

Colleges Must Fix Graduates' Professionalism Gap

By Mark Bauerlein

I gave an exam last week, and one student showed up 25 minutes late. When the hour ended and I collected the papers, he looked up from his seat, cast a pitiable glance and mumbled, "Please, I got here late – may I have another 20 minutes?"

I shook my head and said, "Can't do that." His request echoed in my head all the way back to my office. Where in the world did he get the idea that an exam doesn't begin and end at a set time?

Employers call it an "employability skill" – work ethic, timeliness, attendance and so on – and they deal with it every day. Whenever the National Association of Manufacturers administers its "Skills Gap" surveys to members, failings in this area are as likely to be cited as complaints about inadequate technical and verbal skills.

In 2001 and 2005, the association's members rated employability skills as a crushing deficiency in their workforce, and more respondents urged schools to instill better behavior than did those who demanded more training in reading and math.

Even after the 2008 financial crisis, poor conduct remains a top complaint. In the 2011 survey, 40 percent of employers cited "inadequate basic employability skills" as a reason for why they can't hire and keep workers.

Employability skills aren't only a blue-collar failing, as shown by the "Professionalism in the Workplace" survey from York College of Pennsylvania released earlier this year. The college's project asked 401 human-resources people about the professionalism of recent college graduates.

Forty-nine percent of them stated that less than half of new employees "exhibit professionalism in their first year." More than half (53 percent) have

noticed "a sense of entitlement" rising among younger workers; almost 45 percent have seen a "worsening of the work ethic," including "too casual of an attitude toward work" and "not understanding what hard work is."

Younger workers believe they can multitask and remain productive, the human-resources people told the York researchers. Thirty-eight percent of respondents blamed multitasking for the lack of "focus" among younger workers. The authors of the study explained that the younger generation "believes that it is possible to multi-task effectively" and that using social media, for example, is an efficient way to communicate. In interviews, the applicants check their phones for texts and calls, dress inappropriately and overrate their talents.

"The sad fact is some of these persons probably do not understand what is wrong with this," the authors note.

Older workers have always complained about younger workers, of course, but there's a difference: This time they attribute the youthful flaws not to ignorance or waywardness, but to a "sense of entitlement."

We might forgive 18-year-olds fresh out of high school for lacking employability skills (the manufacturing sector hires many workers lacking undergraduate degrees). But when he or she reaches 23 and has four years of college, employers expect a white-collar worker to recognize basic norms of dress and deportment.

What happened in college, then? The survey by York College's Center for Professional Excellence assigns colleges part of the blame, observing that letting students miss deadlines without penalty and

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assigning good grades for middling work only make them form the wrong expectations.

Yet, it turns out, professors don't coddle students and overlook youthful flaws. Another survey by York College finds that professors think the same thing as employers do. It's the 2012 "Professionalism on Campus" survey, a questionnaire about juniors and seniors answered by 415 college and university faculty members.

Professors generally agreed that professionalism includes attentiveness, punctuality and a work ethic, and 37 percent think it has declined over the past five years, while only 12 percent see an improvement.

Even more than employers, fully 64 percent of professors observe an increase in a sense of entitlement in recent years, while only 5 percent say it has decreased. The students text- message during class, send emails to teachers with grammar and spelling errors, and act "unfocused." (For the "unfocused" part, the researchers said they started hearing comments a few years ago from employers about workers lacking "focus," so they included a direct item in the questionnaire on it.) Faculty members identify parents as the main cause, though American culture in general and grade inflation in high school also receive blame.

Let's agree that everyone is at fault, more or less. The burden falls heaviest on the workplace. High-school teachers have few direct incentives to toughen up their classrooms. The steady drag of uninterested students and school bureaucracy beats them down to the point where using higher grades and lax discipline are the easiest ways to make it through the week.

College professors, too, have no direct incentive to raise the bar on behavior, given the influence of student ratings of their performance and pressure from administrators and parents. Most of all, poor

behavior by students doesn't immediately threaten the livelihood of teachers.

A bad worker, however, jeopardizes a whole unit's productivity, and a manager can't simply pass a low performer to the next level. Teachers who allow delinquent students to slide merely compromise their own integrity. Dereliction in the workplace puts profits at risk.

This, then, is the real transition into adulthood in the U.S. today – not graduating from high school, leaving home or learning how to succeed in college, but performing full-time work for bosses who can't compromise, and all too often must say, "Your work isn't up to par, you're not as great as you think, and if you don't improve, you're fired."

As employers and government officials put more pressure on colleges to produce employable graduates, this message should reach students before they collect their diploma.

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