

<http://chronicle.com/jobs/news/2006/05/2006051201c/careers.html>

Friday, May 12, 2006

The 7 Deadly Sins of Professors

By THOMAS H. BENTON

AN ACADEMIC IN AMERICA

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

Last month I sermonized about the "[7 Deadly Sins of Students](#)," and it resulted in some predictable reactions: protestations from students and affirmations from professors.

The students, mostly, have learned not to take responsibility for their actions. If they fail to do assignments and miss a substantial number of classes, it's because they are *so busy*, even though said busyness -- if the truth be told -- consists mostly of playing video games, watching television, attending sporting events, and going to drunken parties. In my experience, the ones who are truly busy -- because they are working long hours at a job while going to school, have children to mind, or serious health problems -- are rarely the ones who make excuses about busyness.

It's traditional to think that pride is the root cause of the other deadly sins, but sometimes it works the other way around: Many students have too little to do, and, as the saying goes, "idle hands are the devil's workshop."

But this is not interesting. Slothful students are not news. They have always been thus, and they always will be. To dwell on the shortcomings of students smacks of professorial pride more than anything else. Were most of us any different at their age? If so, it might have been because we had better teachers and better institutions that guided our moral development and had the courage and support to stand behind their beliefs.

In some respects, the students are right: Professors *are* to blame.

We cultivate students' unmerited pride with high praise for mediocre work. And we tolerate all of the other sins by abdicating responsibility for the culture of our classrooms. Again and again, I have heard students say their classes are so easy that almost no effort is required, even for top grades. Residential student life, at many institutions, is mostly free time to explore and indulge one's vices. And we professors -- too busy chasing our ambitions -- avoid maintaining standards because they are time-consuming and costly to our teaching evaluations.

Once again, the traditional model of the "Seven Deadly Sins" provides a helpful means of understanding why so many students are unhappy with their professors, and why so many professors are unhappy in general:

Sloth: Like their students, professors claim to be so busy that they can't give proper attention to their teaching. Some professors begin classes late and dismiss them early; others rarely keep their posted office hours. Students used to complain about deadwood professors reading their lectures from yellowing notes. That's less common now than canned PowerPoint presentations, film screenings, and group discussions in which students -- most of whom have not done the reading -- attempt to do the work of the absentee professor.

All of those techniques use up class time with a minimum of effort and learning. In addition, professors can avoid the hard work of grading by requiring fewer assignments, making them "objective" (i.e., machine gradable), and -- when written assignments and exams are mandated by the curriculum -- inflating the grades. High grades require less written justification, result in fewer student complaints, and require no follow-up advising.

Of course, in many contexts, all of this grading can simply be shifted to teaching assistants and adjuncts who will likewise inflate grades for the same reasons. It's easy to blame the situation on administrators, but the corporate university crept into place because, over the last three decades, professors -- out of apathy and a desire to pursue their own interests -- have slowly abandoned the governance of their institutions to the values of the marketplace.

Greed: Professors often say that they didn't become teachers out of a desire to get rich, but it's hard to believe that most professors chose their careers solely out of a desire to foster "social justice" or some other fashionable form of ostentatious altruism. More often, I think people become professors out of a lack of options: What can one do, after all, with an undergraduate degree in medieval studies or art history? Most entry-level jobs seem unsatisfactory to people who think of themselves as exceptionally gifted.

Unlike doctors and lawyers, most professors forgo big money, but, as a group, they are even more ravenously hungry for status. Humanities faculty members, for example, are less concerned about the higher salaries earned by their counterparts in science (who do have other career options) than they are about what the humanist in the next office is getting paid. This is where greed shades off into pride, but more on that later.

Perhaps the place where greed is most evident among tenured faculty members is in their general refusal to support better pay and benefits for part-timers and graduate students who increasingly do most of the difficult teaching at the major universities where one finds the tenured professors who are very well paid indeed for that Faustian bargain.

Anger: Everyone has heard the saying, "Academic fights are so bitter because the stakes are so small." Every department is a social experiment in which a cluster of people who regard themselves as underpaid and underappreciated are trapped together for decades, forced to endure each other's annoying eccentricities and utterly predictable habits of mind. Every department is a stew of resentments stretching back at least as far as the careers of the oldest senior professor. Every department meeting -- topics, words, inflections, facial expressions -- is as rich with historical reference as a monologue from *Absalom, Absalom!*

Married without the possibility of divorce, angry faculty members exhaust themselves in petty battles over ancient personal resentments that pretend to be principles. And, conversely, because professors become so invested in maintaining the appearance of ideological commitment, it is impossible to discuss matters of principle without the risk of giving personal offense. Instead, professors often choose to cultivate their disagreements in silence or among small clutches of allies who have little more in common than dislike for one powerful person.

Lust: Affairs and adultery happen in departments as they do in other places, but the hostilities linger longer. Apparently, there are also some professors who pursue students in a sexual way, with the perverse justification that it is some kind of initiation into adult life. One recalls the younger Harold Bloom leering at the undergraduate Naomi Wolf (though her belated report of this encounter says more about her lust for media attention than his lust for her). Of course, male faculty members have no monopoly on inappropriate sexual behavior; recall Jane Gallop's observation that her "sexual preference is graduate students." It may be, however, that all of the attention given to lust (and its complex relationship with power) in the last few decades has caused professors to stand aloof from their students -- no lunches, no informal mentorship, no emotional warmth, no hugs -- because of the risk of false accusations from people with lust on their minds.

Gluttony: A lot of concern is directed at alcohol consumption by students, and rightly so. But relatively little attention is given to alcohol consumption by professors. Like students, professors have a lot of unstructured time in which the consolations of the occasional drink can easily develop into an addiction that affects one's performance and judgment in all kinds of ways.

Sometimes professors use pride to turn addiction into virtue: The myth of the "thirsty muse" dramatized by Hemingway and Pollock is still alive, and it includes more than alcohol under the guise of enlightened defiance of bourgeois social norms.

Likewise, obesity for academics is less about gluttony or sloth than it is a form of machismo that crosses gender lines: "I am so busy -- and important -- that I don't have time to mind my health." On the other hand, sometimes the thin among us substitute delicacy for overindulgence and make a point of complaining how the food in the faculty cafeteria is inferior to the meals they've eaten elsewhere and feel entitled to eat every day.

Envy: The whole system of institutional hierarchies and academic ranks seems designed to make professors unhappy with their present circumstances. There is always somewhere better we should be, if only someone in authority would recognize our talents, which are always out of proportion to the place where we work. And even in the context of our present reduced circumstances, someone else has a bigger office, a larger salary, and it's unfair because we deserve more.

So, instead of building cordial relationships with our colleagues and students, we expend our energies trying to impress people somewhere else. We attend conferences not to enhance our knowledge or maintain collegial relationships based on equality, but to seek out the famous and the powerful (whom we secretly resent) and cultivate their approval and patronage.

Or, if we are so fortunate as to attain titles of eminence, we come to believe that our position is wholly merited by our abilities and adopt a mien of condescension and hauteur that probably does more to breed envy than the unrealized ambitions of thousands whose names we do not care to remember.

Pride: If it does nothing else, the process of becoming a professor should involve the recognition of how little one knows. Even in the smallest subfield, there are always new questions, and revolutions in thought arrive with the regularity of new generations of scholars. Perhaps the evident pride of professors is based upon a secret insecurity: Our intellectual and ideological fortresses are built on sand.

Perhaps the ugliest side of professors is the conviction that specialized knowledge about a few narrow subjects confers intellectual and moral authority on matters about which one knows almost nothing. How is it possible, we wonder, that students who do not share our fascination with the English Civil War and Marxism can somehow also be intelligent and ethical people? How is it that we are not consulted in matters of grave national importance? If the world will not come to us for wisdom, then we will stand aloof and make a world for ourselves where we can torment each other, like Milton's vision of hell, while the rest of the world goes about the business of living, unconcerned with the petty disputes that cost many of us any possibility of happiness.

It is not possible to write about the sins of one's profession without suggesting that one is somehow superior to others and therefore guilty of pride, among other vices. Ultimately, however, I am writing this column for myself. I am making a confession and an apology, which might be representative of other professors' experiences, and which may, perhaps, become as helpful to others as it has been for me.

Thomas H. Benton is the pseudonym of a soon-to-be associate professor of English at a Midwestern liberal-arts college. He writes about academic culture and welcomes reader mail directed to his attention at careers@chronicle.com
