

The High School of my Dreams

High school graduates are less well prepared for university with every passing year.

By Cleo Boyd

I have been engaged in the challenge of providing academic support to students admitted to the University of Toronto from high schools across Ontario for the last 25 years.

From the vantage point of a quarter of a century, I can say that I have witnessed significant changes in the students who choose to attend the university.

Many people who comment on today's students report that they are unskilled and unprepared to succeed at university. I concede that, for the most part, I cannot disagree with that conclusion.

Many of the same people who have identified weaknesses in student preparation for university point to the high schools as the responsible agents.

My assignment for this article is not to assign blame, but to dream. My dream is just that. It is whimsy. It is a description of the preparation that I wish my students across the years had come to university with.

The high school of my dreams would have the freedom to emphasize what students can do with information. Students are not coming to university with less information than they ever had. They probably know more with each passing year.

Unfortunately, with each passing year, they can do less and less with what they know. Also, unfortunately, more and more of what they know is wrong.

It is not unusual to hear professors of first year classes bemoan the time it takes to identify and correct the misconceptions that many students bring with them from high school.

Thus, the high school of my dreams would approach the education of its students aware that the ability to process information is far more important than the sum total of the pieces of information a student can recall.

My ideal high school would emphasize skills. Graduates would:

- be numerate and literate;
- be able to read at a literal level;
- be able to write with a technical level of proficiency that does not interfere with the reader's ability to understand their intent; and
- have numeracy skills sufficient to move into university-level math.

The high school of my dreams would be an active partner with the university and would build into the last year of study transitional components to prepare students for the reality of university.

Standard Chemistry Test Written by all Incoming Chemistry Students at the University of Waterloo

Year	Average Mark	Number of Students Tested
1983	61.86	
1984	61.43	
1985	59.52	
1986	58.61	780
1987	59.76	706
1988	57.61	503
1989	57.61	746
1990	57.70	743
1991	56.16	779
1992	56.37	609
1993	58.56	749
1994	57.7	610
1995	55.9	782

Academic skills are not the only ones that I would have emphasized. I want first-year students to be able to prioritize their time. I want them to understand that transitions must be managed if they are to be successful.

University can't just happen to them. They must come prepared to adjust to it. Unfortunately, however, many come expecting that university will adjust to them.

High schools need to help students set reasonable expectations for themselves and have reasonable ex

pectations of university. Most importantly, students should understand that at university they will be treated as adult learners. Maintaining and building their self-esteem is not the prime objective of any university course that I know of.

Many students come to university *empowered* to get what they want, usually a specific grade, and they attempt to deploy threats to their self-esteem as the first weapon in their arsenal.

They also use threats to their self-esteem as a rationale for cheating. Somehow, they have been allowed to confuse what they want with what they need — and what they need with what they have a right to expect. If their *rights* are not respected (i.e., if they don't get what they want), they have no problem justifying resorting to obviously unethical behaviour.

Finally, if only one little bit of the stuff of my dreams can come true, I want it to be this. The high school of my dreams would nurture in its students a spirit of inquiry, a desire to know and an attitude of intellectual skepticism that would lead them to push the boundaries of knowledge.

Only then, will they be able to join in the conversation that is the Academy's legacy.

Our mandate is to create new knowledge and to disseminate it, not to constantly recycle the old for the purposes of passing the next exam. In other words, foster active learners, not passive receivers of information that they can't use.

I never again want a first-year student to say to me, "I didn't come here to learn. I just want you to tell me what I need to know." The high school of my dreams would help them understand that what they need is to want to learn, and that what they need to know is how to learn.

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