

OPINION

What's the Point of a Professor?

By Mark Bauerlein

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ATLANTA — IN the coming weeks, two million Americans will earn a bachelor's degree and either join the work force or head to graduate school. They will be joyous that day, and they will remember fondly the schools they attended. But as this unique chapter of life closes and they reflect on campus events, one primary part of higher education will fall low on the ladder of meaningful contacts: the professors.

That's what students say. Oh, they're quite content with their teachers; after all, most students receive sure approval. In 1960, only 15 percent of grades were in the "A" range, but now the rate is 43 percent, making "A" the [most common grade](#) by far.

Faculty members' attitudes are kindly, too. In one national survey, 61 percent of students said that professors frequently treated them "like a colleague/peer," while only 8 percent heard frequent "negative feedback about their academic work." More than half leave the graduation ceremony believing that they are "[well prepared](#)" in speaking, writing, critical thinking and decision-making.

But while they're content with teachers, students aren't much interested in them as thinkers and mentors. They enroll in courses and complete assignments, but further engagement is minimal.

One measure of interest in what professors believe, what wisdom they possess apart from the content of the course, is interaction outside of class. It's often during incidental conversations held after the bell rings and away from the demands of the syllabus that the transfer of insight begins and a student's emulation grows. Students email teachers all the time — why walk across campus when you can fire a note from your room? — but those queries are too curt for genuine mentoring. We need face time.

Here, though, are the meager numbers. For a majority of undergraduates, beyond the two and a half hours per week in class, contact ranges from negligible to nonexistent. In their first year, 33 percent of students report that they never talk with professors outside of class, while 42 percent do so only sometimes. Seniors lower that disengagement rate only a bit, with [25 percent never talking to professors](#), and 40 percent sometimes.

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It hasn't always been this way. "I revered many of my teachers," Todd Gitlin said when we met at the New York Public Library last month. He's a respected professor of journalism and sociology at Columbia, but in the 1960s he was a fiery working-class kid at Harvard before becoming president of Students for a Democratic Society.

I asked if student unrest back then included disregard of the faculty. Not at all, he said. Nobody targeted professors. Militants attacked the administration for betraying what the best professors embodied, the free inquisitive space of the Ivory Tower.

I saw the same thing in my time at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the early 1980s, when you couldn't walk down the row of faculty offices without stepping over the outstretched legs of English majors lining up for consultations. First-year classes could be as

large as 400, but by junior year you settled into a field and got to know a few professors well enough to chat with them regularly, and at length. We knew, and they knew, that these moments were the heart of liberal education.

In our hunger for guidance, we were ordinary. The [American Freshman Survey](#), which has followed students since 1966, proves the point. One prompt in the questionnaire asks entering freshmen about “objectives considered to be essential or very important.” In 1967, 86 percent of respondents checked “developing a meaningful philosophy of life,” more than double the number who said “being very well off financially.”

Naturally, students looked to professors for moral and worldly understanding. Since then, though, finding meaning and making money have traded places. The first has plummeted to 45 percent; the second has soared to 82 percent.

I returned to U.C.L.A. on a mild afternoon in February and found the hallways quiet and dim. Dozens of 20-year-olds strolled and chattered on the quad outside, but in the English department, only one in eight doors was open, and barely a half dozen of the department’s 1,400 majors waited for a chance to speak.

When college is more about career than ideas, when paycheck matters more than wisdom, the role of professors changes. We may be 50-year-olds at the front of the room with decades of reading, writing, travel, archives or labs under our belts, with 80 courses taught, but students don’t lie in bed mulling over what we said. They have no urge to become disciples.

Sadly, professors pressed for research time don’t want them, either. As a result, most undergraduates never know that stage of development when a learned mind enthralled them and they progressed toward a fuller identity through admiration of and struggle with a role model.

Since the early 2000s, I have made students visit my office every other week with a rough draft of an essay. We appraise and revise the prose, sentence by sentence. I ask for a clearer idea or a better verb; I circle a misplaced modifier and wait as they make the fix.

As I wait, I sympathize: So many things distract them — the gym, text messages, rush week — and often campus culture treats them as customers, not pupils. Student evaluations and [ratemyprofessor.com](#) paint us as service providers. Years ago at Emory University, where I work, a campus-life dean addressed new students with a terrible message: Don’t go too far into coursework — there’s so much more to do here! And yet, I find, my writing sessions help diminish those distractions, and by the third meeting students have a new attitude. This is a teacher who rejects my worst and esteems my best thoughts and words, they say to themselves.

You can’t become a moral authority if you rarely challenge students in class and engage them beyond it. If we professors do not do that, the course is not an induction of eager minds into an enlarging vision. It is a requirement to fulfill. Only our assistance with assignments matters. When it comes to students, we shall have only one authority: the grades we give. We become not a fearsome mind or a moral light, a role model or inspiration. We become accreditors.

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