

Myths Held by the Two Cultures of America and the Role of Universities in Bridging the Gap

American educational institutions, colleges and universities included, have fostered a cultural split in America between those with college degrees and those without. This is not the only cultural split in the country, nor is it, perhaps, the most critical we might address. Certainly, the split between racist, anti-racist, and passive racist cultures needs immediate attention. The split between rural and urban cultures is also unfortunate. Nevertheless, because I come from higher education, I choose to focus on that split, hoping that higher education can take some responsibility for pulling these two cultures closer together at a time when they appear to have moved too far away for democratic dialog.

All these cultures overlap. While we have some justification for stereotyping, there exist counterexamples, as we all know, urban racists with and without college education. Let us narrow our focus, however, to those differences that we might identify as occurring between those with college degrees and those without.

Even in naming these diverging cultures, I have offended those without degrees by using a negation. They lack something. Marx might have been more sympathetic: the workers and the non-workers. Let's bridge the gap: The Workers and the College-educated, attempting a compromise that will equally offend both.

I will use a rather pedestrian definition of *culture* as a common set of expectations of proper behavior. Within a culture, individuals may differ in these expectations. The culture itself, however, is defined by that more limited set of those expectations held in common.

Proper behavior among the College-educated includes a willingness to do homework, pay attention in class, read books, accept the authority of the more educated, avoid being disruptive, and be willing to play the game of finding the key to success. ("Will that be on the test, sir?")

Proper behavior among Workers is to value experience over book learning, to rely on the "school of hard knocks" over the opinions of those more educated, to act independently rather than as directed, and to define success independently of the opinions of others. ("I don't kiss ass.")

I will assert, although I recognize that I need data to properly support this assertion, that behaving as expected leads to success in receiving a degree, not IQ and not a personality trait, such as the ability to delay gratification. Perhaps the average IQ and average ability to defer gratification of the College-educated are slightly higher than that of Workers. Nevertheless, I assert that the key determining factor that allows some people to earn a degree is their appropriate culturally-expected behavior.

IQ doesn't differentiate. We have many low IQ college graduates. You don't have to be brilliant to get a degree. You must behave as expected. Also, we have many high IQ Workers. IQ is not a strong enough determinant to define college success for 90% of the people arrayed around the average. Within a couple of standard deviations of the mean, a person with the proper behaviors can obtain a degree.

While socialization begins at home, sorting begins in pre-school. You can be tracked, held up, and dismissed for improper behavior. I have found doctoral students to be the most highly socialized of all. They study hard. They know what will be on the test. They sacrifice. Pity the poor ABD (all-but-degree doctoral student) who lacks his final one percent of proper cultural behavior to write a miserable dissertation.

Each culture has its myths. The College-educated believe that earning a degree makes them into supermen. Their sacrifice must be rewarded. They deserve high salaries. Workers believe that mental work, although distasteful, is not "hard." Only those who work hard deserve higher salaries.

The existence of two primary cultures in a nation does not necessarily lead to problems. On the other hand, the lack of conflict does not guarantee a peaceful future. India and Rwanda are lessons in the collapse of civility after periods of tolerance.

The 2016 election (and the political rhetoric leading up to it) ramped up the demonization of opposite cultures. While President Trump was motivated by narcissism, his behavior leading to the Covid-19 crisis echoed Worker cultural norms: distrust intellectuals, act out of experience, and display independence. The disparagement of science and education could not be clearer.

Hilary Clinton's unguarded remark that Trump's supporters were a "basket of deplorables" reflects the feeling of many college-educated people. The Workers are called dumb, lazy, and unable to defer gratification.

Other symptoms of cultural distrust include initiation rites that mark members. On one side are college graduations with Latinate paper certifications. On the other, I was initiated into Worker culture before I was initiated into degree culture. On the day I turned twenty-one in 1987, I and the other foundry foreman left work at midnight, after our shift, and crossed the street to Cascarelli's Tavern. We ordered pitcher after pitcher of beer, telling foundry stories of fire and mayhem. I just kept drinking. I wasn't going to let these men put me to shame. I could drink with the best of them. I passed the test and even made it home, although I was mighty sick the next day. It was a hell of an initiation.

Yet, the primary symptom of the tension between cultures is the ability of demagogues to sow fear and distrust between them.

I don't know of any research that might help me measure the force of probable causes, especially between "human nature" and organizational behavior norms. The two seem

interlocked. The behavior that was allowed on the foundry floor is anathema in today's office. Those who were successful in manufacturing are less successful within service companies. Were my fellow foundrymen born deviant? Some of them, perhaps. Some of them, however, made the transition, but many are now unemployed and resentful. All three foundries in my hometown have been closed for more than 20 years.

Did the spread of college education after the GI bill of the 1950s foster the demise of manufacturing and the rise of office work (after my second degree there was no way I was going back to steel mills and foundries) or was it the opposite: the demand for college educated people by rising office employment drove the demand for higher education? Causality is hard to determine with statistics, and the rise of office work and degree production has the ring of a positive reinforcing cycle in any case: the more education that was provided, the more productive office work could be, and the more a degree became necessary for a job, and so on.

Why is the culture of today's office so different than yesterday's manufacturing floor? How much of the chaos of our old manufacturing systems with their need for continual ad hoc solution development and high tolerance for ambiguity could be tolerated in today's offices? If we examine the success of organizations like Apple and Facebook, perhaps a lot more. The bureaucracy of today's office in many cases, echoes the stultification of independent behavior in education.

Let me go out on a limb: the cause of the tension between College-educated and Worker cultures is that college-educated behavior is primarily a result of rewards in the education system, not primarily because of the need for that behavior in society. Education has not caused success. It has caused the separation of the successful from the unsuccessful.

While docility is desired behavior for slaves, it is not useful for organizations depending on innovation and ad hoc problem solving. Still, many organizations go through long periods of "maturity," where market dominance has favored repeated patterns of behavior and little innovation, until innovation outside the industry disrupts the equilibrium. Retail is currently undergoing such a disruption. Higher education is now mature and may be a target of innovative organizations outside the industry.

Docility is learned behavior, taught in schools and colleges. It is the desired behavior for mature organizations. It is well rewarded.

And that is the heart of the problem: most of the wealth is controlled by the College-educated, who view themselves as behaving in a way such that they deserve this wealth, while the less fortunate Workers view their behavior as just as valuable, perhaps more so than that of those in the other culture. Workers, however, receive little respect, wealth, or power.

Both groups believe that they have worked hard when work was available to them. Both groups view their opposite as lazy (according to their own definitions of lazy), untrustworthy, and disrespectful.

The Thirty Years' War was fought over lower stakes, but similar estimations.

While stifling the rise of demagogues may seem easier than pulling distrustful cultures together, the subversion of anti-demagogic institutions is hard to stop when cultures are at loggerheads.

No solution will be possible until most people believe that all people have value. The charm of this belief is its reflexivity, like the Biblical Golden Rule. You may wish to devalue Workers, but by agreeing to this belief with them, you forbid them to devalue you.

Colleges and universities can pursue this path by reducing the artificial valuing of people with a degree. Instead of selling degrees, colleges should sell certifications of competence. As more content is delivered online, the necessity of screening out those deemed not ready for the content will fall, and colleges and universities will find the sale of content unprofitable.

Certifying competence will be a more profitable endeavor and, because there will be no need to screen applicants and fail those misbehaving, the enterprise will be more democratic.

The current pandemic is pushing us to re-evaluate classroom instruction at all levels. What is gained when docility is no longer rewarded? Do some of the children who could not abide sitting in a classroom for hours, who were shamed by their peers, and who hated school, lose when they must learn at home, sometimes only when they feel like it?

I never knew how much I hated class until I was free of it. One college I worked for had a strong online division. One student I knew (with a slightly different name), MonaLisa Grey, came to this regional school from Milwaukee, far outside the school's normal recruiting range. She was a personable young woman who worked in the Admissions Office. She lived in one of the few dormitory rooms on campus, but she took all her classes online. When we asked her why she came to this college and why she took all her classes online, she answered, "Well, I hate Milwaukee, and I hate classes." The wisdom of MonaLisa Grey.

Teaching children to evaluate the costs of not following rules is not the same as making children follow rules. Learning to obey is not the same as learning to think.

The role of faculty in inspiring students is important, but this need not always be mixed with the transfer of content. As degrees are devalued, the role of faculty will shift, but their importance need not decrease. Nevertheless, with a changing role and a democratization of clientele, the relationship to the institution and the nature of the role of faculty will shift.

In summary, colleges and universities can learn from the pandemic and avoid a descent into financial challenges by devaluing degrees and broadening their market to the advising of all and certifying of competencies of all types. Catering only to the most docile products of elementary

and secondary education is leading to two tensely divided cultures. It is in higher education's interest to bridge this gap.

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