

Students, Professors and College Life in 'The Good Old Times'

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Recently — by accident — I was introduced to the subject of student-professor relationships in the college environment in the late nineteenth century through receipt of an old newspaper from my hometown. It set me to wondering and searching for other evidence and anecdotes about college life in what one author called “the good old times.” The following is an accounting of some of the more interesting ones I discovered.

Hazing Freshmen

A book published in 1928, *Eight O'Clock Chapel*, related that in the 1870s “hazing” incoming freshmen was often brutal. “It used to be the tradition at Dartmouth College, for example, that an unusually ‘fresh’ freshman was seized by his tormentors and nailed up in a packing-box which was placed on the rear platform of a southbound night express, so that the next day found the victim perhaps a hundred miles away. Every freshman was entitled to one ducking under the college pump, and one side of his mustache might be shaved off.”¹

“Personal Contact” Between President and Students

William Lyon Phelps, retired professor, recalled in 1912 that in his youthful days there was closer “personal contact” between the president of Brown University and the students. Part of the president’s duties “in the good old times,” he related, “was to preserve order by physical force.” Brown was situated at the top of a steep hill and the president’s house was closeby. One night the president, who was a minister and “tall, with a tremendous reach at both the upper and lower extremities,” was disturbed by loud noises outside his home.

He rushed out, and when the men saw him coming, they started to run. All got away but

one luckless individual, who in attempting to round the corner received a terrific kick from the pursuing theologian, which highly accelerated his progress down the hill.

Phelps noted that when he wrote, college discipline was “far easier,” and he attributed this to either the growth of college athletics or “to the general advance of civilization and good manners.”²

“Student Evaluations”

Student-professor relations were different in the late nineteenth century as well. Students judged their professors’ lectures in the classroom by “Wooding up.” If they approved of the lecture they would stamp their feet on the floor; if they disapproved they would shuffle their feet. Sometimes student behavior in the classroom became downright violent.

At Brown, a certain unpopular instructor was, whenever he turned his back to write upon the blackboard, besieged with paper wads, torpedoes, and even lighted firecrackers.

This behavior continued until the faculty demanded the resignation of the teacher “in order that he might not be subjected to humiliation at the hands of students.”³

The Professor Who “cut” His Class

Henry M. Wriston, author of *Academic Profession*, relates that at Harvard (sometime after WWI) there was a “strange professor” who was often tormented by his students. It seems that he had a habit of leaving his office for the classroom at the last possible second and, if delayed, would not arrive within the time limit students were required to wait for their instructor. Occasionally, “students sneaked down and locked the back door through which he usually entered. Then, while he fussed

with his keys or circumnavigated the building, the magic moment of tolerance passed, the students rushed out, gave the 'yell' always accorded a professor who 'cut' his class, and dispersed."⁴

Qualifications for Graduation

Wriston also related an incident during the 1920s at a college in Connecticut where he was an administrator. One spring the faculty met to determine the eligibility of seniors for graduation. One young man had clearly not met the established requirements to receive a degree. However, "one member made an emotional appeal based upon the fact that the student's mother, who lived in Oregon, was already on the train headed for Middletown. Rather than disappoint her, the degree was voted."⁵

One might conclude that we have become too sophisticated now to preclude such incidents occurring today. On the other hand, a recent news article may remind us that while times change, they also remain the same. Take the story of the sophomore coed at Smith College this winter, who after winning a bet of \$2,500 that she could forego alcohol for a year, created an all night ruckus with other "Smithies." They wakened the President of the college by serenading her at 1 a.m. Ultimately, the good-natured president joined the students in a ceremonial drink and saw to it that they were safely tucked into bed before dawn.

Notes

¹ Taken from *The Carthage Republican* (Illinois), March 7, 1928, 2.

² William Lyon Phelps, *Teaching in School and College* (New York, 1912), 75-77.

³ *The Carthage Republican* (Illinois), March 7, 1928, 2.

⁴ Henry M. Wriston, *Academic Profession* (New York, 1959), 94-95.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 95-96.