

Aliens to Ourselves

How Penn State Students are Alienated from Our
Education

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As one of the most prestigious public institutions for higher education, Penn State certainly should provide its students with everything required to enjoy a fulfilling and fruitful education. Unfortunately it is becoming clear that an education at Penn State (or almost any university) neither inspires nor equips its students to find success in the world. At its most basic level, a school should teach its students skills needed to be successful. But it doesn't. It should motivate us to act in the interest of the future that we are going to help build. But it doesn't. It should give us opportunities to better ourselves, express our creativity, and discover who we are. But it doesn't. In the United States, attending college has become not only a means to an end for ourselves, but a perfect way to assemble students who's education may never get them anywhere, but will keep the business of higher education churning each semester.

It doesn't take much convincing to see this problem in our schools. On the first day of class, every desk is full and you have to get there early to get a good seat. On the second day, about three fourths of the seats are taken, and about three weeks into the semester, you can show up two minutes late and still have your pick of desks. Students do not attend class. What an interesting fallacy it is that we pay money to come to a place to be educated and then don't go to the very classes that are supposed to educate us. Why don't we go? Are we not interested? Perhaps we don't go, because we can learn the same thing that we learn in an eight-hundred dollar class by reading a \$15 book or visiting the public library for free. The beautiful thing about not going to class seems to be that you can still get a good grade even if your attendance is lacking, especially in lecture halls. The system allows us to cheat ourselves out of the education we are supposed to be getting by teaching us information that we have either already learned or could read in a book for free, and then charges us more to go back to school and do the same thing year after year. The Catch 22 to this whole system? You need the piece of paper they give

you at the end of four, or five, or six, years in order to get a job. So then you go out on the job market and realize that someone with your background isn't needed anywhere and you have just wasted four to six years of your time and money on an education that doesn't matter, and the school you went to is still profiting from your tuition dollars and using them to create more classes that won't teach next year's students to think for themselves either. I think I may have spoken to only a handful of people who actually enjoy their major. Most people choose to study topics that will guarantee them employment after graduation, not topics that stretch their minds and challenge them to think for themselves. A friend of mine majored in math and is currently in Cambodia teaching English. He has an incredible interest in the prison system and is one of the most intelligent people I know, but his math major probably won't cater to any of his immediate interests. His story has been written by many college graduates over the years, but we still haven't done anything to change the system. Our education isn't about us or for us. Our education is about them. We go to school for them. The future employers, parents, and people who put us on a pathway from the time we understand what college is and shuffle us towards a prescribed future. We are exploited at the hands of those who want us to be carbon copies of all the people who came before us. We're all supposed to think, act, and analyze situations the same way. We have lost our creativity, our ability to think for ourselves. We are kept blissfully uninformed and ignorant to the world around us. We are alienated from our education and our world. A lot of people don't even want to be in school, but we have no choice if we want to live fruitful lives. We've lost faith in the system, yet we still participate in it, because we don't see any other choice.

Penn State's campus paints a perfect picture of alienation. Karl Marx would describe the students of Penn State as "alienated from their education." He would discuss what the four

psychological states of alienation are, how we fulfill each of them, and provide examples of day to day activities that serve to alienate us. Alienation of education manifests itself in the division between students and our education, our minds, what we're forced by the system to learn and what we want to know. Marx's first psychological state of alienation is *alienation from activity*. To be alienated from an activity is to perform an action not because it provides satisfaction or is self-fulfilling, but because it is a means to satisfy needs. Our actions as students are reading, studying, going to class, and doing homework. I have observed that most students do not enjoy these activities. There is nothing self-fulfilling about reading an article that is neither interesting nor applicable to our interests. There is no purpose served by reading, studying, going to class or doing homework other than receiving a grade for our efforts. We complete the actions we are required to engage in in order to get the results we must to continue moving through the system. So at the end of the day, we have a grade; a letter on a piece of paper; a letter that is supposed to represent some level of knowledge, something that inked lines on a page could never encompass.

The grades we receive are the products of our labor as students. But we are alienated from these products as well. Often students wonder why we must take tests. If we attend class and are learning why is it necessary for us to prove our knowledge to the system? Why must we be exploited at the hands of standardized tests and performance assessments? Students are alienated *from the products* our actions produce. Like us, our grades and grade point averages are commodities to be bought and sold to the highest bidder when we graduate. For example, when an undergraduate student applies to law school, two numbers must meet the criteria of the admissions board: the GPA and the LSAT score. If these numbers, these products, are not satisfactory, that student's application is put back into the shuffle with the rest of the students who may have great capacity to learn more and a true passion for law but will never be given the

opportunity. Because passion is not reflected in numbers; there is no way that it ever could be. Who we are as students is minimized to what number the computer spits out when time is up and pencils are down. Our grades are not for us. They are for them. Students become nothing but scores and numbers, not people with ideas and free thought.

When students recognize this reality, we become *alienated from our species being*. Students begin to realize that in order to be prosperous in society; we must squelch our creativity, “stay the course,” and hopefully be offered a job at the end of the voyage. When students realize the numbers we produce are all that matters, we allow ourselves to believe that the numbers and letters are the most important things in our lives. The system tricks us into believing that what they want from us (high numbers) is what we want for ourselves too. So we forget knowledge and enlightenment and chase the “A.” My freshman year, I took calculus for the first time. Every day I went to class and took notes and participated. I learned more math that semester than I learned in my entire four years of high school, but I was failing. I am not a very good math student. On the day of the late drop deadline, I found myself needing to make a difficult decision. Should I drop the class in order to meet my Schreyer GPA requirement? Or should I stay in it, continuing to fail but also continuing to learn something I never learned before? At the end of the day, I was no longer enrolled in calculus. I remember calling my dad that afternoon and being upset about the fact that I would not finish or get credit for all of my hard work. I thought coming to college was about getting the opportunity to really learn things; take classes in subjects that I may not necessarily excel in but just wanted to learn about. I thought college would be different from high school. I was wrong. The requirement to be perfect in every aspect of education alienates us from ourselves and limits our creativity by forcing us to study things that we are already good at, and not allowing us to learn something

new. Our level of knowledge stagnates. A friend of mine wanted to study business at Penn State, but her grade point average did not qualify her to be enrolled in the Smeal College of Business, and she had to choose something that her grades would allow her to. There is no “trial and error” to college, no window for you to learn that perhaps you are good at or would enjoy doing something new. There is only what the system offers you, what it expects from you, and how it manipulates you into believing that what it wants from you is what you want for yourself too. The spreading of this false consciousness embodies the culture of Penn State.

This culture is one of individualism which *alienates us from other students*. Because we as students believe that our numbers must be the best, we don't help each other. We are forced to be competitive with one another which prevents cooperation and collaboration between students. The relations between students are riddled with discussions of grades, who does well, and who doesn't. We get angry with our peers who perform better than we do and are constantly trying to out-do ourselves and others. Our peers become our competitors in both college and the job market, and in order to be successful, we must be the best. We must be better than others. This competitive culture eliminates the possibility for positive interaction between students and diminishes the capacity to which we can relate to each other. We are all in the same situation, but we don't see it, because we are too busy looking out for our own interests. If students worked together better, we could learn from each other and perhaps get something out of having discussions. Instead of trying to “out-internship” and “out-research project” each other, we could learn from each other's experiences and share opportunities. I have a philosophy class this semester that I am excelling in and some of the students in the class wanted to study as a group. I thought this was a great idea, and we organized a study group. We spent six hours over two days in the library reviewing information, making charts, discussing possible essay questions,

and brain storming together, and when the test scores came back, we all earned A's. But this type of atmosphere is often not the one we live in while we are at school. The alienation caused by the assembly line structure of our education system certainly has consequences for individual students and the culture of collegiate life.

Jennifer Case conducted a study in 2007 involving a Chemical Engineering class at the University of Cape Town that addressed students' experiences of learning using the concept of alienation (Case, 2007). She discussed the contributions of post-modern sociologists to the idea of alienation, and how their thoughts could be related to the student learning experience in the post-modern world. She cited Mann, who asserted that assessment practices in education are similar to systems of monetary exchange, thus leading to alienation in the classic Marxist analysis. Perhaps Case's most fascinating discoveries were the comments made by the third year chemical engineering students she interviewed for the research. The students described the necessary self discipline and drudgery required by the engineering program. One student commented,

“The thing is, learning Chemical Engineering is not fun, it really isn't like, it's tons and tons of math, and all you have to do is work, and it takes over your whole life” (Susan, WF, Interview 1, Paragraph 85).

This drudgery led students to feel that their only sense of fulfillment came in completing tasks, unrealistic expectations, and the idea that when you're doing anything but studying, you're wasting time. All of these ideas led to an absence of enjoyment or excitement about engineering which caused many students to disengage themselves from their work. Some students reported finding themselves spending a lot of time sleeping and struggling to do much else, a classic symptom of depression. And if all of this wasn't enough, at the end of three years, some students still didn't feel like they had adequate knowledge to be successful in the field of chemical engineering (Case, 2007).

The consequences of depression, drudgery, and disengagement are self-evident when students walk around campus. We are always tired in class chugging down large coffees and energy drinks just to stay awake. We find fulfillment only in checking things off of our “to do” lists, and we are completely disengaged from what we are doing. I spent almost every afternoon for two weeks taking naps, because I found myself unable to stay awake and concentrate on the work I needed to get done. There is a sense in which students look for opportunities to disengage from their studies just to get a break. If this isn't evidence that students lack passion for their fields of study and are denied opportunities for creative expression then I don't know what is. We become alienated not only from the world around us but from ourselves as well, and when we are alienated from our own minds and futures, the world becomes a very frightening place. If we do not determine our own thoughts and actions, then who does?

The implications of this depression, drudgery and disengagement can be seen in the job market and the number of educated people who are currently unemployed. My father has a bachelor's degree in environmental science and a master's degree in education, and he has been in and out of work for the past 4 years. He is currently unemployed. My mother has an associate's degree from an unaccredited school, so her education doesn't even seem to count. She is currently working at Kohl's department store. The fact of the matter is that an expensive education no longer guarantees employment, and that is a frightening thought indeed. But we continue to adhere to this assembly line system where we are more alienated from our learning experience each day. When people dread getting up in the morning and disengage from their work, we lose ourselves. We forget who we are and why we are doing what we do. We forget what it feels like to be happy, engaged, and creative. We forget how to live.

The most important implication of this alienation for me personally is the fact that I don't get to learn everything I would like to in college. I would like to learn calculus and biology. I wish that I had time to be on the club swim team. I would like to pick up playing piano again. I am interested in politics and government. I want to try something and be terrible at it, but still learn and appreciate it. I wish that I could take more diverse courses and learn more things, but the cruel reality is that I am confined to one course of study, and one career path after college. At least, that is the idea behind the system. We constantly find ourselves saying that we, "don't have time to...join a sport team, go out, have friends, think for ourselves, read a book for pleasure, sleep, eat, live..." because we have too much work to do. I cannot even begin to imagine the implications that this mentality will have for education in the future and the students who are currently being lined up to follow us through the system in the next ten years.

This analysis seems to be adequate for the majority of students in higher education today, but there are some who are lucky. As much as I would like to have a more diverse education, I love my major. I learn in my classes and I mostly enjoy the work I get to do. But there seems to be a growing alienation plaguing our institutions for higher education today, the results of which are affecting students all over the world. To be alienated from one's actions, the products of those actions, one's self, and others has serious implications for society at large and how we interact with our world. Marx's ideas of alienation, though intended for the workplace certainly have relevance in education. Penn State alienates its students just like any other institution, through an assembly line like structure that constrains our creativity, limits our passions, and reinforces our fears that at the end of it all, we may not get out of it what we had hoped.