

## FIRST PERSON

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### Hey, Dude!

#### **A professor ends another semester filled with students who couldn't be bothered to learn his name**

By J.R. EGAN

My reverie about retiring to work at Wal-Mart or Home Depot or anywhere other than where I was at the moment (grading papers while waiting for students to appear during my designated office hours) was broken by someone knocking timorously at my open door.

What's this? A student actually showing up to ask for help?

"Come in," I said, moving my briefcase and jacket off the rarely used chair for student visitors.

I listened as she rattled off the usual excuses — I was out of town, I was too busy, I didn't know your number, I needed to wash my hair — for her two-week absence from my class with nary a phone call or e-mail message. I handed her a tissue as she cried about her hard life.

Later that very day, as I drove off the campus, I saw her whisk by in a shiny new BMW while chatting away on her cellphone. She had felt it was unfair to count the absences and missed assignments against her grade — as was stated clearly in the syllabus that she had obviously not read — because her parents *insisted* she go along on the family vacation trip to Cancún.

My field is communications. While many in academe, myself included, long to escape the increasingly disrespectful classroom and the tedium of grading stacks of final papers that read like half-thought-out rough drafts, many of my former colleagues in the news media are clamoring to get in. The fantasy of returning to academe in the twilight of one's career to share one's knowledge and experiences with legions of attentive and bright students is a powerful stimulant.

As a reality check, I herewith share some of my recent experiences in higher education to help focus the expectations my professional colleagues should have when considering a move to college teaching. I hope others have had different experiences.

Let me set aside the standard wailings and lamentations that students are dumber than they used to be (although they indeed may be). When I say I believe that students have, on the whole, changed for the worse, I'm not talking about standardized test scores or grade-point averages. I am talking about behavior, and I am basing my stance on 30 years in the college classroom.

In the past, students seemed to see going to class as their main activity during their years enrolled at a university; work was something they did to earn enough money to survive.

Today, nearly all my students work — many of them full time — and class attendance and homework are things they squeeze in as long as it doesn't interfere with the rest of their lives. I have received complaints that a mere 10 pages of reading for the next class were too many because the students were so busy. They expect you to provide makeup lectures, exercises, and tests at their convenience. Most drive nice cars, wear the latest fashions, and have both a cellphone and an iPod, yet tell me they can't afford a \$25 textbook.

Disrespect in the classroom is rampant. Many students don't even know their professor's name or how to pronounce it by mid-term, much less recall the names of faculty members from the previous semester. During a timed laboratory exercise recently, I had a student call out to me across the room, "Hey, dude!"

Once, while discussing the nature of classroom manners and decorum, I had a woman pipe up from the back row: "Listen, man, I paid \$300 for this class, and if I want to sit here and trim my toenails, that's what I am going to do."

That detachment from the classroom environment works the other way as well. Students from the immediate past semester routinely are amazed when I recognize them in the new semester's class or when I see them in the hall and actually say hello using their name. They probably find me only vaguely familiar.

The professoriate has become a nameless wait staff, paid to deliver what the customer wants, when it is wanted, in an entertaining fashion, with a B grade or better. The tuition check is merely the tip for good service.

Students also look at us, standing at the front of class, as entertainment. The professor is the television set droning off in the corner. It (you) can be attended to or not, conversations can be carried on while the "show" slips to background noise, and personal interaction is necessary only when making up excuses for absences or wheedling for a higher grade.

Despite repeated invitations to students to come to my office when they are struggling or if they want to discuss careers, or whatever, my office hours are spent alone 95 percent of the time. And then the rare student visitor usually asks a question that is clearly answered in the syllabus.

In one recent instance, a student tried to explain why he hadn't shown up for the past three classes because he was out of town for a "family emergency" (based on my experience, that is the new excuse of choice, surpassing both homework-eating dogs and flat tires). Turned out that he was having a fight with his out-of-town girlfriend, as another student let slip.

Just this semester, I had a student walk up to me at the lectern two minutes past the beginning of our third class session. I was finishing getting the computer and projector fired up to start the discussion, but no, her need to talk to me on her schedule trumped the start of class. She wanted me to sign paperwork to allow her into the class late, saying she didn't realize not attending the

first day of class would bump her for someone on the waiting list — another tidbit clearly stated in the college catalog and online class schedule.

I asked what caused her to miss class. She said she went snowboarding with friends. They "made" her come, she lamented. I declined to sign and started class. She stomped off, probably to complain to the dean, the provost, or even the president, which is done more frequently than you would imagine.

It is as if someone with a Microsoft software glitch went straight to Bill Gates to complain. Students, however, are where the money comes from, so they always get an audience upstream.

In a particularly surly class last semester, students continued to ignore my requests that they stop their computer play during the class discussion. I exaggerated my irritation by telling them that their behavior had driven me to retire and that I was going to take that job as a Wal-Mart greeter. One student was so offended by my hyperbole that she complained to my chairman, the dean, and even the provost. Who knows exactly what she said, but did anyone ask me my take on the incident? No. The dean just said I should apologize.

That's why it's tough to ignore student misbehavior: They are the cash cows that make the place run. Once the admissions office lets them in, you are expected to let them out so that the desks can be filled with the next year's fresh student harvest.

Then, just as you feel the bitterness becoming more than you can stand, you get a reminder of what keeps you in the business. Just today, I got two such reminders — e-mail messages from former students thanking me for my rigorous approach to education. Looking back, they said, it not only has helped them in their careers, but in their lives.

I suppose teaching is, like golf, a maddening endeavor. In golf, even after 50 bad shots, if you accidentally hit a beauty, life is good and you love the game and you don't throw the clubs in the lake after all. In teaching, even if you get 50 students who don't care, it's those one or two each term who keep you coming back.

Wal-Mart is going to have to wait.

*J.R. Egan is the pseudonym of a professor of communications at a state university in the South. For an archive of previous First Person columns, see [http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/author\\_list\\_fp.html](http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/archives/author_list_fp.html)*

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