

A New Course

UNIVERSITIES FACE PROBLEMS THAT CHRISTOPHER LASCH IDENTIFIED 34 YEARS AGO. HAS THE TIME COME TO FIX THEM?

MAGDALENA KAY

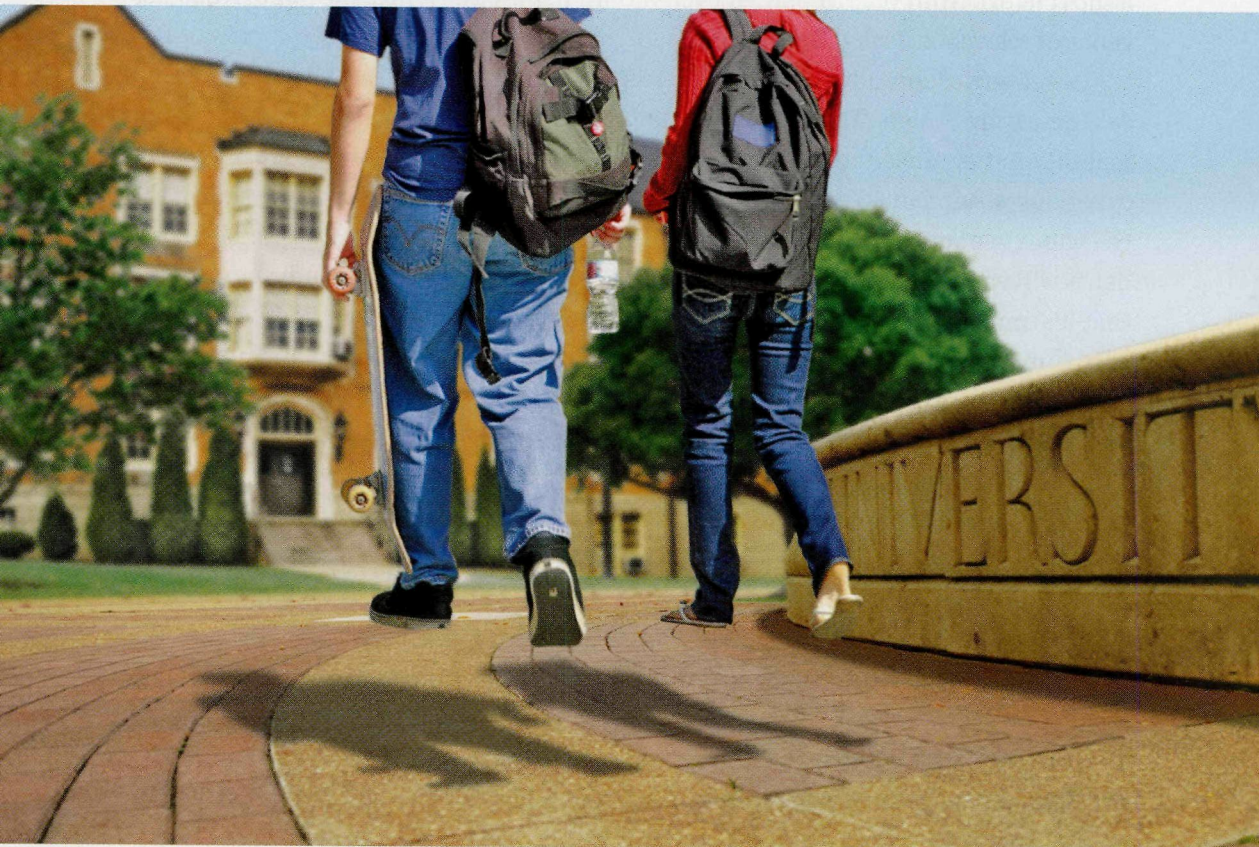
JUDGING BY THE SPATE OF BOOKS that have addressed a sense of crisis in American higher education over the past 50 years, the university system has been in trouble for a long time, and shows no signs of improvement. It's a strange situation: American universities consistently garner the top spots in international rankings, research scholars are constantly quoted by newspaper articles and news shows, and American presidents all seem to have Ivy League credentials. Tuition costs are hitting astronomical highs—approaching the average American's annual salary—and yet students apply to college in massive numbers, apparently undeterred by the prospect of massive debt or the impoverishment of their parents' bank accounts, or both. If the Higher Education Act is not reauthorized this year, fewer students might be tempted to take this plunge. But cost is not what all the fuss is about—at least, not only cost.

Books on the decline of the university come out regularly, with titles that are often stunningly blunt, such as *The University in Ruins*, *The Moral Collapse of the University*, and *Tyrannical Machines: A Report on Educational Practices Gone Wrong and Our Best Hopes for Setting Them Right*. Other titles give a specific diagnosis, such as *Impostors in the Temple: American Intellectuals Are Destroying Our Universities and Cheating Our Students of Their Future*. Recent titles sometimes promise a narrative of recovery, such as *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* or *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*. Such titles seem to point in very different directions: Is there a problem with students, with teachers, with administrators, or maybe with government? If you dare to assert that you don't see any problem at all, you're going to feel pretty lonely. This pervasive sense of crisis shows no signs of being resolved.

Magdalena Kay is an associate professor of English at the University of Victoria.

In 1979 the historian and social critic Christopher Lasch (1932–1994) published *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. An unlikely but deserving bestseller, the book contains an acerbic account of our educational crisis, one that retains most of its relevance today. Lasch is unrelenting: from beginning to end, he lambastes a culture that may be based on valuable ideals but has, nonetheless, gone into decline. After the debacle of the Vietnam War, after the rebellions of the 1960s and the cultural ferment of the 1970s, it made sense for a historian to start reappraising his society. His irritants were local and specific. But how on earth does this matter now?

In academia, an article that is 10 years old is considered dated. More than that, and it might be a “classic,” but only if it’s very good and we can place it in its context. The more recent the research is, the better—or at least, more relevant—it’s assumed to be. In a field such as technology, in which time does not march so much as it whizzes by, the freshness test is understandable. Less so in the humanities and social sciences (a smart book on Shakespeare is a smart book on Shakespeare), but we remain obsessed with making things new. Still, an older work sometimes does say something relevant and, because it’s not new, lets us see what factors have gone into making



us what we are today. Society does not change overnight, but thinking it does lends a sense of drama to our everyday lives. Many of our current feelings have been felt already; our moment is not the only momentous one. Our sense of crisis is real, but it is also nothing new.

LASCH HIMSELF POINTS OUT the relative novelty of relevance itself as an educational concept, and if anything, relevance is even more prized in today's postrecession society. Few teachers and professors have not felt pressure to make their course material more relevant than it may intrinsically seem to their students, and few scholarly writers have not felt pressured to make their research more clearly relevant to land a grant or a publication contract. Course evaluation forms—the bane of university instructors—often ask students to rate on a numerical scale the relevance of the course to their world. You might assume that specialists in contemporary culture would have an easier time of it, but even they are subject to the same pressure. A great writer publishing today, for example, might not be seen as relevant unless her work is explicitly connected to the social issues that preoccupy us right now. Of course, history marches on, and these issues change from year to year, or even month to month. Hence, the built-in obsolescence of relevance itself.

Lasch writes that adhering to the concept of relevance is not just objectionable but self-defeating: it signals an underlying antagonism to education itself, assuming our inability to take an interest in anything beyond our own experiences. We apply this egregious pessimism to students when we assume that they, too, need to be shown the relevance of a subject before they will be interested in it. Nobody can assume that students will want to read Shakespeare just because he is excellent; nobody can assume that learning about Cleopatra will be inherently interesting. An aggressive utilitarianism underlies this call for relevance, in which knowledge is a means and not an end, and the pleasure of viewing it as an end is looked down upon cynically. Volumes could be written on the subject of educators' (and educational administrators') pessimism. Our current sense of crisis is partly a crisis of faith in what we are teaching, not just in how we are teaching it.

For a culture obsessed with immediate gratification, the rewards of studying anything may seem intolerably slow in coming. The question is not just whether we can twist our favorite subject so that its relevance becomes visible, but whether we can persuade people to study at all when so many easier pleasures beckon. Lasch believes that the desire for more relevant courses often comes down to a desire for "intellectually undemanding" courses, so that relevance functions as a smokescreen concealing the reluctance to work hard. Is this overly harsh? Professors like to joke about the popularity of easy courses among students ("Rocks for Jocks," anyone?), and Holly-

wood has had a field day portraying multiple incarnations of student slackers. Teachers love to tell stories about such students, and no classroom would be complete without someone snoring peacefully in the back row.

But Lasch exaggerates. Plenty of students are seeking quality educations, plenty genuinely want to learn certain skills, and plenty are quite willing to be interested in the subjects they're taking. The idea that making something relevant will automatically make it interesting is false. The real problem is that students can find entertainment so easily elsewhere, on the laptops, smartphones, and tablets that are ubiquitous in classrooms today.

We take pleasure in distraction. How can education respond to this fact? It's an ambitious question that involves thinking through what we want education to do. Lasch, like many more-recent authors, gives a potted history of the university to situate his own opinions. He emphasizes its historical focus on moral training (let's not forget that universities were often religious institutions) and proper conduct. Derek Bok, the former Harvard president and author of several books about education, focuses on this, too, and supports the educational mission of building character and teaching civic responsibility. The need to build intellectual (as well as moral) discipline stems from this mission and has been a major educational goal. Universities used to focus far more on history, philosophy, and literature than they do today, when these disciplines are often looked down upon by university administrators—they do not pull in big grant money—and by the public, which often questions their practicality. “Will it get me a job?” is a question often asked by undergraduates choosing a major.

Plenty of students are seeking quality educations, plenty genuinely want to learn certain skills, and plenty are quite willing to be interested in the subjects they're taking.

The capacity to work in a disciplined, diligent way will help to get you a job, and knowing a few solid facts about a particular field will certainly help if you manage to get a job in that field. Skills often build on facts: if you don't know the Constitution, it will be harder to excel as a lawyer than if you do.

As Lasch races through his educational history, he stresses how recent the idea of free choice, or a university degree based on elective classes, really is. (Never mind more current issues like self-grading, peer-grading, and student-centered learning.) The idea that higher education will make you an informed citizen grew hazy once most universities eliminated their universal course requirements.

Not everyone would support teaching citizenship as a goal, though. Stanley Fish, for example, points out that democratic values and academic ones are not the same.

It sounds honorable to speak of civic responsibility, but teachers can't make students into good people—too many variables come between life in the classroom and life outside it—and they probably shouldn't have to, unless we want to pay them a lot more to advise and mentor students off campus as well as on. Fish predicts the unpopularity of his view: "While academics are always happy to be warned against the incursions of capitalism, they are unlikely either to welcome or heed a warning against the incursions of virtue."

In his 2012 book, *College*, Andrew Delbanco writes that a broad humanistic education does provide valuable life training. Vocational education is important, but Delbanco, a literature professor like Fish, holds that academic value and personal value are indeed commensurate. College is not just for getting a job. In this way he

As a student wonders which course is worth her money and which is not, administrators will eye her choice and tell themselves that certain subjects are more lucrative than others.

approaches Lasch's critique of narrowly understood relevance, but with a different goal. He responds to a movement that accelerates every year: the raising of tuition prices and the simultaneous commercialization of education. Here Delbanco aligns himself with Bok, whose *Universities in the Marketplace* blasts our society for conflating commercial and academic values. An expensive education does not necessarily propagate commercial values,

however, and many academics are outspoken critics of consumerism.

But when a university acts like a for-profit enterprise, knowledge itself can begin to be economically quantified. As a student wonders which course is worth her money and which is not, hard-nosed administrators will eye her choice and tell themselves that certain subjects are more lucrative than others—business, for instance, which is a newly popular major (and a new major altogether), rather than astrophysics. The next step is downsizing entire programs or departments that are not earning their keep. If students and instructors are viewed as economic units, then the university is, to take an extreme view, little different from the factory. Instructors create products (courses) that consumers (students) want, while hoping for larger and larger enrollments so that the real bosses (administrators) approve of their productivity. It should come as no surprise that massive open online courses (known by the unsettling acronym MOOCs) have been heralded as the beacons of the future, providing easily testable knowledge and no human interaction between instructor and student. Is this what we really want?

Lasch foresaw this state of affairs when he lamented the way a starry-eyed rhetoric of self-fulfillment joined hands with a degrading reality of procurement and customer

service. These preset programs of study (like courses in a *prix-fixe* dinner) would encourage us to view education as the automatic consumption of warmed-over ideas, but I worry that not offering them would be even more frightening. Allowing student-consumers to dictate course availability would be the next step—one that Lasch does not closely consider but that is already in process. In the wake of the global recession, universities are using information about what students enjoy to restructure themselves. Certain courses meet their enrollment targets because they are gateways to a popular major, such as psychology or business, or because they are required, like freshman writing. Specialized classes within a major, however, may attract a smaller crowd.

In the rush to offer courses that cater to perceived student tastes, popularity gets confused with quality. Just as a Hollywood blockbuster may be less artistically interesting than a small-budget film, a popular course may not be especially ambitious. A course of study cannot consist of mere entertainment, and such a course would not deliver long-term gains in intellectual health. We should also be wary of the condescending stereotype that all or even most students would choose entertainment over hard learning, but perhaps such “edutainment” should not be a choice at all.

Even during a recession, employers sometimes complain that they cannot find suitable employees to take available jobs. Lasch might say that a decline in educational standards is to blame, but this situation could also be the result of a misconceived definition of education itself.

How to combine life training with specific disciplinary skill training is a topic nobody will ever agree upon. But that doesn’t mean nobody tries to offer solutions. The 20th century has been full of educational experiments. Phrases such as *the new math* are still used, though always ironically, showing that it may be possible to achieve consensus on what doesn’t work. In that case, champions proclaimed that the new math allowed for freedom of thought by stressing abstract concepts over basic, rote learning of subjects like multiplication tables; critics complained that this made no sense and produced students who could not perform basic math. Morris Kline’s 1973 *Why Johnny Can’t Add* was its most famous indictment. Again, the major issue here is that education does not provide adequate training, either for further academic study—in which it’s assumed that students have mastered basic facts and skills about their discipline—or for professional work, which often requires that mastery too. A recent article in *The New York Times* revealed that some law firms are implementing crash courses for new hires to learn all the facts about lawyering that they didn’t learn in law school. Will this become the professional norm?

.....

WHO IS TO BLAME FOR this situation—the students or their instructors? I would fault an educational ideology only superficially claiming to value innovation, openness,

and self-fulfillment. Real innovation must build upon basic knowledge. A radical openness in the curriculum produces formlessness and entropy. Self-fulfillment is not the same thing as immediate gratification, and it takes considerable maturity to choose wisely between the two. The feeling of fulfillment that comes from an incremental and rigorous course of study is bigger and better than the immediate feeling of relief experienced upon turning in a so-called creative assignment instead of a research-based essay. The merit of creative assignments (such as a journal entry instead of a research essay) is up for debate. The more important issue is that the function of schools and universities is not to offer relief from hard work but to challenge students. A challenge is, by definition, difficult. It will probably arouse fear, worry, and a feeling of stress.

Here Lasch again proves his lasting power when he acidly asserts that teachers tend to follow the line of least resistance with their students while claiming to promote innovative and enlightened theories. The attempt to make learning as painless as possible is also an attempt to avoid confrontation. Nobody quarrels over a fun assignment, and little stress results from it. But Lasch overstates the point. Few people would argue that learning must involve pain, or stress, or mind-numbing memorization of facts. Nobody advocates rapping students with rulers. At the same time, nobody in the working world scants the value of hard work, in spite of all our stories of immediate celebrity, “eureka” moments of discovery, or people who bound up corporate ladders. Sure, children may aspire to be celebrities, but adults realize that bills need to be paid. And this is where the insufficiency of a poor education becomes a real problem. We demand diligence and rigor in the workplace, but people need to acquire these traits somehow—not everyone is born a workaholic.

One academic department with which I’m familiar passed a measure mandating that only 30 percent of the students in a class could get an A. Meanwhile, instructors often complain that class attendance is poor, tardiness common, and plagiarism rampant. If true, then it would hardly seem necessary to restrain instructors from handing out large batches of As. Our system of grade inflation is dishonest. It hides the truth of a student’s performance. Everyone feels good (yes, it is as pleasant to deliver a high grade as to receive one). Nobody complains. And instructors who give high grades tend to receive high evaluations from their students.

But someone will eventually complain: the employer. As Lasch points out, quoting Frederick Exley, “even in America *failure is a part of life*.” If schools and universities don’t teach this, then it will come as a hard lesson indeed. If your first business plan fails, there’s no denying that failure. If you’re smart, you will figure out what went wrong and be honest about your own mistakes. How can we cultivate this sort of intelligence? It has much to do with the courage to face one’s own shortcomings. Before shortcomings can be remedied, they need to be identified. Before they can be

identified, we have to realize that even we can fail. Egalitarianism is all well and good, but some businesses grow while others do not, no matter how strongly we believe that everyone's a winner in life. To be truly egalitarian, we must admit to ourselves that equality of opportunity isn't the same as equality of achievement.

There's a hidden pessimism in the belief that most people cannot achieve something great (whether that's getting an A on a paper or turning a profit at a business) and therefore shouldn't be expected to do so. Lowering our standards, though, will not do anyone any good. Assuming that the masses cannot be made to learn difficult material, while also assuming that they should be spared the hurt feelings that result from poor grades or outcomes, is not an admirable form of egalitarianism but an intolerably pessimistic form of condescension. Lasch blames adults for not allowing students to truly learn: "When elders make no demands on the young, they make it almost impossible for the young to grow up."

His pessimism and spite make Lasch a difficult voice to internalize for those who wish to maintain an attitude of forbearance. His conviction that American society itself is in crisis—due to the culture of narcissism that he discerns all around us—leads him to conclude that we should attempt to *counter* the negative aspects of our culture in our schools and universities, not merely mirror them. And his strong conviction that the American educational crisis will only get worse is dispiriting. But recent writers have largely proven him correct, even prescient, since many of the concerns he raises are as pressing today as they were in the 1970s.

The real question is what to do next. Lasch doesn't have much of a conclusion. But I don't believe this is the sort of issue that lends itself to grand conclusions that make us feel good. Rather, it demands a reevaluation of our educational vision followed by the implementation of very specific strategies. Building the capacity for intellectual discipline, maintaining clear and rigorous standards, making it possible for students to fail while encouraging them to learn from failure, bringing back the idea of a required general curriculum (including history), working against rather than with the short attention span encouraged by new media, considering whether self-fulfillment might be increased by hard work and occasional failure—these are some points where we might start. If we have the courage to take on this challenge, then why should we teach students to avoid challenges, difficulties, and occasional failures? Let's learn from the enormous amount of literature on the educational crisis, and not be afraid to change a system that has stopped working as well as it could—yes, could, and should. ●

This is where the insufficiency of a poor education becomes a real problem. We demand diligence and rigor in the workplace, but people need to acquire these traits somehow.

Copyright of American Scholar is the property of Phi Beta Kappa Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.