An Infantilizing Double Standard for American College Students

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Picture two 20-year-olds. One is a full-time college student and the other is a full-time waiter. Both go out one night to drink and have a good time.

If the underage student is caught drinking by the campus police, he'll most likely get a free ride home in the college's drunk van, while the imbibing underage waiter is more likely to be charged with a misdemeanor. If, the next morning, the waiter fails to show up to work or confuses orders, he cannot expect to remain employed long.

But the hung over university student who sleeps through his classes and turns in incoherent assignments faces a sunnier prospect: Thanks to grade inflation, A-range

grades constitute an astounding 79 percent of all grades given at Harvard and Yale, with other universities not too far behind.

Universities don't openly describe students as children, but that is how they treat them. This was highlighted in the spring, when so many pro-Palestinian student protesters — most of them legal adults — faced minimal consequences for even flagrant violations of their universities' policies. (Some were arrested — but those charges were often dropped.) American universities' relative generosity to their students may seem appealing, especially in contrast to the plight of our imaginary waiter, but it has a dark side, in the form of increased control of student life.

If universities today won't hold students responsible for their bad behavior, they also won't leave them alone when they do nothing wrong. Administrators send out position statements after major national and international political events to convey the approved response, micromanage campus parties and social events, dictate scripts for sexual interactions, extract allegiance to boutique theories of power and herd undergraduates into mandatory dormitories where their daily lives can be more comprehensively monitored and shaped. This is increasingly true across institutions — public and private, small and large — but the more elite the school, the more acute the problem.

A result of this combination of increased lenience and increased control is a kind of simulacrum of adult independence that in reality infantilizes students and protects them from responsibility — for both their good choices and their bad ones. On one hand, there is almost no chance that a Stanford student will face serious consequences for underage drinking at a party. The first three violations of the school's alcohol policy result in consequences no more severe than mandated participation in an in-house educational program. On the other hand, under rules requiring extensive monitoring and an elaborate registration process for social gatherings, finding a party to attend in the first place at Stanford might be even more difficult than being punished for drinking at one.

In principle, this should not be true anymore. Universities have long since dispensed with the doctrine of in loco parentis, which gave universities parental power vis a vis their students, permitting them to make rules and dispense punishments at their discretion. At many schools, students were subject to curfews, visitor restrictions and other rules intended to curb opportunities for sex.

In loco parentis was challenged by civil liberties lawsuits in the 1960s and eventually replaced by a hands-off approach to student life outside the classroom. During this period (called the "bystander era"), students' extracurricular lives were relatively free from administrative intrusion — generally speaking, student drinking, socializing and sex were not considered any of the university's business.

But freedom breeds risk, and risk sometimes results in harm. After another series of lawsuits, this time brought by students injured in hazing rituals and alcohol-related accidents, universities were forced to give up their hands-off approach. By the 1990s, the bystander era had given way to the "caretaker" or "facilitator" era, which continues today.

The aim of the facilitator model is to create a safe environment offering students a variety of opportunities and choices for personal growth while foreclosing those choices that might result in permanent damage — initially to the body, but increasingly to mind, reputation and transcript. It is sometimes described as a middle ground between the paternalism of in loco parentis and the neglect of the bystander period, but this assessment makes sense only from the perspective of tort law, not surprisingly, because it is largely lawyers who've promoted it. From most any other perspective, the model is only a more insidious form of paternalism.

To sum up the facilitator model: It's not that students don't have rights; it's just that safety comes first. Instead of restricting students for the sake of their moral character or its academic standards, the university has reinstated control under the aegis of health and safety. Protection from an ever-expanding conception of harm did not stop at campus alcohol and anti-hazing policies; it necessitated the campus speech codes of the 1980s and 1990s, the expansive Title IX bureaucracy of the 2010s and the diversity mandates of the 2020s.

These social controls are therapeutic rather than punitive; they are the "gentle parenting" of university-student relations. These days, it is less common for students (and faculty members) to face real consequences for rule violations than to be assigned to H.R. trainings, academic remediation or counseling.

A University of Chicago professor, Agnes Callard, described this dynamic in a thread on X about her relationship with a then-27-year-old graduate student and her eventual husband. (She was 35 at the time.) Although many universities have since prohibited all faculty-student relationships owing to their potential for — you guessed it — harm, Dr. Callard's relationship was permitted under several conditions, including that the student "meet weekly with a counselor who would check in with him to make sure he was not being mistreated."

As grim as these social controls might sound, if you're a student they can feel pretty good. This is the nature of what the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville described as soft despotism, a form of control that "covers the surface of society with a network of small, complicated, minute and uniform rules." This "does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them and directs them; it rarely forces action, but it constantly opposes your acting."

Tocqueville saw how this kind of control — with its focus on satisfying needs and prioritizing security — results in the foreclosure of adulthood: "It would resemble paternal power if, like it, it had as a goal to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to fix them irrevocably in childhood."

And the soft despotism of college campuses has worked remarkably well, since the majority of college students — 84 percent, according to one study — don't view themselves as full adults, nor do their parents. It is tempting to allow yourself to be managed this way because the price of the security and comfort seems so low. It's not brutal repression, only the loss of self-government.

This dynamic might reinforce itself forever, but the events of last spring suggest that the facilitator relationship and its infantilizing dynamics of leniency and control might finally be coming apart. As harm and safety have become the exclusive channels through which to air grievances and impose restrictions, they've expanded to encompass more meanings than any concept can coherently bear.

After pro-Palestinian students set up camps to allege that their universities were complicit in the harm of a foreign genocide, Jewish students alleged that the protests imperiled their campus safety. In response, Muslim students alleged that measures to restrict the protests slighted *their* safety, and disabled students pointed out that the protests, as well as the university's response to them, were undermining *their* safety by blocking their access to campus. All these groups looked simultaneously to administrators for protection. Safety comes first, no doubt — but whose?

Faced with opposing demands from faculty members, donors, the public and even Congress, these universities short-circuited. Responses across the country, especially at elite schools, were arbitrary and inconsistent, punitive one week and lenient the next. By the end of the academic year, the presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania had resigned, Columbia's president was barely hanging on (she has since resigned), and the leadership of schools including the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Virginia were under fire. As the new school year begins, protesters are resuming their campaigns.

In the midst of this turmoil, schools have begun to back away from efforts to control students beyond the classroom. Harvard announced that it would no longer issue position statements about issues beyond "the core function of the university." Dozens of schools have dropped diversity statements, and several states curtailed diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. Polling shows growing suspicion of higher education among both Republicans and Democrats. Right now, public pressure on universities to change is more intense and bipartisan than it's been in decades.

The sources of the current regime are difficult to disentangle because the incentives to lower academic standards, tighten control over student life and strip student autonomy have come from many directions — legal and regulatory requirements, rankings pressures, faculty priorities, parents' expectations, changing revenue models and labor markets. It's impossible to reverse all this in one fell swoop, but reclaiming student independence begins with getting universities to do less — to focus on their core academic mission and leave students to govern their own affairs beyond it. National outrage offers an opportunity for students to take back their independence.

In concrete terms, that might mean scaling back student-life bureaucracies, allowing (even encouraging) students to live off campus, and strengthening student-run institutions, from coffee shops to honor systems. In a decade of undergraduate teaching, I've come to believe that students' own loss of confidence in their maturity and competence is misplaced. I have never experienced a more professional and conscientious disciplinary proceeding than an entirely student-run Honor Committee hearing for an academic dishonesty case at the University of Virginia. (U.Va has since changed its

approach, and other universities with honor systems like Princeton and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill have also changed, often with student support, in ways that disempower students.)

If universities are to do less, then students must be prepared to do more, by relinquishing the comfort of leniency and low standards and stepping up to manage their social and academic lives on and off campus, as their peers outside the university already do. Universities, faced with the constant threat of litigation, will be hesitant to extend student autonomy, but they stand to lose their own autonomy if they concede all their institutional decision-making to lawyers and judges.

If universities, particularly elite universities, claim to prepare students to shoulder the most demanding professional responsibilities in the country, they must both model and encourage independence.

During their legal minority, students are rightly constrained in the ways they can assume responsibility. But unless we want leaders and a citizenry permanently dependent on social and personal management by another class of undemocratic authorities, we have to eventually allow young adults to stand on their own. If we can't do that at college, where can we?

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Appendix: A thread on student-faculty romances by Agnes Callard

I want to explain something, for the sake of the profession of philosophy, the field of academia, and the health of workplace gender relations more broadly:

Conflating potential abuses of power with actual abuses of power benefits no one.

Recently a profile of me described how 12 yrs ago my husband Arnold, then a first year graduate student taking one of my courses, told me he was in love with me.

I said I felt the same, we decided nothing could happen between us, and the next day I got on a plane for New York...

(I am going to leave out the parts of the story connected to my divorce, you can read about them in the profile, this thread is focused on the power issue)

From NY, I called a number of colleagues and looked into the university's rules. I learned that there was a protocol:

(a) we needed to announce the relationship to the department chair

(b) I needed to immediately remove myself from any advisory role in relation to Arnold

(c) Arnold needed to meet weekly with a counselor who would check in with him to make sure he was not being mistreated

We did (a) & (b), and we did them BEFORE beginning a romantic relationship. First thing when I came back from NY, Arnold & I met w/department chair & Arnold additionally had a meeting with the DGS & the department chair. A colleague agreed to grade Arnold's paper for the class.

From then on I'd exit faculty meetings whenever he was discussed. (I do the same in relation to my ex-husband, Ben, & same is true for other married couples in the dept.)

Arnold met with the counselor as required.

Eventually we married, had a kid, & lived happily ever after.

All of this is causing outrage, 12 years after the fact, among people, some of whom have long known about it & did not seem disturbed until now. Which is probably just a result of people being worked up by the profile and looking for an angle on which I come out a villain.

In general, such "takes" are worth ignoring, but here I am worried that the prominence of this case, and the reaction to it in philosophy, could lead to a bad cultural shift, encouraging and exacerbating the abuse of power in the context of workplace romantic relationships.

So let me say what should've been obvious to all:

- This is what a GOOD case looks like.
- This is what it looks like when a situation that COULD lead to an abuse of power DOESN'T lead to an abuse of power.
- Being open & honest & following rules can work out well for everyone: yay!

I am writing this thread because I fear that having a whole bunch of people (many of whom have some prominence in the profession) equate my case with the worst forms of abuse will drive people towards a culture of secrecy.

A blanket policy of stigmatizing even rule-abiding behavior induces secrecy and shame, which is precisely what serial abusers rely on.

(By announcing the relationship, a record is created; this is important for allowing the university to intervene when it sees a bad pattern.)

Abusive romantic relations between faculty and students are a genuine problem, it is irresponsible to willfully exacerbate this problem because you want an outlet for some negative energy towards me.

The End

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The New York Times.
<www.nytimes.com/2024/09/03/opinion/college-students-adulting.html> &
<www.twitter.com/AgnesCallard/status/1636394491228692480>
A version of this article appears in print on Section SR, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Colleges Need to Let Students Grow Up. Order Reprints