



## College Daze

By Charles Murray

*Since we have simplified college and used it as a way to delay adulthood, parents should rethink sending their children to college immediately after graduating high school. Time spent working or in the military will not hurt America's youths, and it may help them become grown-ups who will understand the worth and value of higher education.*

College is not all it is cracked up to be. Dumbed down courses, flaky majors, and grade inflation have conspired to make the term B.A. close to meaningless. Another problem with today's colleges is more insidious: they are no longer good places for young people to make the transition from childhood to adulthood. Today's colleges are structured to prolong adolescence, not to midwife maturity.

Once upon a time, college was a halfway house for practicing how to be a grown-up. Students could not count on the academic deans to make allowances for adolescent misbehavior. If they wanted to avoid getting kicked out, they had to weigh the potential consequences of their actions, just as in adult life. The student-teacher relationship was more distant and less nurturing than in high school—more like the employee-supervisor relationship awaiting them after graduation. Students had to accept that they no longer got hugs for trying hard. If they did not get the job done, they were flunked with as little ceremony as they would be fired by an employer.

This apprenticeship in adulthood has been gutted. The light workload alone can make college today a joke. The most recent data say that students self-report only about fourteen hours per week spent studying—presumably the true figure

is even lower. The definition of “weekend” has sprawled to the point that, as a Duke administrator put it, “We’ve run out of classroom space between 10:00 a.m. and 2:30 p.m., Tuesday through Thursday.”

The demanding professor is close to extinction. Due dates for papers are commonly extended when the student just cannot get it done. Many professors permit quizzes or even final exams to be made up if missed—missed not because of an emergency at home or a fever of 104, but just, “sort of, like, missed.” At many schools, student evaluations of professors are now systematically collected and used as part of the tenure decision process. Warm and sympathetic is in. Strict and demanding is out.

Professors are under pressure to accommodate students even when it comes to right and wrong answers. Talk to any college teacher and you will hear bemused accounts of encounters with students who think that the teacher’s criticisms of their work are “just your opinion”—no more valid than the student’s opinion—as well as stories of students who make serious trouble for teachers who refuse to adjust their grades.

Meanwhile, colleges today take pride in making student life as warm and comfy as life at home with Mom and Dad. It used to be that the girls had housemothers to do bed checks and the guys might have a proctor living on the dorm corridor,

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but otherwise students were on their own. This is no longer the case. Colleges now have large bureaucracies of “residential life staff” charged with responding to any scrape that our little darlings might suffer. Barrett Seaman—whose book *Binge* is the indispensable guide to this new college world—found that his alma mater, Hamilton College (a school with 1,700 students), now has twenty-six full-time people to manage student issues that in the 1960s were handled by only three. Hamilton is not exceptional.

And so I offer this heretical thought for parents of high school students nearing graduation: if you want

your child to grow up responsible and independent, sequester the college tuition money. Encourage your child to join the military; work abroad as a volunteer for some worthy cause; or just move to a different city, get a real job, and support himself for a few years.

There is no intellectual loss in delaying college. On the contrary, your child will probably gain from the wait. Plato and Tolstoy were not writing for kids. The real danger lies in raising children who reach their twenties still thinking like children. The years after high school are for learning how to be a grown-up. Today’s colleges are terrible places to do that.

### Also by Charles Murray:

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- Too many people are going to college. Almost everyone should get training beyond high school, but the number of students who want, need, or can profit from four years of residential education at the college level is a fraction of the number of young people who are struggling to get a degree. We have set up a standard known as the B.A., stripped it of its traditional content, and made it an artificial job qualification. Then we stigmatize everyone who does not get one. For most of America’s young people, today’s college system is a punishing anachronism.
- America’s future depends on how we educate the academically gifted. An elite already runs the country, whether we like it or not. Since everything we watch, hear, and read is produced by that elite, and since every business and government department is run by that elite, it is time to start thinking about the kind of education needed by the young people who will run the country. The task is not to give them more advanced technical training, but to give them an education that will make them into wiser adults; not to pamper them, but to hold their feet to the fire.

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