Second-Class Citizens on Campus? Promoting an Ethic of Care for Undergraduates in Student–College Relationships

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Abstract

The authors of this article discuss circumstances that have led in some ways to a decline in the commitment by colleges and universities to the well-being of undergraduates. They present reasons why an ethic of care is needed to promote student–college relationships that protect and nurture higher education’s youngest members.

On the whole, American colleges and universities have always espoused a strong commitment to undergraduate education (Thelin, 2004). This student-centered tradition is, however, in serious jeopardy today: Administrators and faculty have greatly ascended in importance in the academy, while students have diminished markedly in priority and focus. The Boyer Commission (1998) compared undergraduates to “guests at the banquet who pay their share of the tab but are given leftovers” (p. 37). The Commission (1998) found in its study of undergraduate education that research universities “have opted for cosmetic surgery” (p. 6) rather than substantive restructuring and reexamination of undergraduate education.

Today, colleges and universities have come under considerable criticism for their disregard of students’ welfare, especially the holistic well-being of undergraduate students. In their recent critical examination of contemporary American higher education, Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses, Arum and Roska (2011) observed that schools are not as likely to limit student behavior in areas such as alcohol, and they increasingly define students as “consumers” or “clients” (p. 17). The authors concluded that when institutions fail to invest in students’ personal development and welfare, students respond with diminished commitment to institutional academic priorities. Pliant (2011) noted in his Business Ethics blog that “the contempt that universities have for undergraduates is legendary” (para. 3). Relentlessly rising annual tuition and fees, less contact with faculty in increasingly crowded classrooms with fewer full-time professors and a growing number of adjunct instructors, campus safety problems, failures to protect

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students from credit card and financial disasters, and a widespread regard for undergraduate students as “cash cow” customers are among the situations that have led to the treatment of many undergraduates as second-class citizens on campus. In this article we examine these circumstances that have led to a decline in commitment to the well-being of undergraduates, and we present reasons why an ethic of care is needed to restore a student–college relationship that protects and nurtures higher education’s youngest members.

**Undergraduates as Second-Class Members on Campus**

In analyzing the status of undergraduates in early American colleges, Horowitz (1987) described students as a “subject people,” who had “entered a society in which they did not make or enforce the rules” (p. 12). While college students have achieved much greater independence and influence on campus today than they possessed in former times, they remain in many ways a “subject people.” They provide the largest revenue stream for today’s colleges and universities, but they have the least influence among the major stakeholders in contemporary higher education. It should not be surprising that among college students there is a strong sense that in many areas they get less than their money’s worth (Boyer Commission, 1998, pp. 5–6). Bok (2006) concluded that “Colleges and universities, for all the benefits they bring, accomplish far less for their students than they should” (p. 8). Rising tuition costs and falling job placements are drawing increasing skepticism on the part of the public that higher education is delivering on its promises, especially to undergraduates.

The mistreatment of student athletes in college sports is drawing special attention and concern from parents and the public. In the spring of 2013, a videotape showing Rutgers basketball players being demeaned and physically harassed by their coach at practice received widespread attention and rebuke. *The New York Times* (2013) described the incident as

> leaving the nation appalled at the sight of Coach Rice’s yelling homophobic slurs at his players, repeatedly pushing and kicking them for perceived mistakes, and furiously punctuating his supposed lessons in sportsmanship by hurling basketballs point-blank at their heads and torsos. (para. 2)

In an official statement concerning the incident, Governor Chris Christie (2013) of New Jersey commented that

> Parents entrust their sons to the Rutgers athletic department and the men’s basketball program at an incredibly formative period of their lives. The way these young men were treated by the head coach was completely unacceptable and violates the trust those parents put in Rutgers University. All of the student-athletes entrusted to our care deserve much better. (para. 2)

Two moral claims were made here that we believe are important in defining student–college relationships: (a) college students are entrusted to the care of higher education faculty and staff, and (b) many college students deserve better treatment than they are presently receiving.

Another area in which students get far less than they should is in access to faculty. Contact and interaction with faculty continues to be one of the most important factors in effective student learning and positive student satisfaction (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Today, however, undergraduates frequently confront crowded classrooms led by part-time faculty. Moreover, as Scarlett (2004) noted, large classes of between 200–1,000 are frequently offered during the freshman year when students are most in need of...
personal attention. If students attempt to seek out contact with professors, they often find few opportunities because of limited faculty office hours.

One reason that makes the college environment difficult for undergraduates is that they have such limited contact with experienced adults. When he was president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Richard Hersh (1994) observed that the institution had “failed to teach an ethic of concern and to model a culture of responsibility” (para. 6). In their study of student life at Duke University, Willimon and Naylor (1995) wrote that “faculty go their way, absorbed in the research that will determine their professional future; the students go their way, blending into a student culture that is ruthless in enforcing its values and mores” (p. 35). The authors concluded that college students have been abandoned in terms of authentic nurturing relationships and support. Students are provided plenty of consumer goods and services in college, but fitness centers, computer labs, and late night cafes hardly provide the kind of personal attention and nurturing that students so often need from experienced faculty and staff. In the absences of such adult mentoring and guidance, students have little insulation from the worst influences of the college peer culture.

Student contact with faculty has also diminished greatly in the realm of academic advising. Academic advising, historically an important juncture for faculty to get to know and mentor students, has been largely turned over to nonfaculty staff who too often focus on clerical tasks (Gardiner, 1994). Faculty contact has also been diminished by the increasing use of part-time teachers that saves considerable money for institutions but reduces student contact with senior faculty and the institution’s most outstanding scholars. The result is that while undergraduate students want faculty to be available and involved, they soon discover that there are very limited opportunities for personal contact with faculty, and this circumstance can diminish the campus climate of intellectual stimulation (Gardiner, 1994).

Beyond the classroom undergraduate students encounter a variety of conditions and circumstances that can pose a threat to their personal safety and well-being. In college students may be introduced to student cultures that encourage high-risk behaviors in many areas including binge drinking, date rape, hazing, widespread academic cheating, excessive socializing, and racial and ethnic intolerance. Concern about safety and security on and off campus has received considerable public attention in recent years because of high-profile campus tragedies such as those that occurred at Virginia Tech University and Northern Illinois University (Powers, 2008). Colleges and universities have beefed up campus police and implemented public safety campaigns, but these often fail to address some serious threats to student safety. Many dangers associated with college student life occur at the periphery of campus control, in off-campus residences, local bars, fraternities, and informal student activities. These peer culture threats to student welfare often directly undermine the best safety efforts of institutions.

The Risks of College Life

Young adults entering college encounter a number of psychological and social challenges. They face great pressures to perform academically, gain acceptance socially, and learn how to cope with personal independence, often for the first time in their lives. Horowitz (1987) depicted the undergraduates years as a staging ground for adult life. Parks (2000) described young adulthood as a time of “promise and vulnerability” (p. xi). Making it in college requires a complex set of personal adjustments in thinking and behavior that disrupt many of the patterns of life to which young people have grown accustomed. Almost every student encounters a “shipwreck” along the way, which can be a failure, the “loss of a relationship,” an “illness,” or a “defeat” that “can suddenly rip into the fabric of life . . .” (p. 28).
Although most students make the transition successfully, some fall prey to pressures, anxiety, depression, alcohol, and other high-risk behaviors. For all the idyllic pictures of student life in college promotional brochures and videos, the transition to campus life for many students is fraught with very real risks and dangers. These risks are why parents so often worry about their son or daughter when they head off to college. Parents understand the promise and vulnerability of such a pivotal time in the lives of their sons and daughters; they know that college life is full of great possibilities but can also be a risky venture in which failure can be very consequential.

Applying an Ethic of Care in Higher Education

One of the strategies many colleges and universities utilize to make environments safe for students is through implementation of personal conduct rules, procedures, and policies. This approach to defining the student–college relationship places great emphasis upon defining and enforcing students’ rights and responsibilities within the academic community. Institutional efforts to create safe environments by regulating student behavior through formal conduct rules depend heavily on punishment as a risk deterrent but gives little attention to the importance of caring for and nurturing undergraduate students.

Nel Noddings (1998), a contemporary philosopher who has advanced an ethic of care approach to education, argued that building caring relationships with students is more effective than merely using formal rules and principles because they fail to provide young people with the guidance that they need in dealing with life’s critical challenges. She argued that human beings are partially responsible for the moral development of all those they encounter since their behaviors can bring out the best or worst in others with whom they interact.

As an alternative to relying primarily on rules and principles when facing moral dilemmas, persons who care, or carers, ask themselves questions that focus on the persons involved, or those cared-for. What are their needs? Will filling these needs harm others in the community or network of care? Are the carers capable of filling these needs? Would carers sacrifice too much of themselves in helping to satisfy these needs? Are these needs in the best interest of the cared-for? If the cared-for are strangers, would the carers respond differently to them if they were within the carers’ inner circle?

How might an ethic of care be applied, for example, in the role of faculty in their teaching and mentoring of undergraduate students? In an ethic of care learning environment, the teacher seeks to view the subject matter through the students’ eyes because students are regarded as persons cared-for—not something in the world to be analyzed and categorized. Students work as apprentices in the particular field or discipline and continually assume more and more responsibility for their own learning under the teacher’s guidance. Noddings (2003) wrote that teachers often try to force students to respond to the subject matter in particular ways, but in the end, students will decide whether to make the learning their own, and it is the students themselves who will choose what they think is significant enough to apply to their own lives.

While the caring teacher continues to evaluate the students’ work according to high standards, there are also many opportunities for students to evaluate their own efforts. Noddings (1998) argued that often educators misunderstand Dewey’s concept of student-centered instruction and interpret it to mean that teachers must try to entertain students at their present level of competency and interest; however, the relationship between teacher and students is the focus because the primary role of the teacher is to encourage students to strive to be their best possible selves—both intellectually and morally—and in this reciprocal relationship of the carer and the cared-for, the teacher’s best self also emerges.
To demonstrate how practicing an ethic of care can contribute to the moral development and well-being of young persons, Noddings (1998) described four components that are involved in the teacher-student relationship: modeling, dialogue, practice, and confirmation (p. 190).

- **Modeling** (p. 190). For those who espouse an ethic of care approach, the primary aim of character education is to help students grow to become worthy carers and cared-fors. Modeling is a way that teachers demonstrate what it means to care, and they do this by their own behaviors toward students and others.

- **Dialogue** (p. 191). Students and teachers engage in dialogue because additional help is needed to interpret each person’s behaviors. For example, a professor may impose exceptionally demanding standards on their students, or they may be especially permissive. What do these behaviors mean in the teacher-learner context where those involved seek to create and sustain caring relationships? Important in the dialogue are “receptivity, reflection, invitation, assessment, revision, and exploration,” a process in which young persons are invited to act as codirectors of the dialogue (p. 191).

- **Practice** (p. 191). Because the primary aim of moral education in an ethic of care approach is to teach young people to care for and be cared for by each other, students should practice caring for others. Opportunities for self-reflection on ways the process influences personal experience and growth are crucial.

- **Confirmation** (p. 191). Confirming means that individuals nurture the development of the better selves of others whom they encounter. This act includes seeking to understand what ideals others hope to realize and, with others, confirm these ideals. The moral agent as completely autonomous is rejected; morality involves interdependence, and as a result, teachers are as dependent on their students’ caring as students depend on their teachers’ caring.

**Applying an ethic of care for undergraduates requires an emphasis on the welfare of the whole student.**

An ethic of care for students imposes upon educational institutions an obligation to consider each student holistically including intellectual, emotional, physical, social, and ethical aspects (NASPA, 1989). Such a view of educational responsibility requires an approach to students that is personal and individual. An ethic of care “puts students first” among the priorities of the institution and “invests in students such that they might live holistically” (Braskamp, Trautvetter, & Ward, 2006, p. 1). It requires active involvement in the context of students’ lives. We cannot cultivate friendships with students from a distance. To care about the welfare of students requires educators to engage with students in holistic ways.

**Applying an ethic of care requires the protection of students from exploitation and harm.**

As the youngest and most inexperienced members of the campus community, students need and deserve the care and protection of administrators, faculty, and staff. While most college students are legally adults, they are also living in a stage that Parks (2000) described as an “apprenticeship” to adulthood (p. 249). They do not know what they do not know, and this makes them particularly vulnerable to the high-risk situations,
which they confront in college. An ethic of care also requires that students be protected not only from the physical dangers of campus life, but also from institutional policies and actions that create hardships and barriers for students because of their youth and inexperience.

**Applying an ethic of care requires exhibiting caring behaviors and strategies at all levels of the institution.**

Institutional commitment to an ethic of care for students is reflected in all aspects of the campus environment. It is reflected in the variety of ways in which help is offered to learners, in the human contacts through which faculty and staff get to know and demonstrate interest in students, in the availability and access that students have to faculty and staff, in the amount of time that faculty and staff spend with students and how much they listen to students through informal and structured means. An ethic of care is reflected in large and small acts of compassion that communicate to students that they matter and belong to the community that invites them in.

**Some Educational Benefits of Cultivating an Ethic of Care in Higher Education**

Institutions that promote an ethic of care create environments of hospitality for students. They welcome new students and invite them to participate as important members of the academic community. They create networks of belonging in which students feel they are connected to other members of the community and share a sense of common purpose and shared beliefs (Parks, 2000). Hospitality is fostered not only through personal interactions, but also ceremonies, rituals, special events, and other activities, especially for new students, which communicate messages of welcome and inclusion.

Promoting an ethic of care enhances the well-being of students and encourages a powerful learning environment for them. Keeling (2004) argued that we must be engaged in student lives because “transformative learning always occurs in the active context of students’ lives” (p. 12). Active engagement with students and participation in the context of their lives help to make learning personal and communicates a regard for students that helps them to feel involved and cared for. In Kuh, Schuh, Whitt, and Associate’s (1991) examination of factors that contributed to an “engaged” learning environment, the authors noted that when students feel that they belong and are cared for, it helps them to feel that they matter and have a greater sense of personal inclusion.

Students who feel a strong connection to the college community are more likely to make a deeper investment in their academic and social involvements. Consequently, promoting an ethic of care not only serves to provide much needed personal safety nets for students that protect them from the shipwrecks that can happen in college life, it also helps students to flourish in their educational and personal development. Parks (2000) argued that to flourish, young adults need “challenge, support, and inspiration” (p. 179). They need to be nurtured by experienced adults who can provide mentoring and guidance at critical times. Such a personal approach to student welfare may seem impossible in large university settings where the sheer numbers of students can appear to overwhelm the human resources available. But even in large institutional settings, it is possible to create structures and processes that make the setting more personal for students. Creating inviting and welcoming campus environments do not always require expensive programs, staff,
and complex institutional arrangements. Students are very good at recognizing authentic expressions of concern, and sometimes it is in the simple transactions of campus life that an ethic of care is conveyed to students.

The Role of Student Affairs in Promoting an Institutional Ethic of Care

The holistic welfare of students is the moral center of student affairs work. Students, as individuals and in groups, are the primary focus of what the work of student affairs should be about. The qualities of caring, compassion, and concern for students have been at the core of the mission of student affairs since the beginnings of the profession. One of the earliest deans of students was Russell Briggs of Harvard. Dean Briggs “was human, he was intimate, personal, vastly gentle and kind” (Fley, 1977, p. 24). These qualities are reflected today in the continuing emphasis in the profession on the obligation to consider the whole student in the higher education context.

The emphasis on the whole student sometimes places student affairs staff in opposition to others in higher education who would prefer to define the student–college relationship in much more restricted ways. Those, for example, who argue for an exclusive emphasis on academic and intellectual priorities in addressing students’ needs fail to recognize the relevance and power of the affective domain in students’ learning and development. Others who focus heavily on the role of students as consumers-customers value students chiefly as revenue generators or “cash cows” and neglect students’ need for mentoring, protection, and advocacy. An emphasis on the whole student requires institutions to put students and their needs among their highest priorities and commitments.

One of the important contributions of the student affairs profession to American higher education has been its advocacy for an ethic of care for students. Through its insistence on the importance of addressing the needs of the whole student, student affairs has helped to bring institution-wide attention to the welfare and well-being of undergraduates. Moreover, the continuing emphasis of student affairs on serving the whole student is complemented by its support for holistic education that integrates academic and student life experiences. Concern for holistic student welfare and integrated holistic learning are complementary approaches that benefit both students’ well-being and their educational development.

Conclusion

Promoting an ethic of care for students is not an add-on to effective higher education. It is, as Earwaker (1992) claimed, “an integral element of the educational process” (p. 12). Promoting an ethic of care in higher education environments offers an education strategy that has both academic and personal benefits for students. It communicates a conviction that the institution cares not only what students think, but also the kind of people they become. An ethic of care can provide a much needed corrective to the current conditions in higher education in which too many undergraduates are treated as second-class citizens.
References


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