

What's Causing Anxiety on Campus?



Written by Victor Brown

Published: 11-01-2016

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During the time I spent teaching at a small liberal arts college, I had occasion one day to have lunch in the cafeteria with one of the school's "wellness counselors". I had not met her previously, so I asked about what she and her staff did, how many of them were assigned to their department, etc.

I was astounded to hear how many counselors we were employing – apparently all of them completely busy – at our small college. We offered a safe living environment, small classes, and a significant institutional focus on first year students, helping them make the transition from home to residential college life.

I told the counselor that the students in my classes seemed happy and well adjusted, but she assured me that anxiety and depression were on the rise, and students were seeking counseling in significantly increasing numbers.

Last month, the Wall Street Journal picked up on this same theme (<http://www.wsj.com/articles/students-flood-college-mental-health-centers-1476120902>) in an article that discussed the roughly 50% growth in anxiety and depression among college students in the last five years.

SeeThruEdu, for its part, recently linked to a column by Gracy Olmsted of The Federalist (<http://seethruedu.com/10-things-i-wish-id-done-my-freshman-year-of-college/>), who wrote about some of the stress-relief activities (more sleep, friendships, etc.) she would recommend to students.

But what is causing the stress? The Wall Street Journal article reported that college therapists are unclear as to why this trend is happening. To quote the article:

“It is unclear why the rates of mental-health problems seem to be increasing among college students. Therapists point to everything from the economy and rising cost of tuition to the impact of social media and a so-called helicopter-parenting

style that doesn't allow adolescents to experience failure.”

That strikes me as a fairly weak diagnosis. Parents have always been parents, the students in my courses didn't seem to be too concerned about (or even overly familiar with) current trends in the economy, and any tuition costs not being paid by their parents or reduced through merit aid seemed to be safely tucked away in the “I'll think about it later” portion of the student brain.

What, then? Is it the stress of hours upon hours of time laboring on their coursework? I think not. Studies have shown that students spend far less time studying than in other activities. The Heritage Foundation recently compiled data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics Time Use Survey. As reported by The Federalist (<http://thefederalist.com/2016/09/11/study-college-students-spend-far-time-playing-studying/>) in September:

According to the survey, the average full-time college student spends only 2.76 hours a day on education-related activities. This includes both class time and studying, for an average of 19.3 hours every week.

So, if constant worry about the economy, tuition bills and parents is not the issue, and if overwork in courses are clearly not behind the problem, what is causing all of the anxiety that has increased so dramatically in the last five years?

I'm certainly no psychologist, but I have my own theory. This five- year time period coincides exactly with campuses erupting over micro-aggressions, trigger warnings, use of highly charged terms like “House Master” (Harvard), choice of Halloween costumes (Yale), names of long-dead white men on buildings (Princeton), and all sorts of other nonsense.

That's the problem, in my opinion. Students, led by faculty, have turned inward. And inward thinking breeds an overabundance of emphasis on the self. When

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the self becomes the most important, attention is paid to anxieties that would probably go relatively unnoticed if a student was highly engaged in outward-facing activities, thinking about the great things that really matter – and his or her future role in all of that.

College years should be exciting, illuminating, and stimulating. Reading and studying broadly about cultures, religions, politics, and technological advancement should be occupying the mind.

My advice to students is to start in their first year to figure out what they want to begin to do in just three more years. Seek advice from faculty, graduate students, guest speakers on campus, involved alumni, etc.

Arrange internships in organizations that appeal to you in terms of the markets they serve and the types of products or services they provide. Explore actively, gaining an understanding of why good people can think so differently – read the New York Times and the Wall Street Journal in their entirety (I almost wrote “cover to cover”) every day.

If students plunge into the broader world of change and opportunity, they will necessarily become less centered on themselves, dismiss the “trigger warning” nonsense they hear from inwardly-focused faculty, and be simply too busy to let much of that anxiety take hold.

Of course, some students need to deal with legitimate anxiety and depression issues. Life is like that. But my instinct tells me that a strong dose of outward focus and activity will do much to help the many students who just feel stressed out.

[For more about the author, visit VictorBrown.net](http://VictorBrown.net)