

Time for Students and Faculty to Get Down to Business



Written by Victor Brown

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Even I have grown weary of the commentaries decrying the recent nuttiness on college campuses. The relatively staid nonsense at Ivy universities involving Halloween costumes and “House Master” titles has given way to outright intimidation and violence at Evergreen State, Middlebury, Mizzou and Berkeley, to name just a few.

I’ve certainly written my share of commentaries on all of this, but more recently have been focusing my thoughts on what we need to do to turn this situation around, and to help our colleges and universities get back to the business of educating young people to be leaders of our society.

The burden falls on both faculty and students, of course, and the best phrase I can come up with is for all of them to “get down to business”. And the business of higher education has nothing to do with time spent on perceived micro-aggressions, protesting speakers who have every right to share their views, and shattering storefronts in town. When they engage in this havoc it is generally on matters that they are unlikely to even think about once they get out into the real world of taxes, children, work, and crabgrass.

I came to academia after a three decade career in corporate America, so I guess it is not surprising that I carried over an approach to teaching that was really all business – and I mean business in the general sense.

The business and economics courses I taught were all highly structured. The course calendar was meticulously planned prior to the start of the semester. Each class was focused on a specific topic, and I made sure that the topics covered were those that students would most need to understand when they found themselves in their own careers.

Contemporary articles from the business and trade press supplemented the more academic materials that were part of the course.

“Visiting executives” joined us to speak about selected

topics from their current experience. For example, a corporate anti-trust attorney addressed price fixing in a way that the students would never forget.

Each week we had readings from academic texts, relevant articles from business and professional journals, newspapers and periodicals such the New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg, etc.

The PowerPoint lecture slides (I wanted students to focus on the content and discussion, not take notes in class) were posted on our internal system immediately after each class.

Every week, at the first class meeting, there was a 10-question quiz on the prior week’s content – readings, lectures, visiting executive presentations, etc. We never, ever missed a quiz and the students knew it was coming. Lots of steady work for them, and for me – but it kept their heads in the game, kept them current, and contributed to much better knowledge retention.

Absences were tolerated only under the most unusual circumstances, approved in advance, and almost never taken.

Four major case studies, centered on current issues of debate in society, forced the students to objectively research and consider opposing points of view, and then arrive at their own well thought out conclusions.

I read and “tool tracked” every word of every case study. Points were awarded on the quality of research, organization, clarity of thought and – get this – proper spelling, grammar and punctuation. Grading was exhausting and took a large amount of time. But the rapid student improvement during the semester in all areas was remarkable, once they realized that this was serious stuff.

In their ratings at the end of each semester, the students documented the time spent outside the classroom working on my course. The Dean seemed to think it was

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excessive, but the students never complained. In fact, their written assessments of the course were uniformly outstanding. I still get emails from former students who thank me for the content we covered and the way it was organized, as it has proven helpful to them in their own careers.

So, what's the point in recounting all of this? The point is that faculty needs to demand the highest performance possible of their students and themselves. Structure and deliver course content that is highly time consuming but also highly useful. Deal with facts, not perceptions. Keep students so busy that they don't have the time or the inclination for useless and counterproductive activities. They're paying a fortune for this education – smashing windows and protesting Halloween costumes has nothing to do with delivering what they need during these four short years.

The faculty, if they perform their functions seriously, will also find they have little time left over for non-essential pursuits. The proper structuring, delivering and updating of courses takes an enormous amount of time. No more idyllic summers, as that is the time when most of the heavy lifting has to be done.

This heavy lifting extends far beyond the course work, or should. Faculty members need to work with all administrative and staff functions of the college to address the very real problems that threaten the institution's existence, and to find solutions that work in today's world. Just a few for starters:

What are we doing to address the unconscionable fact that 42% of all enrolled students never obtain a degree, even within six years? Why? Are we admitting the wrong students? Are we not offering relevant coursework? Are we not giving them value for their money (students are pretty savvy consumers, and can figure this out quickly)?

What are we doing about reducing costs and reducing onerous student debt? Would partnerships with

community colleges – real, structured partnerships – work for our students? Are we challenging the full range of courses, sports, and other activities offered on campus? Are we suffering from administrative bloat?

How do we take advantage of digital technology to lower costs, make the best professors accessible to more students, and apply the technology to information management?

How are we assembling faculty in today's world of outsourced and contingent labor? Is tenure the right answer? Are adjuncts the right answer? Some combination of both? How do we identify, attract and retain outstanding faculty of all types? How do we market a well- designed faculty to students (instead of pretending in admissions materials that adjuncts don't exist).

All of these questions, and many more, need the focused attention of faculty. Faculty are the keepers of the product that the college delivers, and they need to lead the thought process, challenge the status quo and implement cutting edge change in all areas.

There goes the summer vacation, or sabbatical, or the “recharging of batteries” time. Higher education is at a crossroads, the proportion of full-time faculty is dwindling, and those remaining full-time faculty members, like the students, have much to do.

And it doesn't include spending time on inane and destructive protests.

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