

What Your Profs Really Think

Off the record, they say many of their students are unprepared to learn.

By Kate Fillion

First, the bad news. Your writing, basic computational skills, and critical thinking abilities are—there’s no way to sugar-coat this—abysmal. Math profs grumble about students who pull out a calculator to get the answer to 3×7 . English profs complain about students who can’t compose an outline for a four-page paper.

Some say the problem is the high school curriculum, with its emphasis on creativity rather than knowledge. Others, the ones who know Latin, anyway, blame modern society *in toto*. “Video games, TV, the Internet, cell-phones—any kid who’s spending several hours a day on those might have been using that time a generation ago to read. They may actually be dumber as a result,” muses one philosophy professor at the University of Toronto.

“Evolution doesn’t work that quickly,” contends a science prof at the same institution (for reasons that will become obvious if they are not already, almost all the professors interviewed for this article insisted on anonymity). “The problem is that it’s far too easy to get into university today. We’re seeing students who never would’ve been admitted 20 or 30 years ago, and we’re spending a huge amount of time providing remedial education to them at the expense of the more talented ones.

More Canadians attend university than ever before: in 2005, the number of full-time students climbed beyond 806,000—an increase of nearly 150,000 in just four years. “Many of them have little interest in learning,” says a social sciences professor at the University of Winnipeg. “They’re here because their parents believe a degree is a prerequisite for a good job.” Accommodating all these bodies requires dumbing down course content, according to many professors. Some even admit to helping students write papers because, as the Winnipeg prof puts it, “someone has to show them how to write a sentence, and if I didn’t, they could not complete the work. Unfortunately, we’re not allowed to fail the entire class.”

But despite the chorus of complaints, it’s impossible to prove whether today’s students are, in fact, less well-prepared than their parents were. There’s no Canadian equivalent to the SAT, nor is a longitudinal survey of scores on proficiency tests possible, because “we simply haven’t had standardized testing of post-secondary students across the country or even across provinces” says Paul Cappon, president of the Canadian Council on Learning. However, he points out that annual testing of 14- and 16-year-olds indicates “very stable trends, not much change at all over the past 10 or 15 years” in

terms of achievement in reading, writing, math and science. And in recent international tests, Canadian high school students rank significantly above average.

Nevertheless, professors maintain that the current crop of students has a markedly more utilitarian attitude toward education. "I am no longer a teacher. I have become a service provider, and education is a consumer purchase," reports one professor at Ryerson University. "I am expected to be available in person and online when students need me, and they have little interest in or understanding of, let alone respect for, my scholarly research obligations, for example."

This sense of entitlement has little to do with learning and everything to do with outcomes. "If they don't get an A, they ask how they 'lost' marks, as though an A is an inalienable right, not something you earn by exceeding expectations," says one member of the health sciences faculty at Queen's University.

Even more annoying, at least from the profs' perspective: many students feel quite free to blame the teacher when they bomb a course. This unwillingness to take personal responsibility is particularly galling because profs are, by and large, convinced the problem has little to do with them. "We don't get any training in teaching or organizational skills," concedes one U of T humanities professor. "But after a student gets a bad mark and denounces my teaching ability, he'll often go on to say that really, he would've done very well indeed if only I'd had the decency to post my lecture notes on the Internet. Well, the only reason student wants your notes is so he can skip class more often."

Weeping and harassment via email are, it appears, now standard tactics when seeking better marks. One math prof reported that a student had a full-blown tantrum and threw herself on the floor of his office when he refused to raise her grade. An English prof spoke wearily of "constant email harassment from kids who want to go to law school, and view their low marks as a problem you need to solve for them." A criminology prof noted that, not infrequently, such emails have return addresses like sexygirl@hotmail.com or drunkjock@sympatico.ca, and open with a formal salutation along the lines of "hiya".

"Since the time of Plato, professors have probably bitched about their students," says Dr. Ed Barbeau, a math professor who recently retired from the University of Toronto. "The problem I see today, that I believe is new, is that if you really probe, you realize many of them don't have a firm idea of anything. There's no bedrock of knowledge." And yet more than ever before,

students are worried about their grades, not least because so many of them are hell-bent on grad school.

Now for the good news, at least for students. Universities are desperate to attract and retain more funding sources (read: you), which creates pressure on professors to inflate grades. All professors, even the self-proclaimed tough markers, said that it is now surprisingly easy to get A's. For starters, go to class—yes, they do notice when you're not there—and make a point of debating, disagreeing and otherwise demonstrating that you can think critically. Several profs confided that participation will result in more generous and lenient marking, and that they are sticklers only with students they think are lazy or rude. Feign interest, if necessary: one professor pointed out that many students appear to believe they are watching TV instead of a lecture, and to be under the misimpression that the lecturer cannot see them slumped over the desk, sighing and rolling their eyes. A modicum of professionalism—meeting deadlines, refraining from the urge to blurt out personal information or turn up to class dressed like a pole dancer—is always appreciated. Oh, and one last thing: ask for help before you fail the exam or essay. You might be surprised what your prof has to teach you.

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Student Retention

In its November 13, 2006 issue, Maclean's calculated the percentage of first-year students who return in second year, either full-time or part-time. It also measures the percentage of full-time undergraduates who completed their degree within one year of the expected graduation date. We have reprinted these data below, but added a fourth column, the result of multiplying the second column by the third column – to yield the percentage of first-year students who complete their degree within one year of the expected graduation date.

University	Freshmen Return	Sophs Graduate	Freshmen Graduate
Western	96.5%	92.8%	89.55%
Queen's	96.6%	91.4%	88.29%
Toronto	95.3%	91.3%	87.01%
McGill	93.1%	92.7%	86.30%
Ottawa	93.3%	91.4%	85.28%
Saint Mary's	91.2%	91.6%	83.54%
Montreal	90.8%	92.0%	83.54%
McMaster	93.7%	88.2%	82.64%

Sherbrooke	95.3%	86.7%	82.63%
Guelph	91.1%	89.5%	81.53%
Lakehead	90.3%	88.0%	79.46%
UBC	90.2%	86.9%	78.38%
Waterloo	90.9%	86.2%	78.36%
Ryerson	90.9%	84.6%	76.90%
Dalhousie	85.4%	89.5%	76.43%
Wilfrid Laurier	89.6%	85.2%	76.34%
York	89.7%	85.0%	76.25%
Manitoba	84.1%	90.5%	76.11%
Laval	94.7%	79.2%	75.00%
Simon Fraser	85.1%	87.7%	74.63%
Windsor	93.0%	80.1%	74.49%
Trent	93.2%	79.6%	74.19%
Acadia	82.7%	89.7%	74.18%
New Brunswick	87.2%	83.9%	73.16%
Brock	89.3%	81.4%	72.69%
Victoria	85.3%	85.1%	72.59%
Saskatchewan	82.2%	87.8%	72.17%
Bishop's	88.1%	81.5%	71.80%
Alberta	85.6%	83.7%	71.65%
Nipissing	86.0%	83.2%	71.55%
Calgary	86.1%	80.5%	69.31%
Carleton	87.2%	79.1%	68.98%
UPEI	82.9%	82.6%	68.48%
Cape Breton	84.0%	80.2%	67.37%
St. Francis Xavier	87.0%	77.2%	67.16%
Laurentian	89.4%	75.1%	67.14%
Concordia	85.3%	74.6%	63.63%
Memorial	84.7%	73.5%	62.25%
Mount Saint Vincent	74.4%	83.5%	62.12%
Mount Allison	83.4%	74.1%	61.80%
Regina	74.6%	80.1%	59.75%
St. Thomas	73.4%	77.9%	57.18%
UNBC	72.6%	78.3%	56.85%
Moncton	80.6%	67.5%	54.41%
Winnipeg	79.8%	60.6%	48.36%
Brandon	71.2%	63.1%	44.93%