SAT scores in decades but was given the highest grade point average ever. In 1975, 70 percent of the grades at Princeton were A's or B's. At Stanford, the average grade was A-.

"A lenient grader," observed author Lansing Lamont, "could draw students to his course like sparrows to a feeder."

The same pressures of the numbers game corrupted even the attempts to reform the badly rusting system. The most popular response to complaints about the incoherence of the curriculum was the introduction of new "core curriculums." But even the reforms were drawn into the professors' curricular numbers game.

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In practice, observers argue, the latent function of the core curriculum at most state universities "is to allocate student credit hours across colleges and departments."

The fact is that curricular coherence is the archenemy of the academic culture. If the undergraduate were ever to be placed at the center of the university and the curriculum molded around the kind of education he or she should receive, the entire focus of the university would be disrupted, and the power of the "academic villages" badly shaken.

The academy would be forced to revoke its *carte blanche* to the professors; and the villages would not only have to begin communi-

cating within one another, they would have to make concessions to one another based on priorities other than their own. Some might even have to wither away. And the professors are not going to let that happen, at least not without an epic struggle in which they will use their entire arsenal of academic double-think.

### **A Failure to Set Standards**

**I**n the mid-1970s, the Carter administration summoned academic leaders to Washington to discuss the possibility of holding a White House conference called "Liberal Learning in the 1980s and Beyond." Harvard had just introduced its Core Curriculum, and the administration had noted with interest the apparent enthusiasm for reform among the nation's academic leaders.

But when confronted with specifics, they found that the academics were less forthcoming. Many professors bitterly opposed any effort to develop even a minimum curriculum, because they saw it as a reactionary infringement on their own prerogatives. Some were concerned over simple turf issues. But in public they took a different and by now predictable tack: They expressed lugubrious concern over the problems of defining any curriculum in light of the diversity of the student body, particularly the so-called new learners, who would not be in schools if they were forced to conform to traditional standards.

After two days of wrangling, the organizers dropped the goal of defining liberal learning and in a burst of inspired profspeak changed it to "legitimizing diversity in the solving of common problems." Plans for a full-dress White House parley were quietly scrapped.

As if to prove that this was not a fluke, a 1983 conference sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities came to a similar "conclusion." At the NEH conference, representatives from 11 institutions of higher learning could agree only that "the curriculum should reflect the particular goals and character of the institution. There is no single effective education, and what works well at one institution may be a disaster at another . . . ." In other words, they punted. But deciding not to decide was itself a powerful ratification of curricular disintegration because it left the academic culture untouched.

A slightly different variant of the new ideology can be seen in Brown University's hot New Curriculum. More aptly, it is a non-curriculum. When it was introduced in the late



1960s, it abolished all course requirements and most of the other traditional standards of academia as well. The grade "D" was summarily dropped. But that hardly mattered because Brown students could take any number of courses pass/fail. And if by chance they did fail, that also did not really matter. Under the new dispensation, failures were not recorded on transcripts. ("I regard recording [failures] for the external world both superfluous and intimidating, or punishing," a Brown dean explained.) A Brown student could also fail as many as four courses and

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still graduate—with the equivalent of seven semesters of work at most schools.

Not coincidentally, after the New Curriculum was installed, Brown quickly became the hottest school in the Ivy League, if not the country. It has become, in fact, one of the nation's first "designer colleges." At one time or another in the 1980s, it boasted such luminaries in its student body as Amy Carter and the daughters of Jane Fonda, Geraldine

Ferraro, Barbara Bach, Claus von Bulow, and Prince Michael of Greece. For a few years, it was the trendiest school in the country, even topping Harvard in the number of applications. It is also a museum piece of the academic mind in its purest state.

### **More Hillsdales, Fewer Harvards Needed**

**W**hat begins in the upper reaches of the academy inevitably works its way down into the classrooms of elementary schools where the basic issues of literacy are at stake. Ultimately, the legacy of the gut culture is a generation of kids with self-esteem well intact, but unable to read, write, or do even basic math—in other words, self-satisfied illiterates. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that despite its thinly veiled contempt for the lower level schools, the university is, in fact, the home office of educational mediocrity in America.

Moreover, higher education simply is failing to educate students properly. That failure is not incidental nor is it the result of occasional lapses; it is built into the large-scale modern university system. In order to recover, schools need to go back to the fundamental question: What are the values and goals of a liberal education? They also need to return to educating undergraduates, and to a coherent

curriculum, rather than pursuing grants. Professors need to be reminded that students and classroom teaching are their first priorities.

It is no accident that the handful of schools which haven't forgotten what education is all about are small private liberal arts colleges, or that these institutions are neglected by their larger and more "mainstream" counterparts, the Big Ten and state universities. Hillsdale College is a sterling example, however, of a place where professors and administrators acknowledge that teaching is more than the mere transmittal of dead facts and that teachers are molders of human beings who can, in the act of communicating, convey passion and excitement about learning while fostering new skills in students. This is why we ought to hope for more Hillsdales and fewer Harvards in the future of American education. ▲

**Attention Readers:** Michael Medved's December issue of *Imprimis*, "Hollywood vs. Religion," will appear in this month's *Reader's Digest*. Look for March *Imprimis* author William Raspberry's essay, "A Journalist's View of Black Economics," in the August issue of *Reader's Digest*.

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## Lithuanian Prime Minister Sends Delegation to Hillsdale

In the first exchange of its kind, Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene sent six high-ranking representatives of the new Lithuanian government to Hillsdale this May. Ludwig von Mises Chair of Economics Richard Ebeling and George Munson Chair of Political Economy Gary Wolfram are hoping to spend

much of the summer in Lithuania delivering lectures and attending seminars throughout Lithuania.

Hillsdale College President George Roche has also agreed to speak at the University of Vilnius upon the inauguration of a new economics program in cooperation with Hillsdale

College. Over a hundred books from the Hillsdale College Press have already been donated to Vilnius.

The Lithuanian delegation to Hillsdale attended the 17th annual Ludwig von Mises Lectures in which nearly 30 economists and businessmen discussed the state of "Austrian School" economics, dedicated to the free market and an end to government intervention in the marketplace. Hillsdale and the Financial Development Group of Lansing, Michigan coordinated the delegation's visit to a number of other free-market organizations in the U.S.

George Roche commented, "We were the first American college the Lithuanian government chose to send a delegation to, and we feel very honored. In a special two-hour session, the delegation addressed our students and faculty about Lithuania's bold intentions to sweep away decades of central planning and socialism in favor of a free-market system which, if successful, will be even more free market-oriented than our own economy."

He added, "It was a moving experience for all of us at Hillsdale to meet men and women of such courage and vision. Terrible dangers and problems still lie ahead in Lithuania's fight for freedom. If we can be of any small service, it is only right that Hillsdale get involved." ▲



*SEATED: George Roche, President, Hillsdale College; Kestutis Glaveckas, Lithuanian Member of Parliament and Professor of Economics, Vilnius University.*

*BACK ROW, LEFT TO RIGHT: Aleksandras Sbtromas, Professor of Political Science, Hillsdale College; Violetta Sbtromas, vocalist, recording artist; Vytenis Alekaitis, economist, Lithuanian Ministry of Economic Affairs; Algis Dobrovolskis, Minister of Social Security; Filomena Jaseviciene, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Economic Affairs; June Roche; Kestutis Baltramatis, economist, Lithuanian Council of Ministries; Romualdas Visokavicius, President, Lithuanian Bank of Commerce and Industry; Lina Anuzis, Saul Anuzis, President, Financial Development Group.*

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