

# Professors These Days

## By John Warner

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The world will never be short of “kids these days” essays.

Two recent examples got on my radar: Mark Bauerlein’s lament in the *Times* and Prof. Keith Parsons’ “Message to My Freshman Students” where he drops some knowledge on the youth today about the difference between a “teacher” and a “professor.”

My personal favorite of the genre is from three years ago, in which the current generation of students were called “unteachable.”

At their core, these essays speak to a disconnect in values between professor and student. Professors see one thing as important, students another, and the professors, believing themselves to be the authority<sup>[1]</sup> in this particular relationship, seek to drop some knowledge on the young-uns, usually in the form of a lecture that makes it clear things used to be better.

These clashes of values are inevitable. The traditional college-aged student is young. Even those of us who came after the Baby Boom, are old. As my students are quick to remind me, as old as their parents.

The “kids these days” essayists are identifying a serious issue, a disconnect that stands in the way of important connections.

We have a problem. The question remains, how do we solve it?

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I think we significantly overestimate the traditional college student’s understanding of “college,” at least in the way faculty seem to see college. We think it is for one thing, students another.

At the same time, lecturing to students how the old days were better/different accomplishes less than nothing, but only serves to drive the wedge deeper.

Yes, helicopter parenting. Yes, credentialism and consumerism. Yes, excess self-esteem. I experience frustrations over all of these things, but what good is my frustration if it doesn't come coupled with a quest for understanding?

When I see a disconnect between what I think is important, and what my students seem to value, we talk about it. We share our values.

At the second class period of my first-year writing course, I ask for a show of hands as to how many of them would take a grade of B+ right now (higher than the usual semester average), and they'd never have to come to class again.

Fifteen out of twenty raise their hands. The other five think it's a trap or refuse to accept a grade lower than an A.

I ask why they would take this deal.

The logic is obvious:

B+ is a good grade, better than many expect otherwise.

They could get that good grade without doing any work. This would free them up to do other things or work harder in their other classes.

English 110 is a gen ed course, which we all know don't matter.

English class always sucks.

I acknowledge these beliefs. I respect these beliefs because they are the product of the world in which these students are asked to work.

I then try to move the discussion deeper. I ask where these beliefs come from; Answer: School, parents, life. I ask them what they're hoping for from their college experience; Answer: Lots of things, but mostly a career, which means they get to entertain the possibility of having a decent life.

I ask them if “learning” something is part of their college plan. I ask them if their first-year writing class might have anything in it that they’d like to learn. When I ask if they’d extend the same deal to their entire degree, almost all of them – save the handful who are in college under duress[2] - say that would be ridiculous. They could never expect to succeed post college if they didn’t learn *anything*.

Here, I try to add some perspective from my position. I identify the fundamental tension in contemporary higher education between education and training, personal development and credentialing. I talk about how some people believe that college should be oriented around helping students find employment and career. I tell them that most college faculty are likely more oriented around a somewhat different proposition[3].

I then share my values. I tell them that, in my view, the process of learning is far more important than the product of a grade, that a C+ student may be better off than that B+ student, depending on where they’re coming from and where they’re going. I explain that I will never tell them how to get an “A,” because to me, an A absent the development of a meaningful process that makes them self-regulating writers is meaningless. I tell them that I see my role as the person who will push them to be engaged with the work, to help them refine their process and if they follow that path, good things usually result.

I look around at the world my generation and the others before me have built and I question why exactly we should be so eager to tell our students what’s important to them. All of their attitudes that I find troublesome are birthed by a culture we made for them.

I don’t really know what it’s like to be eighteen years old in this world, so I need to take the time to listen. I have no idea if my world view will be relevant to my students and the world they’re going to live in. I do my best to be an example they might like to follow, but to demand fealty seems, frankly, ridiculous.

Professors these days, I tell ya.

## **NOTES:**

[1] A “moral authority” in Bauerlein’s case.

[2] Their parents are “making” them go to college even though they didn’t want to, or have some other dream in mind.

[3] I believe most students want an education (as opposed to training), but that education better come coupled with good prospects for employment.

*John Warner is author of the story collection, Tough Day for the Army, and a novel, The Funny Man, on teaching, writing and never knowing when you're going to be asked to leave.*