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The 7 Deadly Sins of Students

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AN ACADEMIC IN AMERICA

"Thomas H. Benton," an associate professor of English, offers his take on academic work and life.

I've been teaching for about 10 years now, and, of course, I was a student for 20 years before that. So I have some experience observing my students' sins, and perhaps even more experience committing them.

The sins that I see in the everyday life of the typical college student are not great ones. Most of the time, they don't seem like "sins" at all, even if one accepts the religious significance of the term. But they spring from thoughts and behaviors that, over time, become habits.

Enabled by institutions, students repeatedly take the path of least resistance, imagining they are making creative compromises with duty that express their unique talents. So they choose self-indulgence instead of self-denial and self-esteem instead of self-questioning. They do not understand that those choices will eventually cause more unhappiness than the more difficult paths they chose not to walk.

The traditional model of the "Seven Deadly Sins" provides a helpful means of categorizing -- and perhaps simplifying -- the complicated and cumulative experience I am trying to describe:

Sloth: Students often postpone required readings and assigned preparations, making it hard for them to understand their classes the next day. Gradually, lectures and discussions that were once interesting start to seem boring and irrelevant, and the temptation to skip classes becomes greater and greater, especially when the classes are in the morning. Sometimes students arrive late with -- in my opinion -- insufficient shame, closing the door behind them with a bang. Slothful students regard themselves as full of potential, and so they make a bargain: "I will be lazy now, but I will work hard later." Like St. Augustine, students say to themselves, "Let me be chaste, but not yet." More on lust later.

Greed: Students often pursue degrees not for the sake of learning itself but with the aim of getting a better-paying job, so they can buy a bigger house and fancier cars than those owned by their parents and their neighbors. That often leads to greed for grades that they have not earned. Some students cheat on exams or plagiarize their papers; others, sometimes the most diligent, harass professors into giving them grades unjustified by their performance. The goal of such cheaters and grade-grubbers is not the reality of achievement but the appearance of it. They will then apply to graduate programs or entry-level jobs that they do not really desire and for which they are not really qualified. They want to be lawyers, but they are bored by law courses. They want to be doctors, but they do not care about healing people. They want to go into business, not to provide useful products and services, but to get rich by any means necessary. And so they come to believe that no one has integrity and that there is no basis -- other than the marketplace -- by which value can be judged.

Anger: Seemingly more often than in the past, professors encounter students who are angered by challenging assignments, which they label -- with bureaucratic self-assurance -- "unfair" or even "discriminatory." When students do not succeed, they sometimes conclude that their professors are "out to get them" because of some vague prejudice. Students feel entitled to deference by professors who "work for them and should act like it." They do not come to office hours for clarification about an A-; instead, they argue that they are paying a lot of money and, therefore, deserve a high grade, and, if you don't give it to them, they will "complain to management," as if they were sending back food in a restaurant. One hears rumors of cars and homes vandalized

by angry students. But, perhaps, the easiest places to find uncensored student rage are the anonymous, libelous evaluations of faculty members found online at Web sites such as RateMyProfessors.com. Often those evaluations say less about the quality of a teacher than they do about the wounded pride of coddled students. More on that topic soon.

Lust: I have seen students come to classes barefoot, with bare midriffs and shoulders, in boxer shorts, bathing suits, and other kinds of clothes that, even by fairly casual standards, are more appropriate for streetwalking than higher learning. When did liberation from uniforms transform itself into the social demand that one prepare to be ogled in the classroom? It is hardly a surprise that on RateMyProfessors.com, students are asked to rate their professors' "hotness" -- in other words, the teachers' worthiness to be sexually fantasized about by bored students. Even in high-school classes, as an observer of novice teachers, I have overheard lewd remarks about female teachers from denizens of the back row who fear no rebuke because none is forthcoming from the current culture.

Gluttony: It hardly needs saying that most colleges struggle to control alcohol consumption by students and the embarrassing incidents and tragedies that result from it. But there are other manifestations of gluttony these days. For example, when did it become acceptable for students to eat and drink in class as if they were sitting in a cafeteria? Nowadays, I occasionally encounter a student who thinks it's OK to consume a large, messy, and odorous meal in class. I once saw a student eat an entire rotisserie chicken, a tub of mashed potatoes with gravy, several biscuits, and an enormous soft drink during the first 10 minutes of a lecture. I felt like a jester in the court of Henry VIII. It seems hard these days to find a student in class whose mouth is not stuffed with food. Such students will often say that they have no other time to eat, but previous generations -- who were no less busy -- managed to consume small snacks between classes. That is why colleges have vending machines.

Envy: I think competition is a good thing in education; up to a point, it encourages students to work harder and excel. But the envious student, perhaps daunted by some temporary setback, comes to believe that education is "a rigged game." Envy is the voice of resignation that cringes at the success of one's peers: "Listen to her, trying to impress the teacher, like she's so brilliant. I hate her." Envy is the feeling that no one "earns" anything because there are no objective criteria of accomplishment; and, as a result, success and failure seem to be based on political and personal preferences. But envy is not limited to differences in effort and ability. Even more pervasive is a sense of unjustified economic inequality, but, it seems to me, the fashionable students in their convertibles who jeer the commuters at the bus stop commit a greater sin than those who envy their money and status.

Pride: I once asked a group of 20 students how many thought they were "better than their parents"? All of them raised their hands. I didn't ask, but I assume they all believed they were better than their teachers too. They would rise higher, be more successful, and transcend the limitations of their elders. We read this belief in our students' expressions: "What you know is not worth learning. They're just your opinions anyway. I am young. I have infinite potential. You are old. And you're just a college professor. But I will be rich and famous someday." They have rarely been given a realistic assessment of their abilities and prospects. Out of this pride -- nurtured by the purveyors of unearned self-esteem, personal grievance, dumbed-down courses, and inflated grades (often in the guise of liberality) -- the opportunity to earn an education is squandered by prideful students who can make a potential heaven seem like hell.

The concept of the "Seven Deadly Sins" comes out of the Christian tradition, but it also has value as an ethical guide or at least as a means of avoiding unhappiness. Increasingly, as a professor who teaches undergraduates, I believe that one of the paramount purposes of a liberal-arts education is to help young people acquire the wisdom to escape those sins, particularly the last one from which the others often spring.

A liberal-arts education, as I see it, is not about acquiring wealth and opportunities to further indulge one's desires. Nor is it about cultivating in students an insular, idolatrous view of their nation, ethnic group, gender, or religion. It is also not about celebrating the so-called "great tradition" of authors, philosophers, and artists.

It is about the recognition, ultimately, of how little one really knows, or can know. A liberal-arts education, most of all, fights unmerited pride by asking students to recognize the smallness of their ambitions in the context of

human history, and more. Whether it is grounded in faith or not, a liberal-arts education should help students to combat the Seven Deadly Sins with the "Seven Contrary Virtues" of diligence, generosity, patience, chastity, moderation, contentment, and, most important of all, humility.

Of course, moral perfection seldom arrives at graduation, even in the best of cases. I teach the courses, and yet I must present myself, at last, as the "Chief of Sinners." The behaviors I observe in students often reflect the deeper drives -- the resentments and weaknesses -- of their teachers. Perhaps the impulse to identify the sins of others reflects a corruption more serious than any I have described here. And that is why, next month, I will sermonize on the "Seven Deadly Sins of Professors."

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